

French SCOTs and inter-SCOTs: the right way to face global challenges?

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This contribution examines whether the spatial planning tools that have been put in place in France can meet major contemporary challenges. After a brief reminder of the specific nature of the organisation of the French regions and the national emphasis on combating urban sprawl, it elaborates on the different spatial planning tools that have been used over the last 15 years. In this assessment, the initiatives to group areas so they can collaborate and produce viable overall strategic plans, take centre stage. The examples of the Toulouse and Lyons metropolitan areas make it possible to highlight the major challenges that the 'Schéma de cohérence territoriale' (territorial coherence scheme or SCOT) and inter-SCOTs intend to tackle on a metropolitan level, and to examine their ability to meet them.

Spatial planning is a municipal responsibility

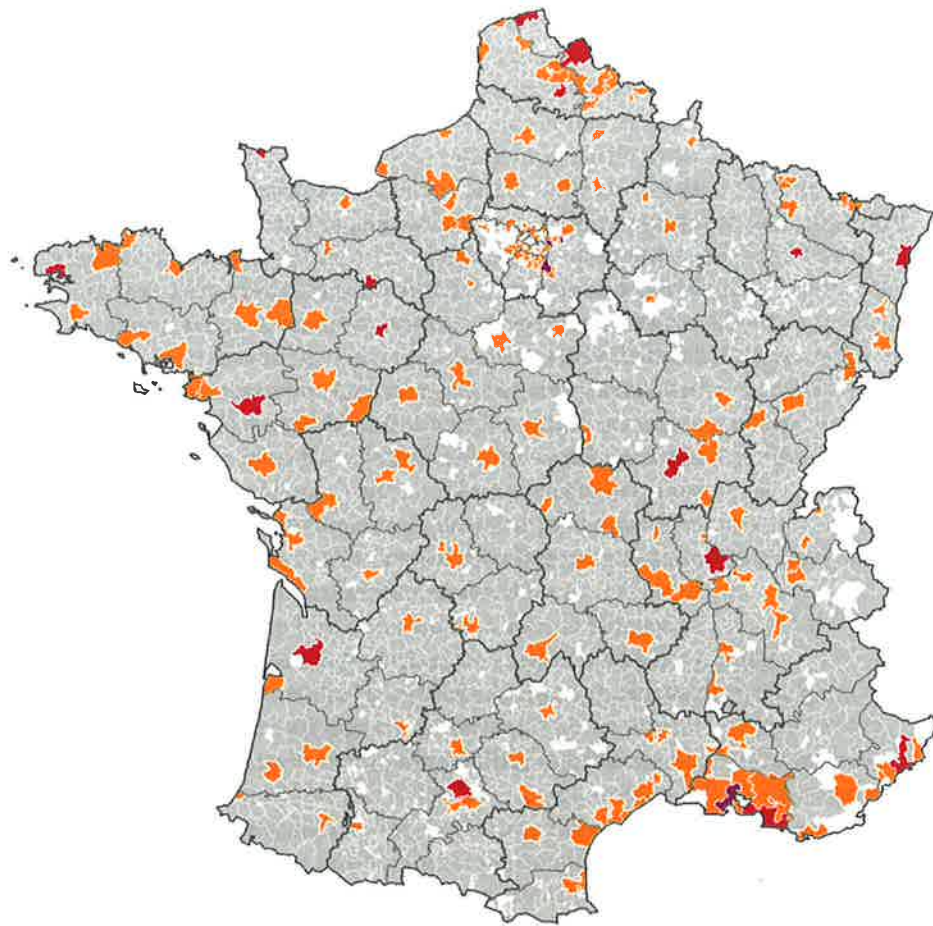
As regards the basic level of regional administration, France has over 36,000 communes or municipalities over a territory of 550,000 km² for a population of 64 million. In comparison, Germany, for example, has 12,000 municipalities on a surface area of 357,000 km² and a population of 82 million, and Italy has 8,000 municipalities on a surface area of 300,000 km² and a population of 59 million. In the 1970s France, unlike its European neighbours, failed to put in place a proactive strategy of merging municipalities. However, since the 1990s it has put in place a policy of municipal groupings through intercommunal structures.¹ This policy has been largely successful and may inspire other European countries. Sixteen Urban Communities (urban areas with over 450,000 inhabitants), 167 Agglomeration Communities (urban areas with over 50,000 inhabitants) and 2,600 Commune Communities, comprise 93 percent of municipalities and cater for 90 percent of the French population (see figure 1). They constitute the real, relevant levels of spatial planning and regional management.

Regional challenges

The major challenges facing spatial planning in France since the mid-2000s are those represented by urban sprawl and the artificialisation of land. This (irreversible) use of natural and agricultural spaces is a significant concern for public decision-makers and planners. Although the figures of the Ministry for Agriculture sometimes give rise to controversy, we can agree that since 1992 France has used an average of 60,000 hectare of natural and agricultural space per year for buildings. It corresponds to one percent of French territory that is urbanised every 10 years. This rate of land use is almost three times greater than the population growth rate and even seems to have increased over the last few years. It covers the construction of housing (50 percent), economic activities (33 percent) and the construction of infrastructure and public facilities. Although this phenomenon enriches the owners of agricultural land, it makes it difficult to set up new farms and is accompanied by a worrying reduction of farming land. At the same time it leads to urban sprawl, the consequences of which are considered harmful not only because of the irreversible use of natural or agricultural spaces but also as regards energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (including longer car journeys between home and work) and other important challenges. This issue is now a major concern that structures spatial planning approaches and justifies a sometimes slightly irrational vindication of density.

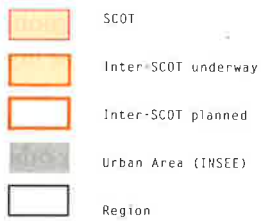
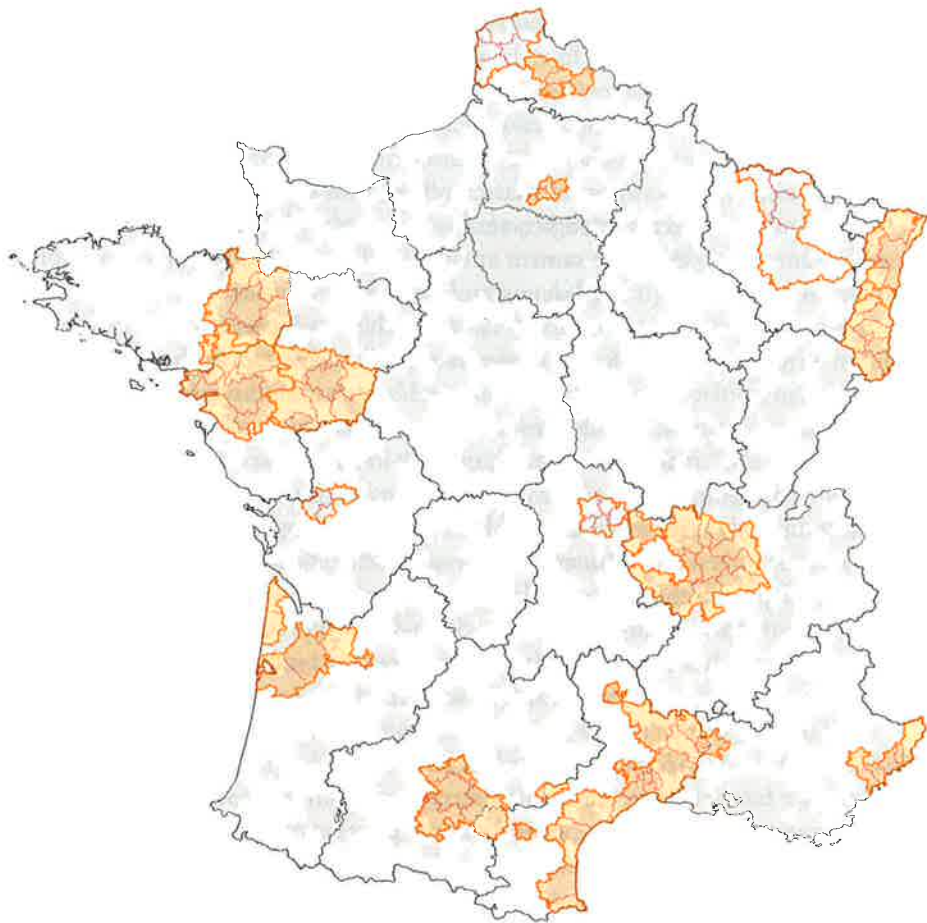
Three scales for regional planning: DTA, SCOT and PLU

As regards spatial planning tools, over the last 15 years France has modernised a tool box that essentially dates back to the late 1960s.³ Although the state has a tool, the Territorial Development Directive or DTA³, that determines and takes account of its major challenges and projects (in particular, major transport infrastructural projects), it is local authorities that are responsible for defining a sustainable development project for their region at different levels. To this end, they use two tools: the territorial coherence scheme or SCOT and the local urban planning plan or PLU.⁴ The SCOT operates at an intermunicipal level, which is for the local authorities to assess but it is fairly wide if possible. In reality, there is a wide variety in the size of regions involved, as they may cover from 10 to over 450 municipalities. The aim of the SCOT is to define the major challenges and the sustainable development objectives for the region in question, based on a precise and shared diagnosis.



- Urban Communities
- Syndicates of
New Agglomeration
(SAN, category being phased
out)
- Agglomeration
Communities
- Commune Communities

1. Intercommunal
structures in France,
2010



2. Inter-SCOT
processes underway
or planned in France
in 2009

The PLU, which must be compatible with the SCOT, is also based on the creation of a real spatial planning and sustainable development project. It sets the development directions and the land use rules at a more local level; that of the municipality or rather the inter-municipal area. In particular, it constitutes the reference document for issuing spatial planning permits.

The SCOT consists of three documents:

- a presentation report, which presents a diagnosis and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the region, particularly as regards the environment and economic and demographic development;
- a planning and sustainable development vision, which sets out the strategic objectives for the development of the region over 15 to 20 years as regards such issues as the environment, economic development, housing and transport;
- a document that sets out guidelines and objectives for implementing this project; in particular it now⁵ has to set objectives for managing the use of space and provide the means for monitoring this use and achieving these objectives.

Currently almost 400 SCOTs have been approved or are in the process of being approved, which corresponds to most of urban France. In addition, inter-SCOTs appear which correspond to more or less informal, spontaneous and state-suggested initiatives aimed at achieving coordination between adjacent SCOT regions (see figure 2).

The inter-SCOT

Inter-SCOTs are interregional initiatives, which apply outside the legislative and regulatory context of spatial planning. They express the need felt by elected officials for the greater coordination of the regional processes of the SCOTs, as it is difficult to find a solution to certain questions (economic development, transport and urban sprawl in particular) within a region initially defined for the creation of SCOTs. They demonstrate the desire for interregional processes that are flexible and not too formalised outside the institutionalised spatial planning regions. These kinds of processes can contribute to the emergence of a new level and new spaces for regional governance. Currently there are 12 inter-SCOTs and four others are being created; covering between four and 19 SCOTs, which corresponds to a total of 108 SCOTs and includes most of the largest French urban areas (except Ile de France, which is a special case for both spatial planning and municipal organisation). Overall 13 inter-SCOTs involve regions of between 0.8 and 1.3 million inhabitants and two involve regions with over two million inhabitants.

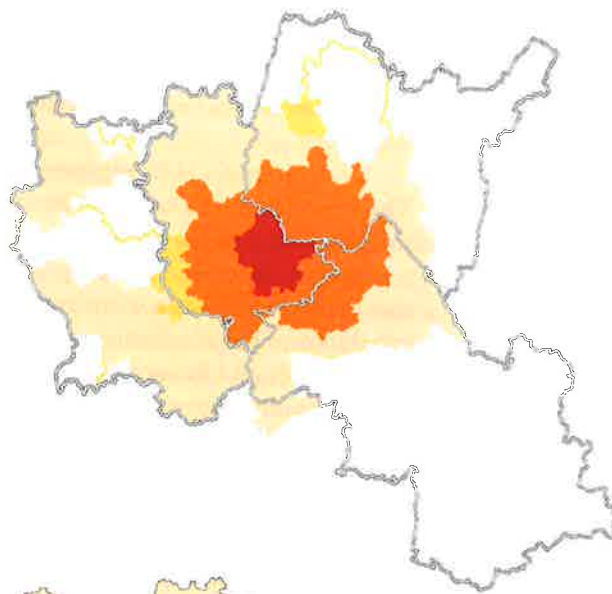
It is interesting to focus on two pioneering initiatives that appeared in 2002, those of the Lyons and Toulouse metropolitan areas. These two inter-SCOT initiatives originated in specific contexts and arose from distinct initiatives, each with its own form.




— Inter-SCOT Toulouse

The inter-SCOT for the Toulouse metropolitan area was created at the instigation of the Prefect, a state representative, as a result of a strategic reflection workshop that he initiated at the level of the Toulouse urban area; an area with slightly over one million inhabitants. These urban areas, defined by the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE)⁶, however arbitrary their definition, have a determining influence on the way in which elected officials and experts (from local authorities, urban planning agencies or the state) imagine contemporary urban reality, or the French region and its operation. The urban area has thus become the space of reference for describing the way French people live at the local level and the real spaces they inhabit in everyday life. It is a scientifically established reality to which institutional territories are compared so that discrepancies can be discussed and to which they are requested to conform as best they can. Finding support in the outlines of the Toulouse urban area as established by INSEE, the regional Prefect managed to encourage a collective awareness at this level, which in 2003 led to the setting up of a structure, called the Urban Area Conference. This conference brought together 342 municipalities and 33 public intermunicipal cooperative bodies, with an office of elected officials, an open reflection group and a technical committee. It facilitated the production of a framework document 'For the regional cohesion of the Toulouse urban area', which was submitted to local authorities for consultation at the end of 2004. This document made it possible to validate the major guidelines selected and to decide to create within this urban area four SCOTs: one central SCOT for the greater Toulouse urban area (117 municipalities) and three peripheral SCOTs. In addition, the document constitutes the inter-SCOT charter and offers a vision that is shared, amended and described in each SCOT based on four major objectives:





- monitoring urban development;
- promoting a hierarchical, polycentric urban model;
- organising economic synergies;
- building links between all the (secondary) urban centres with efficient transport systems.

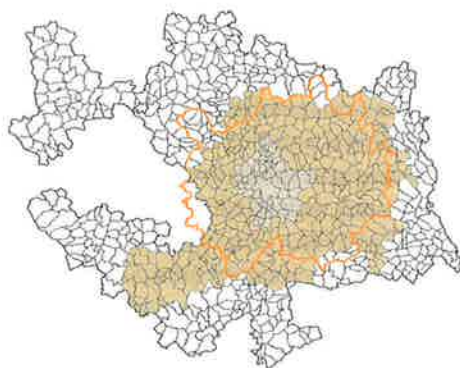
-  Greater Lyons
-  Lyons Urban Area (INSEE)
-  Lyons Urban Region in 2000
-  Lyons Urban Region in 2006
-  Lyon Metropolitan Area inter-SCOT
-  Departments



-  Greater Lyons
-  Lyons Urban Area (INSEE)
-  Lyons Metropolitan Area or inter-SCOT (11 SCOTs)



-  Greater Lyons (57 municipalities)
-  Lyons Urban Area (INSEE)
-  Lyons DTA-area
-  Lyons Metropolitan Area (759 municipalities)



3. From Greater Lyons to Lyons Metropolitan Area

— Inter-SCOT Lyon

The inter-SCOT process of the Lyons metropolitan area is quite different in that it was initiated after the creation of the SCOT regions. The process was initiated by the elected officials and involved 11 SCOTs, covering 795 municipalities, 63 intermunicipality cooperative bodies and almost 3 million inhabitants. It is part of a long history of spatial planning exchanges at the level of a large urban area that already spreads across four departments and whose urban community (Greater Lyons) constitutes the central core. Greater Lyons, created in 1969 and including 57 municipalities, has sought to develop relationships with its environment since the 1980s. It did so particularly through an association, the Lyons Urban Region, that brings neighbouring authorities together in order to consider a number of issues that go beyond the strict boundaries of Greater Lyons.

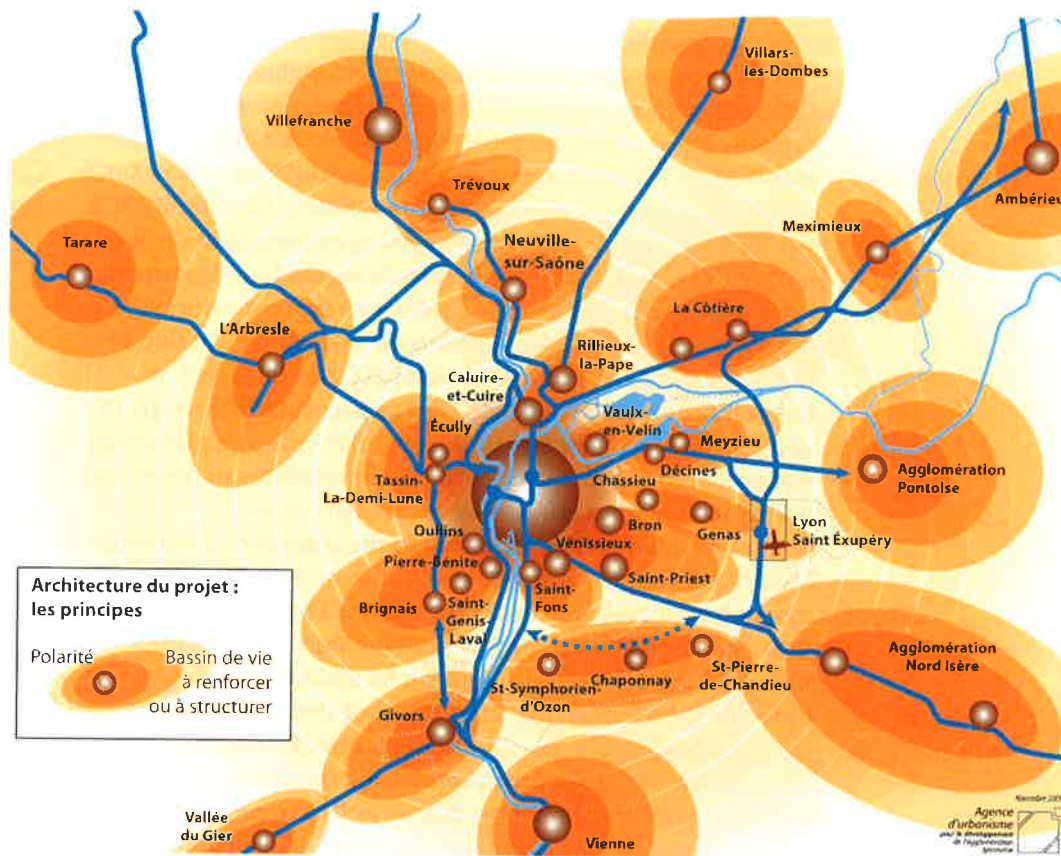
The inter-SCOT process led to the adoption of a common inter-SCOT chapter in 2006, which summarises the main development objectives shared by the 11 SCOTs. This general chapter, included in each SCOT, proposes a common vision of the metropolitan area's future and can be divided into four major objectives, each referring to an image of the city:

— The multipolar city. A multipolar model is favoured in order to avoid an increase in urban sprawl and the dilution of housing and businesses along major roads, as well as to preserve large natural spaces. Some 60 urban poles, providing inhabitants with the essential facilities and services at a local level, have been defined and will be home to almost 300,000 additional inhabitants by 2030 (see figures 4 and 5).

— The natural city. A dense network of natural and agricultural spaces has been defined; it consists of 'green hearts', which are large natural or agricultural spaces that will be preserved and connected by green links. Blue corridors have also been defined along the major waterways.

— The accessible city. This is essentially organised around the metropolitan express network, which will be strengthened and must be the backbone of a sustainable transport system suitable for the metropolitan area, and that promotes public transport. The areas around train stations must be prime locations for future development.

— The attractive city. This means the identification of prime sites for the creation of economic activities. The 27 metropolitan, economic development sites identified must, among other things, be easily accessible by the major public transport networks.



The SCOT for the Lyons urban area, for instance, is part of this strategic vision for the metropolitan area. It describes major objectives at the level of the slightly expanded Lyons urban community (72 municipalities, 1.3 million inhabitants), conceptualised as the eco-city. The construction of an eco-city is intended to tackle five major challenges:

4. The multipolar city

- Residential attractiveness and solidarity: to accommodate a population growth of 10 percent by 2010 and create social housing in the heart of the urban area.
- Employment and influence: to maintain and regenerate the productive base through innovation and knowledge.
- Multipolarity, movement and regional organisation: to develop a model of multipolar urban development based on a high-performing public transport system.
- Natural and agricultural spaces: to protect natural and agricultural spaces that are home to a wealth of biodiversity or that are areas for agricultural production or recreational activities.
- Environment: to anticipate the consequences of energy supply disruption, to work to reduce such damage and protect non-renewable resources in order to seek a development model that requires fewer resources and provides greater protection for the health of inhabitants.



5. Development of
the settlement area
between 1955 and 2005

Figure 6 shows the high level of concern over combating urban sprawl, restricting land use (even if there is still a large amount of property available for new economic activities) and protecting agricultural and natural spaces from the pressure of urbanisation. The latter explains the adoption within the heart of the city of a polycentric urban development model structured around three major networks: the public transport network of the urban area, the green network of natural, agricultural and forest spaces and the blue river network.



6. The blue river network, the green network and the public transport network

Conclusion

We can see that although until the 2000s the main aim of spatial planning in France had been to organise urban development and the location of economic activities, its principal objectives today are combating urban sprawl, protecting natural and agricultural spaces and aiming for development that is more energy efficient (thereby emitting less greenhouse gas). Faced with these challenges, the new model of urban organisation used in large French urban areas today is that of a polycentric structure that is closely integrated with rivers and other natural and agricultural elements and incorporates major public transport systems. This model is also the most commonly accepted politically, and respects the general consensus that the metropolis is the right scale for both governance and good urban planning.

Although the SCOT is the strategic planning tool used to face the many challenges that lie ahead, its territorial scale level, which is left to the free initiative of local elected officials, often seems to be slightly behind in relation to the reality of local practices as understood by the notion of 'urban area'. The twin

problems of planning levels and territorial boundaries may lead to the appearance of diverse, more or less formalised initiatives for making these planning processes consistent through the creation of inter-SCOTs. Urban regions wedged into or even exceeding the perimeter of urban areas may seem to be a new scale of regional governance, as facilitated by a recent law.⁷

Finally, the right scale for the definition of good urban planning objectives is not necessary the right scale for implementation. Although a high level of strategic planning is relevant for facing the major challenges of sustainable metropolitan developments, in France this must be tackled and implemented at the most local level. The question is therefore how to turn the virtuous general objectives defined at the (inter-)SCOT level into real and specific building regulations at a more local level and how to ensure that these higher level objectives are respected at the most local level.

Notes

1. Law of 12 July 1999 on the consolidation and simplification of intermunicipal cooperation.

2. Town Planning Law of 30 December 1967.

3. Town and Country Planning Law of 4 February 1995.

4. Law on Urban Solidarity and Renewal of 13 December 2000.

5. Law of 12 July 2010 relative to a national commitment for the environment (Grenelle 2).

6. For INSEE "an urban area is a series of muni-

palities, counted together and without an enclave, consisting of an urban centre and rural municipalities or urban units (outer suburbs) where at least 40 percent of the resident employed population works in the centre or in

the municipalities attracted by this centre".

7. Law of 19 December 2011 on the reform of regional authorities.