

## **Regions in Transition: Balancing Economic, Social and Environmental Sustainability in the Face of Uncertainty**

12th – 13th November 2020, Holiday Inn Bloomsbury, London, UK

Fast moving and inter-related technological, social, environmental and economic changes alongside the uncertainties brought about by climate change, geopolitical instability, and conflict driven migration flows are having profound impacts on how regions and cities develop or decline. Against this background, shifting towards a more sustainable paradigm of spatial development is the defining challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Decision-makers and policy stakeholders across the globe have to grapple with it, rethinking the currently unsustainable ways in which they steer and plan the development of regions and cities, finding ingenious ways to strike a balance between pursuing the goal of prosperity and avoiding depletion of the Earth's resources, while at the same time promoting social cohesion and just distribution of resources and access to public services. And all this needs to be done in the wake of shifting demographics and, in many areas, deepening inequalities.

These pressures are triggering policy innovation in cities and regions across the world, from universal income experimentation, foundational economies, digital citizen participation, adaptive spatial planning or deployment of nature-based or circular economy solutions, to name just a few. That being said, these innovations seldom become mainstream, and the 'business as usual' approach still dominates. Too often the response to these changes remains based on outdated policy recipes and ideas that failed spectacularly in the wake of the last decade's crisis - faith in growth as a panacea, austerity politics, uncontrolled financialisation of real estate, continuing investment in industries bound to decline (such as the petrochemical industry), and infrastructures supporting global trade flows that are likely to lose their importance as economies shift to regional circular value chains, automation and industry 4.0, etc.

As with any societal, economic and technological change of this magnitude, sustainability transitions are bound to benefit some areas - those that would be able to better capitalise on it thanks to the right set of knowledge, social, institutional, economic and geographical advantages - while other places are highly vulnerable to the negative impacts of change and are likely to lag behind. Will the current leading regions and cities be able to hold their position or are they at risk of declining, for instance, by failing to embrace automation, digitalisation or the green economy? If that happens, will this, in turn, fuel the populist surge and disenchantment with democracy that is currently witnessed in territories with declining industries and that have been neglected by regional policies for some decades? By contrast, will the currently lagging areas be able to find new drivers for development by capitalising on their previously undervalued assets for energy transition (e.g. space and resources for renewable energy infrastructures, carbon capture), circularity (e.g. traditional industries refurbishing and remanufacturing or adopting culturally embedded practices of reuse and upcycling) or quality of institutions (e.g. bottom up democratic practices)? Is there potential for the currently lagging regions to leapfrog into the green economy? Also, what will be the impacts of growing migration flows, driven by climate change, conflicts and economic shifts, on the 'recipient' regions and cities? Will migrants be able to integrate in these places and provide a boost for their economies and halt the demographic or will this inflow of migrants merely deepen inequality and stigmatisation, reinforcing nationalist and xenophobic attitudes? What will be the impacts of this outmigration on the regions from where the migrants escape and what knock-on effects for the globalised economy may that bring?

At the same time, a transition towards a more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable regional and urban future faces major barriers from entrenched interests, seemingly immovable policy paradigms to path dependent development which hamper change. It is also riddled with uncertainties, for instance how climate change will actually unfold, how society would respond to the opportunities and sacrifices that shifting away from fossil fuel may bring or the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens of shifting to zero-carbon economies, how automation would affect job markets and regions, and how this will translate into political and electoral choices.

In this light, regions and cities across the globe are in a desperate need of new policy ideas and experimentation in terms of new economic models, ways to empower citizens and promote a fairer distribution of the fruits of economic growth, tools and indicators for regional and urban policies, and modes of regional planning and governance to overcome the limitations that the administrative, spatial or sectoral boundaries pose seizing the opportunities that the new green economy brings. All that calls for taking stock of the changing regional horizons, experimentation and exploration of new theoretical, methodological horizons to inform and drive policy innovation.

The Regional Studies Association Winter Conference 2020 offers a timely opportunity to discuss and debate these important issues, to rethink the key theories, concepts and methods used in the field of regional studies in the face of changing regional challenges, and to provide new evidence for the urgent reforms of policies for regions and cities. The conference will provide a forum for rethinking the ways in which regions and cities develop and discussing ways to nudge them towards economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development paths.

The conference organisers are keen to attract papers and special sessions which rethink the future of cities and regions. In particular, the organisers invite papers that break new ground by identifying new fields of enquiry, proposing new concepts and methods, shedding new light on the consequences of and challenges for sustainability transitions (especially on the linkages between the three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environmental), and propose bold new policy solutions for local and regional practitioners. Moreover, papers which are collaborative, comparative or inter-disciplinary are especially welcome.

**Broad themes and key agendas include, but are not limited to:**

Regional innovation in the age of the fourth industrial revolution

Industry 4.0 and the changing geographies of knowledge and economic flows

The role of Universities and research institutions for the new regional economies

Geographies of migration and socio-economic integration of migrants

Rethinking EU Cohesion policy in the face of the new challenges that Europe faces

The territorial dimension of EU policies

Cross-national transfer of knowledge and practices in regional policies

Regional planning in the face of populism, demographic and economic shifts

Brexit and its political and socio-spatial consequences

Regional and local development policy

Innovations in citizen empowerment and promotion of spatial justice at the regional and local scales

Governance rescaling in the face of socio-economic and environmental challenges

Geographies of discontent and innovative ways to address populist surge in declining regions

Regional and urban challenges for sustainability transitions

Circular economy and spatial development

Climate change impacts in regions and cities and the policies to address them

Infrastructure, transport and housing

Geographies of trade and Foreign Direct Investment

**Submission Details:** Please submit your abstract (up to 250 words and text only) through the RSA conference portal at <https://members.regionalstudies.org/lounge/Meetings/Meeting?ID=262>. Abstracts will be considered and reviewed by the Conference Programme Committee against the criteria of originality, interest, subject balance and geographical spread.

**Abstract submission deadline is 10th August 2020.**

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More information at <https://www.regionalstudies.org/events/2020-winter-conference/>