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PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**THE URBAN DIMENSION OF EU POLICIES – KEY FEATURES OF AN EU
URBAN AGENDA**

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COMMUNICATION TO THE COUNCIL, EP, CoR, EESC

INTRODUCTION.....	3
1. CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL OF AN URBAN EUROPE.....	3
1.1. An urbanised EU with cities driving growth and resource efficiency.....	3
1.2. Sub-optimal performance and persistent challenges in European cities.....	4
1.3. A fragmented urban system.....	5
2. URBAN POLICY IN EUROPE.....	5
2.1. National urban policies.....	5
2.2. Intergovernmental cooperation on urban development.....	6
2.3. A shared understanding of urban development in Europe	6
2.4. EU urban policy today.....	7
2.5. Urban potential can be better used	7
3. CALLS FOR AN EU URBAN AGENDA.....	8
3.1. A long recognised need an EU urban agenda.....	8
3.2. Renewed calls for an EU urban agenda.....	8
4. THE GLOBAL DIMENSION OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT	9
5. TAKING THE REFLECTIONS ON AN EU URBAN AGENDA FORWARD	9
5.1. Why do we need an EU urban agenda?.....	10
5.2. What should the EU urban agenda be?.....	10
5.3. Defining the scope and focus	11
5.4. Strengthening cities’ engagement and ownership of EU policies.....	11
5.5. Better understanding of urban development processes	11
5.6. Ensuring the implementation of the EU urban agenda.....	12

INTRODUCTION

Europe continues to be faced with challenges related to the economy, the climate, the environment, and society at large. Most of these challenges have a strong urban dimension; they either manifest themselves mainly in and around cities - e.g., poverty, social and spatial segregation; environmental degradation - or find their solutions in and through cities – e.g.; resource efficiency and CO₂ neutral economy; economic development and innovation; social innovation and integration.

Although cities' role for economic, social and cultural development, and their potential for a more resource efficient habitat, have long been recognised, the policy response at European and national level has been slow and piecemeal, with many but poorly integrated sectoral initiatives. A growing number of voices argue that cities need to be adequately involved in the conception and implementation of EU policies, and that EU policies need to be better adapted to the urban realities where they will be implemented. This is expressed by calls for an EU urban agenda coming from a range of stakeholders at the EU, national and local level. As a response to these calls the European Commission organised a CITIES Forum¹ to initiate a debate on the need for an EU urban agenda.

Following the CITIES Forum, Member States discussed the necessity to develop an EU Urban Agenda, recognising the demand and expectations from the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, city associations and cities themselves, and their readiness to engage in the process. It was suggested that such an agenda should be taken forward with input from the local, regional, national and EU levels.²

The purpose of this communication is to widen debate to all stakeholders. Building on the results of the CITIES forum it proposes a set of questions for consultation aimed at further clarifying the need for an EU urban agenda, what its objectives should be and how it could function. The opinions and suggestions from stakeholders and competent authorities at the national, regional and local level will be an important input to the new Commission and the new European Parliament, not least in relation to the future development of the Europe 2020 strategy³.

This communication sets out current urban situation in the EU (section 1); where Europe stand today in terms of urban policy and (section 2); the calls for an EU urban agenda (section 3); the global dimension of urban development (section 4); and the potential ways forward with questions for consultation (section 5).

1. CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL OF AN URBAN EUROPE

1.1. An urbanised EU with cities driving growth and resource efficiency

Today, approximately 359 million people - 72 % of the total EU population - live in cities, towns and suburbs. Although the speed of transformation has slowed down, the

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/index_en.cfm

² Informal meeting of Ministers responsible for Cohesion Policy organised by the Hellenic Presidency, Athens, April 24 2014

³ "Taking stock of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth". COM(2014) 130 final

share of the urban population continues to grow, and is likely to reach more than 80% by 2050⁴.

The concentration of consumers, workers and businesses in a place or area, together with the formal and informal institutions that are found in cities, makes urban areas more than just centres of population. They are the centres of activity of all kinds, and in particular economic activity. Sixty-seven per cent of Europe's GDP is generated in metropolitan regions, while their population represents only fifty-nine per cent of the total European population. A comparison of European cities' economic performance indicates that the major cities are doing better than the rest,⁵ and capitals and larger metropolitan regions have performed better during the economic crisis than smaller metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions⁶. Small and medium-sized cities, however, form the backbone of Europe's territory and have an important role to play for territorial development and cohesion.

Cities are also where a number of global challenges can best be tackled. Cities are for instance ideally placed to contribute to the reduction of energy consumption and CO₂ emissions as the density of urban areas allows for more energy efficient forms of housing and transport.

1.2. Sub-optimal performance and persistent challenges in European cities

A concentration of population and activities is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for high growth. There is a marked difference in performance between capital and non-capital cities. There is also a big difference between western and eastern non-capital cities that cannot be explained by size alone. Even comparably sized cities, with similar industrial structures within the same Member State, show significant variations in terms of economic and social performance.⁷

Despite cities' potential for driving growth, the highest unemployment rates are found in cities. With globalisation, the recent crisis and a drop in manufacturing, many cities have experienced a de-skilling of the workforce, and an increase of low-skilled service sector jobs and working poor. The share of the population at risk of poverty has increased.⁸ Many cities face a significant increase in social exclusion, segregation and polarisation.

The resource efficiency gains made possible by compact urban settlements are being undermined by uncontrolled urban sprawl that puts public services under pressure and reduces territorial cohesion. Walking, cycling and public transport are not a sufficiently developed alternative to cars in many cities, resulting in congestion, bad air quality and high energy use. The rapid urbanisation leading to the big concentration of population and economic investments in risk prone areas is also a trend that increases significantly the cities' vulnerability to natural and man-made disasters.

Many European cities also suffer from an insufficient capacity to engage in and achieve (needed) structural change. The economic crisis has significantly weakened many cities,

⁴ European Commission (JRC, EFGS, DG REGIO)

⁵ 'State of European Cities Report', European Commission 2010;

⁶ '8th Progress Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion', European Commission 2013

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/citiesoftomorrow/citiesoftomorrow_economic.pdf

⁸ '8th Progress Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion', European Commission 2013

increasing the challenges that have to be addressed with fewer resources. Many secondary cities, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, are experiencing complex shrinkage, with both demographic and economic decline, which can induce a negative spiral of declining local tax revenues, lower demand for goods and services, loss of jobs, reduced supply of labour and lower investment, and an overall loss of attractiveness.⁹ In economically stagnating cities, inner cities have been deserted in favour of sprawling suburbs.

1.3. A fragmented urban system

Europe is characterised by more polycentric and less concentrated urban structures than the USA or China. It has two large urban agglomerations (Paris and London); a considerable number of large city regions; dense networks of small and medium-sized cities; and areas with very few urban centres. Its urban structure can be described as a combination of major urban centres and polycentric urban structures, and dispersed urbanisation. The emergence of polycentric (mega)-city-regions, which are webs of medium and small cities without a real functional and political base, is a growing phenomenon in Europe.¹⁰ The growing mismatch between administrative and urban structures reduces cohesion and impairs competitiveness due to inadequate governance and infrastructures.¹¹

2. URBAN POLICY IN EUROPE

2.1. National urban policies

Urban policies vary greatly between Member States and only a few have dedicated ministries and ministers for urban affairs. Urban policy is often the implicit result of urban and spatial planning laws and the combined intervention of sectoral policies, rather than a domain that is given political and strategic direction.

The manner in which cities are governed, their autonomy, empowerment and involvement in national policy also varies greatly across the Member States: the numbers of administrative tiers or government levels range from two to four, and the average population size of the lowest tier (communes or municipalities) ranges from less than 2000 to over 150000. In some countries additional intermediary structures, such as groupings of first-tier government, have been set up to facilitate joint planning and action around strategic issues or joint infrastructure.¹²

Empowerment of cities within national government systems in terms of political autonomy and control over budget and local taxation also varies greatly. In some countries, (major) cities are given a specific status that brings additional resources and responsibilities¹³. Many Member States have undergone a decentralisation trend during the last thirty years, even if this process is not always accompanied with a corresponding increase in resources.

⁹ "Impact of the European demographic trends on regional and urban development." Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Budapest 2011.

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban2014/doc/presentations/dg_urban_sandrobalducci.pdf

¹¹ "What Makes Cities More Productive? Evidence on the Role of Urban Governance from Five OECD Countries". OECD Regional Development Working Papers, 2014/05

¹² *Second 'State of European Cities Report'*, European Commission 2010

¹³ *Ibid.*

2.2. Intergovernmental cooperation on urban development

Member States cooperate on urban development on an intergovernmental basis, with the Presidency of the Council organising and chairing meetings. The outcome of the intergovernmental cooperation consists principally of documents adopted during informal Ministerial meetings, such as the Leipzig Charter¹⁴ and the Toledo Declaration¹⁵. However, as there is no formal Council formation dedicated to urban policy and the engagement of different Member States has varied over time, the impact of the intergovernmental cooperation on EU and national policies has also been varied.

2.3. A shared understanding of urban development in Europe

In terms of aims, objectives, and values, there is an explicit agreement at European level on the character of the European city of the future and the principles on which an ideal European city should be based. These principles can be found in the objectives of the Treaty, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in the European Social Model. There is also a consensus among the ministers responsible for urban development on more specific city objectives and values - as reflected in the Leipzig Charter¹⁶ – as well as how these objectives should be attained and the instrumental role cities can play in implementing Europe 2020 as expressed in the Toledo Declaration. The same goes for the principles of urban development in the European territory as expressed in the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020 (TA2020)¹⁷.

EU cohesion policy, through the URBAN Community Initiatives¹⁸ and the subsequent mainstreaming of integrated sustainable urban development into regional and national operational programmes¹⁹, has fed the intergovernmental process with practical experience. Together they form what is known as the 'Urban Acquis'.

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/themes/urban/leipzig_charter.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.eukn.org/dsresource?objectid=165782>

¹⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/themes/urban/leipzig_charter.pdf

¹⁷ <http://www.eu-territorial-agenda.eu/Reference%20Documents/Final%20TA2020.pdf>

¹⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/urban2/index_en.htm

¹⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/2007/working/urban_dimension_en.pdf

Cities of Tomorrow²⁰ ***synthesises the principles of the European sustainable urban development model*** drawing upon the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the European Social Model, the Leipzig Charter, the Toledo Declaration and the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020.

European cities should be

- ✓ places of advanced social progress;
- ✓ platforms for democracy, cultural dialogue and diversity;
- ✓ places of green, ecological or environmental regeneration; and
- ✓ places of attraction and engines of economic growth.

European urban territorial development should

- ✓ reflect a sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and balanced territorial organisation with a polycentric urban structure;
- ✓ contain strong regional centres that provide good accessibility to services of general economic interest;
- ✓ be characterised by a compact settlement structure with limited urban sprawl; and
- ✓ enjoy a high level of protection and quality of environment around cities.

2.4. EU urban policy today

The European Commission's Directorate General for Regional Policy was renamed "Regional and Urban Policy" in 2012. This was in recognition of the fact that cities must play their full part in the economic, social and territorial development of the EU, as well as an acknowledgement of a strong urban dimension in EU policies, not least in regional policy. At least an estimated 50% of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), around 80-90 billion Euro, will be invested in urban areas through the mainstream operational programmes in the 2014-20 financial period, and a minimum 5% of national allocations of ERDF have been earmarked for integrated sustainable urban development to ensure that it is a priority in all Member States. City networking and exchange will continue to be promoted by the next generation URBACT²¹ programme.

But urban development is not only supported through EU regional policy and structural funds. An increasing number of sectoral EU policies explicitly target urban areas: Energy, Information Society, Environment, Climate Action, Education and Culture, Transport, etc. support initiatives such as European Capital of Culture, Smart Cities and Communities European Innovation Partnership, Green Capital Award, Covenant of Mayors and Mayors Adapt. Many other EU initiatives and directives implicitly target urban areas, e.g., noise and air quality directives, migration policies, measures to reduce congestion, etc., which although not urban per se, chiefly concern urban areas or are implemented by cities²².

2.5. Urban potential can be better used

Cities play a key role in implementing EU policies, including the Europe 2020 strategy. But current policy making practice at both national and EU level do not always fully exploit expertise available at city level, or recognise the essential role that local authorities can play in delivering on policy objectives set at other levels of governance.

²⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/conferences/citiesoftomorrow/index_en.cfm

²¹ <http://urbact.eu/>

²² http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/urban/portal/index_en.cfm

Although cities are gaining recognition as key players and the urban dimension is gaining visibility, the situation remains problematic. Multi-level governance is not always functioning well and integration of policies across sectors and administrative borders is difficult to achieve. The strong sectoral focus of policy objectives reduces the opportunity for synergies between sectors and weakens ownership by the cities themselves. Compartmentalised policymaking is entrenched at all governance levels and is hard to break as objectives and targets, as well as indicators to measure results, also tend to be sectoral. Insufficient coordination between different areas of sectoral legislation and layers of governance (local, regional and national) can make it difficult for cities to comply with EU directives, e.g., in areas such as air quality.²³

3. CALLS FOR AN EU URBAN AGENDA

3.1. A long recognised need an EU urban agenda

Already in its 1997 Communication “Towards an urban agenda in the European Union”²⁴ the European Commission argued that new efforts were necessary to strengthen or restore the role of Europe’s cities as places of social and cultural integration, as sources of economic prosperity and sustainable development, and as the bases of democracy. Since then there has been an evolution in terms of the scope of EU policy interventions in urban areas and urban development has become a more prominent feature of EU policymaking. In addition, the Lisbon Treaty has added territorial cohesion to the objectives of the EU and has strengthened multi-level governance. However, policy fragmentation persists, the complexity of urban challenges has increased, and the role of the local level in EU policymaking and implementation continues to be an issue for debate. This is reflected in the renewed calls for an EU urban agenda in the recent years.

3.2. Renewed calls for an EU urban agenda

In 2011 the *European Parliament* adopted a resolution arguing for a strengthening of the urban dimension of EU policies and the intergovernmental co-operation on urban development policies, calling for a joint working programme or European Urban Agenda. The European Parliament also stressed the need for a stronger involvement of cities in these processes. In mid-2013 a *group of Member States* led by the Netherlands and Belgium made a proposal for an urban agenda in the context of the intergovernmental cooperation on urban development, which has been taken forward by the Lithuanian, Greek and Italian Presidencies of the Council.

In late 2013 the *Committee of the Regions* initiated its own initiative opinion entitled “Towards an integrated urban agenda for the EU”. The opinion calls for a new Integrated Urban Agenda for the EU giving the urban dimension a structural basis in European policies and legislation. In early 2014 *Eurocities* argued for an EU urban agenda to ensure better policy coordination, integration of urban development objectives in a larger number of policies; better balance priorities in European investment programmes; strengthen direct dialogue between cities and the Commission, and give a stronger coordinating role for the Commissioner for regional policy.

Several stakeholder organisations came forward after the CITIES Forum with explicit calls through position papers. The *Council of European Municipalities and Regions*

²³ <http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/air-implementation-pilot-2013>

²⁴ “Towards an urban agenda in the European Union”, COM(97)197 final

(CEMR) calls for an EU urban agenda that should facilitate the access and active involvement of all types of cities - small, medium-sized and large cities - in the policy making process, recognise the role of functional regions and the need for better policy coordination. *Energy Cities* affirms the need to formulate and implement an EU Urban Agenda in order to leverage local authorities' full potential and to place territorial cohesion at the heart of EU policies.

Ministers responsible for Cohesion policy met in Athens in April 2014 to discuss an EU urban agenda. The Member States also recognised the demand and expectations from a range of stakeholders to develop an EU Urban Agenda and their readiness to engage in the process.

4. THE GLOBAL DIMENSION OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

In 2050 it is expected that 67% per cent of the World population will be urban. Urban areas will gain 2.6 billion and rural areas will lose 300 million people, and this will take place mainly in the developing world²⁵. This urbanisation has the potential to bring wealth and welfare to large populations but also risks creating slums and pockets of extreme deprivation, unsustainable social, environmental and territorial development patterns. It is vital that this is steered in an as sustainable direction as possible, as these developments will have global impacts on the economy, the climate and on the social stability that will also be felt in Europe.

The growing awareness of the potential of urban development is reflected in EU external relations, international cooperation and development aid. In its recent Communication "Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes"²⁶, the European Commission underlines the decisive role of local authorities in urban areas to address development challenges.

In the negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda urban development has become a key topic. The United Nations Human Settlement Programme, UN Habitat, has also asked the EU to contribute for the first time to a global debate on the future of urban development, in a joint contribution to the HABITAT III conference.²⁷ Such a contribution would naturally build on the EU's reflections on an EU Agenda for its own cities, which would provide a basis for a common contribution to the international debate. In addition, the on-going negotiations on a future global climate agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) show an increasing interest in urban development and the role of cities.

5. TAKING THE REFLECTIONS ON AN EU URBAN AGENDA FORWARD

Before taking the urban agenda forward, there is still need to clearly establish its purpose and rationale, the form it could take and how it could operate. An EU urban agenda cannot be formulated in a vacuum but should be fully in line with the EU's overall objectives and strategy, particularly the revised Europe 2020 strategy. It should also dovetail with national policies and national urban agendas. A shared opinion amongst the

²⁵ *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2011 Revision*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, New York 2012

²⁶ COM(2013) 280 final

²⁷ <http://mirror.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=831>

many stakeholders is that an EU urban agenda has to respect the subsidiarity principle and not be built on new legislation.

5.1. Why do we need an EU urban agenda?

An EU urban agenda could respond to several objectives. An EU urban agenda could serve to enhance the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of policies through *better coordination* of policies, actors and governance levels and a *better understanding* of urban development contexts in the conception and implementation of policies. It could strengthen *cities' engagement and ownership* of EU and national policymaking and implementation. It could support *cities' capacity for transition and structural change* to ensure viable urban economies and a socially, environmentally and territorially sustainable development of urban areas. By being linked to holistic local development objectives it could bring *EU policymaking closer to the citizens*. Finally, it could be instrumental in EU's development aid policies and be a vehicle to promote global sustainability issues.

The majority of EU policies have an urban dimension, directly or indirectly. However, there is a potential for improvement and a stronger engagement and interaction between the various governance levels and a stronger focus on urban policy priorities in national and European policymaking. A key first step in the possible definition of an EU urban agenda will be to identify where there are shortcomings that need to be addressed at EU level.

Q1. What are the main rationales for an EU urban agenda? Where can EU action bring most added value? What elements of urban development would benefit from a more concerted approach between different sectors and levels of governance?

5.2. What should the EU urban agenda be?

Those who have contributed to this debate so far have suggested that the "agenda" might rather imply a new working method to ensure coherence. Others have proposed that it should take the form of a strategy with priorities for the long-term and operational guidelines for the short term.

An EU urban agenda could focus on a limited set of major European societal challenges, such as CO₂ reduction, climate adaptation, inclusion or demographic change. Challenges may be considered that have specific urban relevance and urgency, or for which cities' engagement is of prime importance for achieving results. Member States have for instance welcomed the Greek Presidency's initiative to promote "Urban Poverty" as a specific working field for the intergovernmental cooperation's contribution to the EU urban agenda. The Covenant of Mayors has often been cited as a model for engaging cities in delivering EU objectives that could potentially be used in other areas.

However, a more ambitious EU urban agenda might seek to provide a framework to bring coherence to a diversity of initiatives and policies, e.g., by ensuring that sectoral policies and instruments are consistent and mutually reinforce each other.

Q2. Should an EU urban agenda focus on a limited number of urban challenges? Or, should an EU urban agenda provide a general framework to focus attention on the urban dimension of EU policies across the board, strengthening coordination between sectoral policies, city, national and EU actors?

5.3. Defining the scope and focus

A substantial body of work has already been undertaken to define a European model of urban development, through the intergovernmental cooperation on urban development and notably through the Commission's own reflection process "Cities of Tomorrow"²⁸, which commands a broad consensus. It would be possible to envisage taking this work further to define more clearly objectives and tasks for specific sectors and actors.

Q3. Is the European model of urban development as expressed in "Cities of Tomorrow" a sufficient basis to take the work on the EU urban agenda further?

5.4. Strengthening cities' engagement and ownership of EU policies

Many city stakeholders and stakeholder organisations view an EU urban agenda as an instrument to better involve cities and their political leaders in EU policymaking and policy implementation. Several issues are at stake; one is to ensure that the concerns of urban stakeholders are considered in the development of sectoral policy initiatives at EU level. This could be achieved by better using the already existing tools to engage and consult stakeholders in the conception of EU policies (such as impact assessments, stakeholder consultations or evaluations). Some have suggested the option of a stakeholder platform to assess the coherence and impact of policies at EU level on urban areas, in particular in relation to the revised Europe 2020. Another aspect is the role cities could play in setting policy objectives at both national and EU level and to what extent EU and national objectives reflect the needs at city level. This concerns both the way global objectives (such as those of Europe 2020) are translated into specific sectoral objectives, as well as how they are transposed into national policies.

Q4. How can urban stakeholders better contribute to the policy development and implementation processes at EU level? Do cities need to be more involved in policymaking at regional, national and EU level? How?

5.5. Better understanding of urban development processes

One aim of an EU urban agenda should be policy making that better reflects urban realities. Cities are constantly evolving and good policymaking needs to build on a deeper understanding and a more effective sharing of knowledge and experience. A range of EU and MS driven initiatives already exist, such as Horizon 2020, ESPON, URBACT, the Joint Programming Initiative Urban Europe, the European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN), etc. The Commission has worked closely with OECD to develop a harmonised definition of urban areas, as well as better understanding of metropolitan dynamics. It also develops geodata to monitor the development of urban areas. Availability of knowledge and data does not seem to be the major problem. Rather, it is

²⁸ Ibid. p.3.

the use, shared understanding and exchange of knowledge by policymakers at all governance levels that need strengthening. Also the coordination of the development of the knowledge base may have scope for improvement.

Q5. What are the best ways to support a stronger urban and territorial knowledge base and exchange of experience? What specific elements of the knowledge base need to be strengthened in order to better support policymaking?

5.6. Ensuring the implementation of the EU urban agenda

The implementation of an EU urban agenda cannot be done solely at EU level. Many issues are best addressed at local, regional or national level, and some issues are not within the competences of the EU. The implementation of an EU urban agenda should also rely on the interaction between different policy levels and between different policy sectors. Thought needs to be given as to how the intergovernmental cooperation and other policy processes can work better together to achieve more impact. Consideration needs to be given to what roles different players should play at different governance levels and how interaction and exchange best can be supported.

Q6. What should be the roles of the local, regional, national and EU levels in the definition, development and implementation of an EU urban agenda?

If you wish to contribute to the debate on an EU urban agenda, please do so electronically by following the instructions found here:

http://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/pc_eu_urb_agenda

Please note that this consultation will be open until September 26, 2014.