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Urban sprawl in Europe. One or many?

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Abstract

Sprawl has long been associated with low-density urban development. While such a vision of the phenomenon fitted well the history and geography of urbanisation of the occidental world in the nineties, modern cities are increasingly being characterised by not only a decreasing density but also by a changing morphology. These changes involve both the external shape of the cities and their internal one, that is the spatial distribution of the built-up area within the city. Hence, sprawl is best described as a complex mix of urbanisation-related phenomena expressing the different ways the population and the built environment distribute across space. In turn, a multidimensional approach to the definition and measurement of sprawl, based on a plurality of landscape and socio-demographic measures, can best represent the phenomenon, its multiple expressions, and its geographical variation. Europe is a largely heterogeneous continent, and multiple institutional, cultural, and historical factors influenced the spatial expansion of cities. As such, it provides a significant case study to investigate the variety of sprawl. This paper approaches urban sprawl using a multidimensional conceptualisation that further operationalises in the analysis of variance of multiple landscape metrics and socio-economic indicators. The evidence in the paper adds to existing and increasing literature that identifies in sprawling cities a complex problem with common roots across all cities but whose multifaceted nature requires differentiated actions and policies to limit and reduce the negative effects on the environment.

Keywords : Urban sprawl, European cities, agricultural land use