LIVING AND WORKING IN THE BRUSSELS METROPOLITAN AREA: SEARCHING FOR PATHWAYS TO LIVEABLE URBANISATION (BMiX)

This text is a summary of the BMiX research proposal officially approved by Innoviris. For more information, please contact one of the researchers.

The BMiX project starts from the observation of a double socio-spatial mismatch between working and living in the Brussels Metropolitan Area (BMA). This mismatch is expressed both between the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) and its hinterland and within the BCR itself. On the one hand, Brussels offers ample high-skilled jobs, mostly occupied by inhabitants of the hinterland. On the other, the BCR contains a high share of low-skilled inhabitants for whom access to the labour market is restricted and adequate job offer is insufficient, especially within the neighbourhoods where these groups live.

Moreover, the BCR is being challenged by a demographic boom that makes an enlargement of the housing market direly necessary. Socially and spatially, this mismatch translates to urban liveability problems. Firstly, it generates commuter flows resulting in excessive automobile pressure in urban areas. Secondly, mixed neighbourhoods (especially those within the so-called poor crescent) are being gradually targeted by real-estate project developments, which elevates the risk of gentrification, with a double effect: (1) lower income groups are systematically driven off the housing market and spatially
relocated elsewhere and (2) the scarce areas where opportunities remain for low-skilled labour will come under increased pressure from residential real-estate development.

This research aims to develop strategies to tackle this double mismatch between working and living in the BMA. The main hypothesis of this research is that an overarching vision on the spatial development of working and living ought to be conceptualised, which organises both in a way that improves urban liveability. This hypothesis can be divided into two sub-hypotheses.

First we will investigate how within areas for mixed-use development, but also within potential other strategic zones and spaces, an optimal intertwining of working and living functions can be established. Whereas traditional views and indexes of functional mixity tend to emphasise the compatibility of activities in terms of possible mutual hindrance, we suggest developing contextualised and locational strategies of functional mixity, taking into account the spatial potential of places, the socio-economic profile of the population and the economic activities' added value, especially in terms of job creation. The hypothesis is that this type of mixed-use development benefits urban liveability and socio-economic conditions.

At the same time, we will examine whether (sub)urban transit-oriented development can contribute to the adjusting of the housing and labour markets. We hypothesise that morphological densification, compact building, sustainable mobility and urbanising the fringe lead to a stronger and more coherent social fabric; and to a metropolitan core community of inhabitants who ‘belong’ to the city and not only ‘use’ it as daily commuters. Conversely, this tighter physical and social connection between the urban and the suburban permits city-dwellers to reach out to job availabilities in suburban areas. In this way, the urban fringe can play a significant role in intercepting the predicted demographic growth.

A number of spatial scenarios will be developed in order to approach the harmonisation of working and living on an ‘agglomerative + hinterland’ scale. These scenarios will contribute to an increased conciliation of regional planning visions, since from a perspective that combines urban and hinterland development together, alternative and better tuned locational choices and development perspectives for specific sites can be established.