

Dynamics of urbanisation

Finland is one of the least urbanised countries in Western Europe, even though Finnish cities have grown rapidly in recent decades. Under this theme, funding is made available to research that can help unlock the opportunities and avoid the pitfalls of urbanisation, and find comprehensive solutions to the environmental, health and welfare problems that follow from urbanisation. One key aspect of the dynamics of urbanisation is interregional interaction, which opens up new research perspectives.

Research under this theme will be aimed at increasing understanding of urbanisation and its impacts on the interaction between cities and regions and on the vitality of regions. It is expected to draw on international examples and experiences of urbanisation. The phenomenon has a diversity of effects among other things on wellbeing, the economy, social sustainability, citizen participation, the development of democracy, the environment and the organisation of various functions in society. The transition to a circular economy, full-scale digitalisation and other major changes in the near future may provide an opportunity to push forward the balanced development of cities and surrounding regions.

Urbanisation has advanced at great pace in Finland. Even so, we continue to lag behind other Western European countries. Over half of the world's population today lives in towns and cities, and the proportion is growing. On the one hand, urbanisation presents an opportunity for societies, for cities serve as innovation centres and engines of the economy. On the other hand, uncontrolled urbanisation creates challenges for both growing cities and surrounding regions. It is important to find ways in which the strengthening of cities can contribute to enhancing the vitality of surrounding regions. Interregional interaction is central to assessing different development scenarios. Finland also has the advantage of coming from behind. We can look at how urbanisation has advanced in other countries (e.g. Sweden) and put this information to good use in our own process of urbanisation.

Urbanisation gathered strong momentum in the wake of the industrial revolution. The efficiency and effectiveness of cities has been largely based on the use of fossil raw materials and fuels. In order to take the best possible advantage of digitalisation and to maximise resource efficiency, it is essential to identify and harness the potential of urbanisation as well as the evolving interaction between growing cities and surrounding regions. Research is needed so that we can predict how these changes will impact people's lives and society's functions and the way in which society is organised. Research can shed light on the impacts of urbanisation on how and where people will live in the future, on where the various functions of society should be located, on how mobility and transport should be arranged, on how social and health problems and opportunities will change, on how energy will be produced, on what kinds of resources will be available, on the quality of air, on access to clean water and food, and so on. Although paths of development will vary widely between different urban regions, even weaker regions may become competitive if they find the right policy combinations and choose the right measures. Interregional interaction and dynamics will also have a central role in shaping new solutions and development paths. Urban regions of the future will have an increasingly decentralised structure. The comprehensive solutions developed in Finland will therefore have real export potential.

In Finland, the advance of urbanisation coincided with the growth of motorisation. Indeed, urban planning and design has very much centred on car traffic. This has contributed to the development of a decentralised community structure and energy inefficiencies, and influenced the geographical location of settlements as well as the design of public services and infrastructure. Research is needed to explore the characteristics of

decentralised and centralised community structures from different vantage points, specifically from the point of view of energy production and consumption, different industries, security of supply and self-sufficiency. Wealth accumulates in cities, but on the reverse side of the coin, so too do social and health problems. Much of public expenditure is devoted to cities, and therefore the impact and productivity of public services are key to economic sustainability. Information and solutions are needed about how to promote health and wellbeing both in cities and in surrounding regions.

Information and solutions are also needed to find out how urbanisation is affected by community planning, planning and land use policy, housing policy, taxation and industrial and commercial policy. Furthermore, research is needed into how the changing population structure, the diversification of households and lifestyles, the growth of multi-local living, internationalisation and differences in people's values and practices influence the development of cities. Some of the questions that need to be solved are how cities can respond to residents' needs, what adds to the appeal and competitiveness of cities, how cities support innovations, and how functional labour markets are created in cities. It is commonplace now to refer to smart cities or smart regions. Smart transport, smart energy networks and smart housing can all contribute to make cities more liveable for people of different ages and to enhance the ecological sustainability of the living environment.