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Joint regional land utilization plan (Regionaler Flächennutzungsplan) of Ruhr area cities: Rapid Health Impact Assessment

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Background

As indicated by WHO's strategy "Health in all policies", population health is influenced by activities in multiple (if not all) societal sectors.

Planning involvement of health professionals is geared towards harvesting the opportunities and optimizing health impacts of planning decisions, incl. spatial planning. In many regions (e.g. in North Rhine-Westphalia), this is also required by Public Health law.

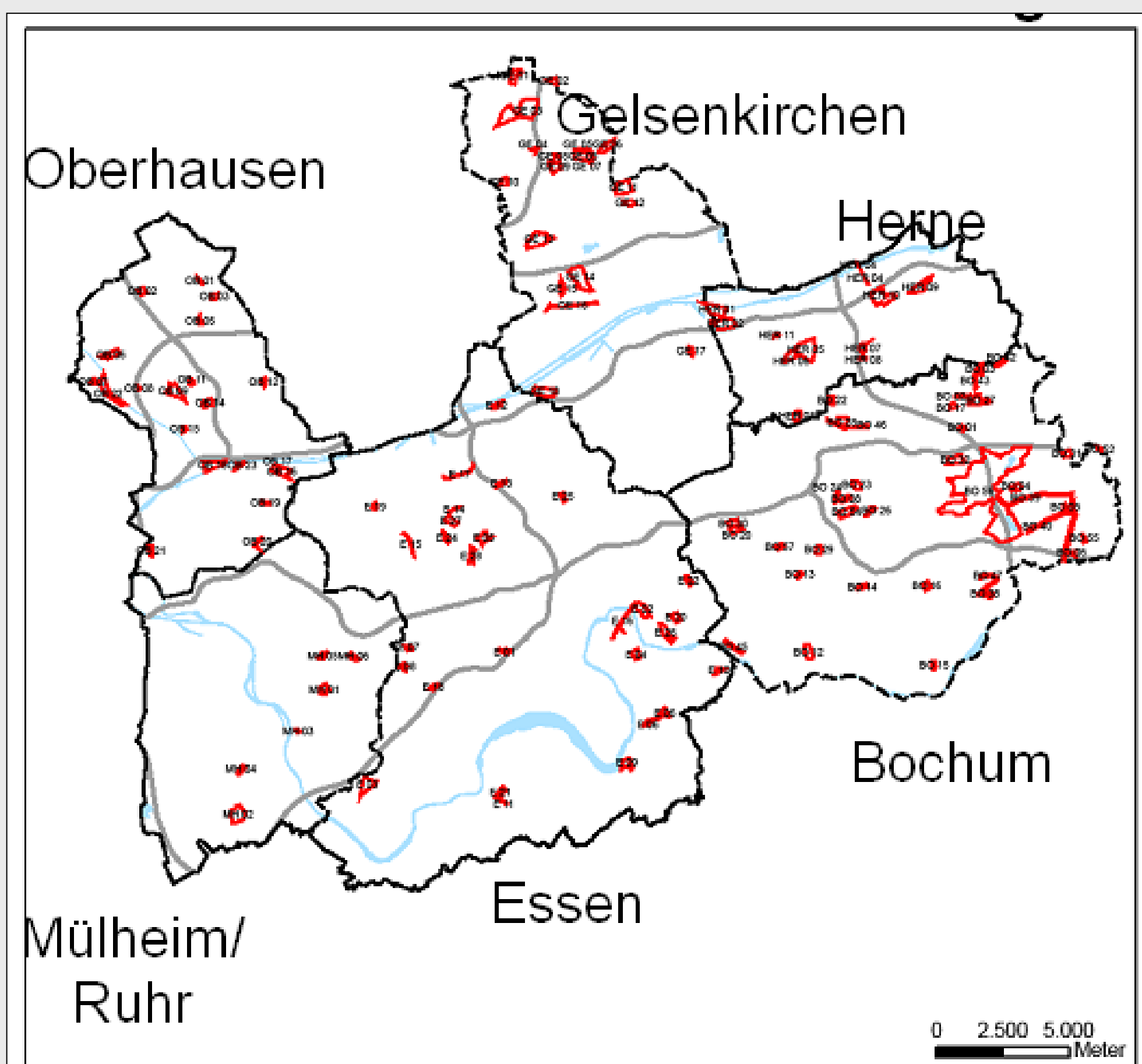
LIGA.NRW was recently appointed WHO Collaborating Center for Regional Health Policy and Public Health. The tasks include "to promote the transfer of knowledge and experience of health policy development at regional and local levels within Europe".

To participate in local and regional planning is seen as a crucial component of state-of-the-art health policy development.

Methods

In the current planning process of major Ruhr area cities (Bochum, Essen, Gelsenkirchen, Herne, Mülheim/Ruhr, Oberhausen), LIGA.NRW was asked to participate as "Institution responsible for public concerns" (Träger öffentlicher Belange, TÖB) and to support the coverage of health aspects.

The planning materials were assessed from the background of international experiences with planning involvement, including Health Impact Assessment (HIA).



Source: RFNP Städteregion Ruhr, Umweltplan, Themenkarte 6, Einzelpufferflächen

Box 1 Health aspects considered in the planning process

- Mortality, life expectancy, hospitalization
- Land use, soil pollution, brownfields
- Ground-, surface water, drinking water, floods
- Air pollution incl. PM, NOx, local climate
- Disaster prevention & response (Seveso II dir.)
- Noise & vibrations, espec. from highways, railways, industry
- Light pollution, offensive odours, EMF
- Waste disposal
- Recreation, leisure activities



Box 2 Specific issues raised by LIGA.NRW

1. Include a section on "health" in the statement of justification for the Land utilization plan
2. Prepare a separate technical paper on "health"
3. Include the topics "physical activity" as well as gender issues and diversity
4. Integrate existing health statistics and health reports into the Land utilization plan, espec.:
 - usage of local health reports for status quo analysis and health target development
 - identification of areas with excess burden of disease, and of improvement strategies
5. Amendments to Environmental report, concerning:
 - details on exposures and related health effects
 - health-related information on recreation and green spaces
 - health impacts of noise exposure: efforts towards mandatory noise protection
6. Add to concise texts ("Steckbriefe") for planning:
 - strengthening the weight of health concerns for fair balancing
 - where appropriate, impose legal requirements for health protection

Results

The comprehensive planning process is reflected in a number of websites and notifications, including comprehensive participation. The planning process includes health considerations (Box 1).

Utilizing standard approaches from HIA literature, LIGA.NRW derived a range of specific recommendations (Box 2).

The recommendations can be summarized as follows:

- Making best use of existing (local) statistics and health reports, for describing the status quo, identifying areas of particular concern, deriving health targets, and developing specific recommendations
- Underlining the relevance of health for regional development by providing section(s) and separate technical paper(s) devoted to "health"
- Including health-promotive topics such as physical exercise, recreation as well as health-related equity and gender issues
- Advocating full exploitation of health-related legal requirements, and adequate emphasis on health in balancing operations.

Conclusions

Spatial planning offers a variety of opportunities to promote and protect human health.

This applies also to allied planning of a group of cities/counties, which hitherto is rarely done in Germany. The opportunities should be used thoroughly and systematically.

Such planning involvement for the sake of health protection and promotion constitutes a key element of regional and local health policy development.

The opportunity to cover health aspects and to utilize HIA findings should be emphasized more effectively within all types and stages of planning procedures. This would require, however, improved technical skills and intensified capacity building, especially for the public health sector on local/regional level.

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