Towards an EU urban agenda

The building blocks from a city perspective

May 2015

Why do we need an EU urban agenda?

Europe's future lies in our cities, drivers of sustainable economic development and frontline managers of climate action and social inclusion. Cities are where the main challenges and opportunities in Europe come together and where policies in areas such as employment, social inclusion, culture, environment, mobility, energy and economic development are likely to have the biggest impact.

Most of the European Commission's ten political priorities have a strong urban dimension, such as jobs, growth, digital, energy, climate change, migration and democratic change. Local and regional authorities, including cities, are responsible for implementing around 70% of EU legislation. The broader EU agenda must therefore fully recognise the capacity of our cities to deliver on the EU's strategic priorities.
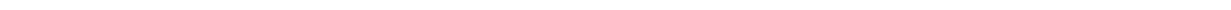
Although there is no EU competence on urban development, a multitude of EU initiatives impact directly or indirectly on cities. However, these are at times uncoordinated and determined by sector policies. An effective EU urban agenda would provide a strategic framework for these initiatives to maximise their impact and added value for the EU, member states and cities.

The building blocks of an EU urban agenda

1) **Clear scope: a coherent, transparent and strategic framework for EU polices with an urban dimension**

An urban agenda must be based on existing EU level agreements and work on the added value of sustainable integrated urban development, such as the Leipzig Charter and the Toledo Declaration, as well as the Commission's 'Cities of Tomorrow' report. An urban agenda must be both clear about its focus and accommodate the broad range of policies impacting on cities. To achieve this, we need explicit recognition of the challenges and opportunities in European cities that are relevant to EU developments. They include:

- Cities as drivers of quality jobs and sustainable growth: cities are major employers, procurers, social service providers, regulators and investors, with a strong role to play in supporting SMEs and entrepreneurs, and brokering new partnerships.

- Inclusive, diverse and creative cities: cities play an important role in strengthening social cohesion in Europe. They recognise the vital role culture plays in addressing

economic and societal challenges and the added value, creativity and economic opportunity that diversity represents. They play a strong role combatting discrimination and racism locally.

- Green, free flowing and healthy cities: cities drive the transition to a low carbon, green and resilient economy. They promote actions that lead to more sustainable behaviour, cleaner air, and zero or low carbon mobility solutions. These actions help mitigate and adapt to the consequences of climate change and have a positive impact on citizens' health.

- Smarter cities: cities can maximise the potential of new technologies for the benefit of citizens for greater energy efficiency, to create jobs and growth, and to improve quality of life for all.

- Urban innovation and governance: cities are continuing to identify and test new approaches to existing and emerging challenges; promoting the shift towards active citizenship, social innovation and participatory policy making; and brokering new forms of governance and partnerships with people, sectors, territories and business for better services and urban growth.

2) **Better coordination: strengthening the identification of and connections between EU initiatives with an urban impact**

An EU urban agenda is not about creating more EU policies or a separate EU programme for urban policies. There is already plenty of EU legislation, policies and initiatives that impact directly or indirectly on cities. Better coordination at EU level would help prevent duplication of initiatives, limit overlaps, and strengthen the positive impact of existing initiatives. We would, for example, welcome better coordination between sustainable energy action plans (SEAPs) and sustainable urban mobility plans (SUMPs). Actions launched under the Covenant of Mayors, Mayors Adapt, Smart Cities and Communities, and Climate-KIC could also be better connected. The challenge for cities in meeting EU air quality requirements due to inadequate measures to reduce vehicle emissions and weak limitations on national emissions is well known.

To strengthen coordination, the Commission president should appoint a political lead on urban issues within the college of commissioners. This commissioner should be supported by an 'urban envoy', a senior official responsible for the practical coordination of initiatives within the Commission that have an urban dimension – policies, funding programmes, awareness raising campaigns, etc. The focus should be on strengthening the upstream coordination as new initiatives are developed, as well as identifying overlaps and gaps once policies have already been launched. Better connecting policies and programmes is closely linked to delivering the Commission's better regulation agenda.

The urban envoy should also be tasked with strengthening the urban dimension of the impact assessments of new legislative proposals. This should include developing a

transparent working method for assessing the potential impact in cities of new initiatives in collaboration with the Committee of the Regions, ESPON, cities and city networks.

In addition, the Commission should, through Eurostat and with the OECD, member states and cities, strengthen initiatives that seek to improve the collection, comparability and use of data on urban development to inform policy formulation. Data should be collected where policies are delivered – often at local level.

Finally, we would welcome a web portal (a 'one-stop-shop') on EU initiatives with an urban dimension, as long as this helps stakeholders navigate the EU system without becoming a barrier to engaging with the relevant Commission directorate generals on urban priorities. An effective one-stop-shop could include a comprehensive overview of EU policies that impact on cities. It could also feature a search engine on EU financed project outcomes related to urban policies to help cities identify past and existing projects across different funding streams.

3) Working methods: better involvement of cities and new genuine partnerships

We would like to see the direct involvement of cities mainstreamed in EU policy development with an urban dimension. There are already a number of good practices for involving cities and city networks directly in policy development. Examples include the Commission's stakeholder group reviewing national education programmes, the Commission's expert group on air quality, and the European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities. This direct involvement ensures that new initiatives are informed by the challenges on the ground and that there is a sense of ownership in cities when policies need to be implemented locally.

There are also gaps where cities are not yet involved, for example in the member state expert group on urban mobility. Similarly, for the EU's Youth Guarantee to be effective, cities must be involved in developments alongside managing authorities and member states. The involvement of cities in policy developments should move away from basic stakeholder consultations and towards collaboration and partnerships.

Meetings with city mayors and study visits to urban areas should be included in vice presidents' and commissioners' programmes when they travel to member states. This would improve awareness of the urban dimension of policies beyond regional development and the local awareness of the impact of EU policies. Involving cities in the planning of local visits by commissioners would offer the best insights into the challenges and opportunities on the ground.

Whereas much can be achieved by 'urbanising' existing working methods, we also need to explore new forms of cooperation if an EU urban agenda is to be effective in tackling the complex challenges in cities.

Through EUROCITIES and other urban networks, cities exchange knowledge on what works and what doesn't in practice. They build capacity and develop innovative solutions and responses to challenges. Member states also work together at intergovernmental level to

exchange on urban development issues. The Commission is often involved in both levels of work. It is time to join up these processes on a selected set of priority areas to better connect policies and solutions and bring together all levels of government.

We would welcome a limited number of new 'urban partnerships' that test a working method where groups of member states, city experts and relevant Commission directorate generals cooperate to tackle specific urban themes and challenges. Participation should be voluntary and bring partners, expertise and resources together. This would need clear leadership, preferably from one or more member states, to ensure engagement at national level. The partnerships should aim to improve both horizontal and vertical coordination, build capacity and share knowledge across all levels of governance and relevant sectors.

4) Urban solutions: a practical approach delivering added value

An EU urban agenda must take a practical approach and deliver tangible outcomes to be able to engage partners and stakeholders. To be effective, the new partnerships outlined above should focus on a limited number of actions that deliver measurable outcomes. Actions launched under an urban agenda should help integrate policies and solutions, moving beyond a sector approach at all levels. Also, they should help tackle poor coordination between sector policies and gaps at local level between responsibility for implementation and ability to influence resources or policies.

EUROCITIES has grown over the past 30 years into a network of 180 cities that cooperate through 40 expert working groups. Cities exchange knowledge, learn from each other about integrated solutions, and stay informed of EU policy and programme development. Our working groups focus on urban challenges and opportunities that are linked to the five themes outlined above.

Within our broader agenda, there is a set of issues that currently stand out as particularly urgent to be addressed through an EU urban agenda. They have clear links to the EU's strategic objectives and address current gaps in actions at EU level. They demonstrate a need to join forces across levels of government to provide effective solutions. These include:

- Air quality: for EU policy on air quality to be effective and have a positive impact in our cities, different pieces of EU air quality legislation need to be better coordinated with each other. EU air quality policy also needs to be better coordinated with policy objectives related to climate change and energy.

- Reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees: European cities, member states and the Commission should work together to find effective and long term solutions to ensure the successful social and economic integration of asylum seekers and recognised refugees, ensuring local social cohesion.

- Decarbonising cities and localising energy supply: the effects of a multitude of EU energy and climate policies come together and interact in cities. Cities continue to work towards more sustainable, energy efficient and cleaner solutions for energy

production and distribution as well as for urban mobility. A coordinated approach will be just as important when designing the corresponding EU policies.

- Affordable quality housing: there are no EU competences on housing policy, but EU rules on state aid and services of general interest as well as the country specific recommendations of the European semester have a strong impact on cities' ability to deliver sustainable housing policies on the ground.

- Intra-EU migration: migrants usually settle in cities, so free movement of EU nationals impacts on both the home countries and receiving cities, but falls outside the scope of EU financial support. We need better cooperation and shared responsibility between EU level, member states, and cities to help manage the movement of EU nationals while also ensuring there are opportunities available in their home countries.

- Employment in cities: to effectively tackle the current unemployment crisis, especially long term and youth unemployment, we need greater integration of services at local level, together with strong coordination between different governance levels. This has strong links to tackling early school leaving and supporting the transition from education and employment.

We launched the EUROCITIES Declaration on Work in February 2015 to demonstrate how to take forward a specific challenge under an EU urban agenda. We call for partnership between different levels of government, across sectors and targeted EU funding so we can jointly tackle the current employment crisis, providing more effective results on the ground. We invite the Commission and member states to politically endorse the initiative and to help us implement it.

Concluding remarks

An EU urban agenda should provide a strategic framework for:

- empowering cities to deliver the Europe 2020 objectives for a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe
- promoting a joined-up approach to policy making
- engaging cities directly and alongside member states in EU policy development

It must take a practical and concrete approach, reflecting urban priorities on the ground and developing partnerships across all levels of government. To make this a reality, we need the Commission and member states to engage directly with cities.

Cities and their surrounding areas depend on each other to find effective policy solutions to their strategic challenges. Cities that perform well benefit their surrounding areas as drivers of growth and innovation and as service providers, supporting the overall competitiveness and territorial cohesion of their regions and the EU.

Therefore, an EU urban agenda is about much more than cities: it is about the EU's ability to deliver its strategic objectives for a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe.