

Open Days Event: The RFSC Conference 2013

Towards a European Model of a Sustainable City

Opening address by

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I am Viennese - born and bred. I have served as an elected representative in the local parliament and as a minister in the local government of Vienna. I know very well the importance of cities in the world we live in. I think it was President Kennedy who once said that:

“We will neglect our cities to our peril, for in neglecting them we neglect the nation.”

Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The same could be said of the EU. If we neglect our cities, we cannot do justice to the Europe we want to build.

In 2010, for the first time ever, the population living in urban areas all over the world has exceeded those who live outside. Just one hundred years ago the proportion of people living in cities was just 20%. This is following a growing trend and it is expected that by 2030, it will reach 60%.

In Europe, today, we are already close to 70%. 7 out of 10 people on our continent live in or around cities!

Cities are not only where most people live. In Europe more than two thirds of GDP is generated in cities. They are the home of business and entrepreneurship. They host research and innovation, education and training. They can foster social inclusion and a thriving cultural life. But they can also account for high rates of poverty, unemployment, crime and pollution.

Cities are microcosms of every aspect of life and of our society. If we don't get it right in our cities, we cannot tackle the problems we face.

You see, a city is like one big lab generating ideas and developing solutions.

To take one example: cities worldwide account for 70% of CO2 emissions. Because of their high density of population and buildings they also offer the highest potential for reducing CO2 emissions. And, their ability to foster innovation can contribute to finding and testing energy efficient solutions.

Cities have to be at the heart of our plans to create a Europe that is prosperous, environmentally sustainable, and where no citizen is marginalised. They are the key to delivering Europe 2020, our strategy for jobs and growth.

That is why I have argued for a higher profile for cities not only in Regional Policy, but across the whole range of EU policies, and why DG Regio – now renamed DG Regional and Urban policy – has a reinforced role in co-ordinating with all the other DGs in the Commission whose work affects cities.

Urban development is not simply a matter of the built environment, it's about employment, mobility, harnessing new ideas, and protecting heritage. All this has to be addressed in an integrated approach, seeing the interplay of all the different factors.

That is why our reforms set for the first time a 5% minimum on integrated investments in sustainable urban development. This is a minimum, I underline. I fully expect the proportion of all spending in urban areas to be closer to 40% of ERDF programming.

Another key factor in our reforms is the introduction of funding for Innovative Actions to pioneer new ideas in urban development – because we need to keep updating our approach to keep pace with rapidly changing challenges, for example our aging populations, and migration.

So, the timing of the development of the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities (RFSC) tool couldn't have been better. Because this tool can help with the design of integrated urban strategies and help to share experience of new approaches. It can also contribute to the exchanges we already have through URBACT and that I look forward to in the new Urban Development Network.

I would like to thank all those who have played a role in developing the RFSC – and in particular the French authorities who have helped make it a reality.

The European Commission has always been supportive of this initiative from its inception - providing significant funding for both the testing and dissemination phase.

Dear friends,

There is not much that is offered for free – but the RFSC is that unusual commodity, a free offer, for cities to use at their own pace and as they wish.

It is a tool that can be adapted to the needs of every city in Europe – whether small, medium or large. It can help determine the strengths and weaknesses of an existing strategy and monitor progress over time. It is flexible, and cities can adapt its tools to local challenges and processes. And it can help cities with similar circumstances to learn from each other.

This is an on-going process and we must continue in our efforts to build up the RFSC. How far it succeeds will depend on you. To fully realise its potential it needs to become a vibrant community of cities that are willing to share their experiences. They must be prepared to use it in an interactive way, benefitting from dedicated training sessions, peer learning and coaching from relevant experts.

The Commission has recently put forward some proposals as to how the RFSC could be strengthened to attract more cities. The details of this proposal are currently being discussed with relevant partners. We hope that we can conclude our discussions in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, we need your help to grow the tool. I would urge those present today to sign-up to it, if you have not already done so. You should grasp this opportunity and make the tool your own, enrich it with your experiences and customise it according to your needs.

You will be aware that I have insisted on the importance of urban policy since I first became Commissioner for Regional Policy in 2009. In order to examine how best to make urban issues an integral part of our thinking, I launched the “Cities of tomorrow” reflection process, which reported in 2011. Now it is time to look ahead to the next steps, and I hope that you will all come back to Brussels next February for a major event we will be hosting called "Cities of Tomorrow: Investing in Europe".

This will be a cluster of meetings at which we want to consult with policy makers, practitioners, academics and all those who have an interest in this field on how the EU Urban Agenda should develop in the years ahead. I hope to see you there.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you a very productive meeting.