LEARNING TO EXPERIMENT

Realising the potential of the Urban Agenda for the EU

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This report is the second of two publications on the Urban Agenda for the EU. In our first publication, the essay 'Learning with Cities, Learning for Cities. The Golden Opportunity of the Urban Agenda for the EU' (Potjer & Hajer, 2017), we explore contemporary ideas on the potential of cities in multi-level governance, coming to conclusions on how the Urban Agenda for the EU can harness the strength of cities. The essay provides the underlying perspective for this report, in which we present the results of our empirical research into the practice of the Urban Agenda for the EU.

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The Urban Futures Studio is a transdisciplinary institute devoted to the study of positive urban futures and of ways to get there. It conducts empirical research on existing practices, but also helps to initiate new experiments. The Studio is convinced that innovative thinking starts in 'crossovers' between distinct disciplines, and in coalitions of new and old agents of change. Find out more at www.uu.nl/ufs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the Urban Agenda for the EU, the European Union reaches a major milestone, as - for the first time in EU history - cities gain a place in EU multi-level governance. The Urban Agenda provides the EU with a golden opportunity to utilize the potential of cities. Yet, whether this opportunity is seized, will depend on how the Urban Agenda turns out in practice. Will the input provided by cities be able to influence complex processes of EU policymaking, and if so, will that change urban governance for the better?

In this research report, we investigate what the Urban Agenda for the EU can mean for cities and for the EU as a whole. Based on interviews with stakeholders, we study the political and practical context of the Urban Agenda, asking the question: 'How can the Urban Agenda for the EU best enable cities to address urban challenges on a European scale?'
We come to five major insights.

THE URBAN AGENDA MUST DEMONSTRATE ITS OWN SUCCESS BY DELIVERING CONCRETE RESULTS

The Urban Agenda is an experimental method that provides significant opportunities for cities to have an impact on EU policymaking. Nonetheless, the Urban Agenda is also an informal and voluntary method, with very little provisions made to ensure its outcomes. Therefore, the Urban Agenda is promising, but also vulnerable. To ensure its future, the Urban Agenda must demonstrate its own success, by delivering concrete results in these early stages.

DELIVERING CONCRETE RESULTS IS A BIG CHALLENGE FOR THE URBAN AGENDA'S PARTNERSHIPS

The Urban Agenda's partnerships form an important vehicle to achieve concrete results. Yet, in our investigation of three partnerships – Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees, Air Quality and Circular Economy – we find that achieving such concrete results is actually quite a challenge: all three partnerships deal with a trade-off between formulating practical measures on the one hand, and having those actions address fundamental multi-level issues on the other. To achieve meaningful results, the key challenge of the partnerships is to find a balance between the two.

CITIES HAVE A UNIQUE EXPERIMENTAL POTENTIAL THAT THE URBAN AGENDA CAN HARNESS

Cities play a major role in ensuring citizens' quality of life. Increasingly, cities use experimentation as a governance strategy to find innovative practical solutions to problems that affect people's lives, such as poverty or climate change. Urban experimentation provides a promising way through which the EU can deal with its challenges, yet to truly have impact, urban experimentation needs to be integrated in its wider system of multi-level governance. The Urban Agenda for the EU can provide this integration: as a method that brings together the urban, national and European levels to strengthen urban governance, it provides a crucial opportunity to systematize urban experimentation.

TO SYSTEMATIZE EXPERIMENTATION, THE URBAN AGENDA MUST 'LEARN' FROM URBAN EXPERIMENTS

The Urban Agenda can systematize urban experimentation in various ways: it can for instance help to initiate and support urban experiments, or it can provide means for cities to learn from each other and their experiments. Yet, the most important avenue through which the Urban Agenda can facilitate urban experimentation, is by considering how multi-level policy can 'learn' from urban experiments: by investigating how policy can give space and support to experimentation, and by using innovations to improve existing policies.

SUPPORTING URBAN EXPERIMENTATION WILL HELP THE URBAN AGENDA TO DELIVER RESULTS

Systematic experimentation can help the Urban Agenda to achieve concrete results, by helping the partnerships to formulate actions that are practical and fundamental at the same time. On the one hand, it allows the partnerships to take small practical steps, rather than immediately aiming for big policy changes that lack political support. On the other hand, it also helps the partnerships to move beyond those first steps, by creating the conditions through which small experiments can grow out to becoming bigger innovative solutions. That way, the partnerships' actions can, incrementally, make a significant contribution to addressing fundamental multi-level issues.

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INTRODUCTION

In the city of Athens, an innovative project is starting that is called *'Curing the Limbo'*. It addresses an issue that has hit the city severely in the last couple of years: the refugee crisis. The challenge has been enormous for Athens, as the city had to deal with large numbers of refugees with very little facilities or resources, while also suffering from an economic crisis of its own. Regardless, the city provided a response: it built a refugee camp, and also provided more creative solutions such as housing refugees in vacant apartments. As important as these initial responses were, however, they only scratched the surface of all the problems that need to be addressed: what is for instance the long-term perspective for these refugees, how will they live, how will they integrate, how can they get jobs and become independent?

Curing the Limbo, a project that is made possible by the *European Urban Innovative Actions Program*, addresses these more complex issues, and does so in an innovate way. By providing housing opportunities to refugees in return for community-oriented work, refugees gain both affordable housing and opportunities to develop themselves, while the wider community benefits from their work. If this experimental program turns out to be successful, it can be seen as a real innovation, where through smart combinations, minimal resources can be used to create a multifaceted impact.

Yet, as powerful as this may be, we should be under no illusion: local innovations can help show the way, but they cannot pave it. *Curing the Limbo* illustrates this. As a project that receives over 5 million euros in subsidy – a significant sum of money – it aims to provide housing to about 400 refugees, while there are currently about 13.000 refugees living in the city. The project obviously does not solve the whole problem. Rather, its value lies in how it can inspire structural change for its broader system: how can other projects learn from what worked here? How can the project change regular processes for the better? How can the governance system be changed to better facilitate such projects?

This example tells a broader story. To the dire challenges of this time – like the refugee crisis, but also climate change or the energy transition – there are no clear-cut solutions. Although these complex challenges require a coordinated response, simple or single solutions will not do. Their complexity demands an integrative and adaptive approach. More and more, such solutions can be found in cities, where experimenting and finding practical solutions are an inherent part of urban governance. But cities, as local and relatively small-scale entities, are also limited: they cannot do it by themselves. Urban experimentation as a form of governance can be an important catalyst to change, but only when it is connected to the practices of governance that take place around it, whether that be on the urban level, the regional, national or supranational level.

In other words, urban experimentation can only be successful to the extent that it is made part of its wider system of multi-level governance. It is in this light that we find the newly formed *Urban Agenda for the EU* such an important development. Through the Urban Agenda, cities for the first time gain a place in EU multi-level governance, providing them with the opportunity to directly influence the policies that affect them. We see the Urban Agenda as a means to unleash the potential of cities, although much depends on how the Urban Agenda plays out in practice. To investigate the potential of the Urban Agenda for the EU, we pose the research question:

HOW CAN THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU BEST ENABLE CITIES TO ADDRESS URBAN CHALLENGES ON A EUROPEAN SCALE?

In this research report, we will answer that question in two parts. In Part I, we will investigate the opportunities and challenges of the Urban Agenda for the EU, both from a political and practical context. Based on what we conclude in Part I, we move on to Part II in which we reconsider what the Urban Agenda should be all about, by exploring the unique strength of cities and investigating how the Urban Agenda can best enable that strength. Finally, based on our findings of both parts, we come to a conclusion.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU

In the European Union, there have long been discussions about the urban dimension of EU policy, and the wish to better involve cities in EU policymaking. As early as 1997, the Commission mentioned the need for an 'urban agenda'[1], which since then has been repeatedly confirmed in political declarations such as the Leipzig Charter in 2007, the Toledo Declaration in 2010 and the Riga Declaration in 2015. Yet, the crowning moment of this development came in 2016, when under the Dutch Presidency of the Council of the EU, the 'Pact of Amsterdam' was signed. This Pact officially established the *Urban Agenda for the EU*, a method that – for the first time in the history of the EU – directly involves cities in processes of EU multi-level decision making.

The Urban Agenda for the EU aims to achieve a *"more effective integrated and coordinated approach"*[2] between EU policies and their impact on cities. Although the Urban Agenda has multiple facets, its most central means to achieve its aims are the 'partnerships'. The partnerships structure the intended multi-level cooperation between cities, member states, the Commission and other stakeholders: in the partnerships, fifteen to twenty partners come together around specific themes, to identify actions relating to the three Urban Agenda pillars of 'better regulation, better funding & better knowledge'. Currently, there are twelve partnerships active, in varying stages of the process, with the first actions formulated but not yet implemented.

As the Urban Agenda is in its early stages, its development now will be crucial for its opportunities in the future. Therefore, to better understand the potential of this method, we ask the question:

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DOES THE URBAN AGENDA PROVIDE FOR CITIES TO ENHANCE THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO ADDRESSING EUROPEAN CHALLENGES, AND WHAT CHALLENGES DOES IT POSE?

In the following paragraphs, we will answer that question by looking at the political and practical context of the Urban Agenda for the EU. First, for the political context, we will investigate how political stakeholders assess the Urban Agenda. Then, for the practical context, we will take a closer look at three partnerships and investigate their process and outcomes, as well as the viewpoints of involved partners. Finally, based on our analysis, we will come to conclusions on the key challenges that the Urban Agenda will need to address in the upcoming period, thereby making way for Part II of this research report.

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1. *'Communication from the Commission. Towards an urban agenda in the European Union' (1997)*
2. *'Pact of Amsterdam' (2016), p.5*

POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU

To investigate the political context, we interviewed various stakeholders of the Urban Agenda for the EU (see the appendix on page 26 for an overview). We asked these stakeholders to share their perspectives on the Urban Agenda, and the opportunities and challenges they think the Urban Agenda provides. Based on their stories, we have come to **three, consecutive, insights.**

1. URBAN AGENDA GIVES RECOGNITION AND 'SMALL SEAT' TO CITIES	2. URBAN AGENDA IS EXPERIMENTAL, OPEN AND INFORMAL	3. URBAN AGENDA MUST DELIVER CONCRETE RESULTS TO ENSURE FUTURE
Cities have become increasingly important	Method is completely voluntary	Urban Agenda must demonstrate success ..
Urban Agenda as recognition, translated into concrete actions	Partnerships have technical character	.. by achieving concrete results
Still, method shaped by vested interests	Ideally, partners also implement actions	Yet, agreement lacks on what constitutes 'concrete results'
Therefore, 'small seat' at table	But no provisions made to ensure this	And different actors have different positions

Together, these insights lead us to the conclusion that the Urban Agenda provides cities with a **key opportunity** to influence and strengthen EU policy. Nevertheless, little provisions are made to ensure this influence, nor to ensure the future of the Urban Agenda as a whole. Therefore, the **key challenge** is that the Urban Agenda must demonstrate its own success by delivering concrete results, so that support of the Urban Agenda is strengthened and by that, its future ensured.

The Dutch presidency presenting the 'Pact of Amsterdam', during the EU informal meeting of Ministers responsible for Urban Matters on May 30th, 2016.

1. THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU RECOGNISES THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF CITIES, AND GIVES THEM A – SMALL – SEAT AT THE TABLE OF EU MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

Cities have become increasingly important in the EU

Over the past decades, cities have become involved in the EU in a variety of ways, whether it be through the Committee of Regions, through organizations such Eurocities and CEMR, through programmes such as URBACT, or through initiatives such as the Covenant of Mayors. Increasingly, cities are asked to provide input on the European level or become partner in EU initiatives. The interviewed stakeholders appreciate this growing involvement, as they clearly note the importance of cities: cities are where the majority of the European population lives, and where concrete quality of life for citizens can be obtained.

"In terms of how our role has changed, I think one of the things we have seen is very practical: where we for many years were knocking on everybody's doors, now if we sit here, people come knocking on our doors"

DORTHE NIELSEN EUROCITIES

The urban agenda recognises the important role of cities, and translates it into concrete action

By aiming to strengthen the urban dimension of EU policy, the Urban Agenda provides recognition to this increasingly important role of cities. At the same time, the Urban Agenda for the EU also distinguishes itself from its predecessors (e.g. the Leipzig Charter of 2007, Toledo Declaration of 2010 and Riga Declaration of 2015) by being the first to translate this recognition into concrete actions.

"We invited people from the Dutch presidency office and discovered that they had an interesting idea to propose something concrete. Compared to the former documents, which were very political. So that's why we were very glad that the result was the Amsterdam Pact, in which there is the tendency to translate it into concrete actions."

JAN OLBRYCHT MEMBER OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Nonetheless, the urban agenda is also shaped by vested interests in the EU

Although the Urban Agenda opens up possibilities for cities to become involved in EU decision making, the possibilities are not endless. In the Pact of Amsterdam, the boundaries are clearly stated: the Urban Agenda will *not* create new EU funding sources, and will *not* alter how decisions are made and competencies within the EU[3]. This clear demarcation reflects the vested interests within the EU, and perhaps most specifically the interests of member states.

"There is this very strong principle of subsidiarity, and in line with this principle, housing and urban policy is the issue of the national government. So many countries raised this voice, actually they were just trying to confirm the fact that this is not going to change."

ELENA SZOLGAYOVÁ MEMBER STATE SLOVAKIA

3. 'Pact of Amsterdam' (2016), p.4

As a result, the urban agenda only gives cities 'a small seat at the table'

Although the Urban Agenda thus forms an important milestone for the involvement of cities in the EU, it is not a grand measure that fundamentally changes the role of cities nor the way in which policy is made in the EU. Instead, it can best be seen as a delicate first step, that gives cities a small tentative role in EU policymaking.

"I would say that this is subtle, I would not say that this will be a revolution in terms of cities now being at the same level as member states. But what it does is that cities have a small seat at the table. A chance to influence things, which they didn't have until now."

JUDIT TOROKNE ROSZA EUROPEAN COMMISSION

The Urban Agenda thus entails a 'small seat' for cities in EU multi-level governance. Yet, the impact of this small seat can still be 'big' in how it enables cities to address challenges on a European scale. To assess this potential big impact, we must investigate what the small seat means in practical terms. For that, we turn to our second insight, about the method of the Urban Agenda for the EU.

2. THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU IS AN EXPERIMENTAL METHOD THAT IS STRONGLY OPEN AND INFORMAL, WITH RELATIVELY LITTLE PROVISIONS MADE TO SECURE THE OUTCOMES

The method of the urban agenda for the EU is completely voluntary

One thing that almost all stakeholders noted as unique about the Urban Agenda for the EU, is its informal set-up. In the Urban Agenda nothing is binding and nothing is obligatory. Instead, the partnerships operate on a voluntary basis, both in terms of participation, and in terms of what is done with the outcomes. Intriguingly, various stakeholders appreciated this differently, some finding it a weakness while others found it a strength.

"The whole Amsterdam Pact, all the action, is based on a voluntary base. So it's not obligatory. Of course this is the weakness, but it was not possible."

JAN OLBRYCHT MEMBER OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

"It's voluntary. It's informal. And that's the strength of it: it's worth a try, it adds an extra dimension without being immediately pinned to it."

NICOLAAS BEETS DUTCH URBAN ENVOY

The urban agenda's partnerships have a highly technical character

In the partnerships, partners take up the role of experts. Each partner brings its specific expertise, whether that be policy knowledge or practical experience. The focus is on finding practical solutions – so-called 'actions' in the Urban Agenda's phrasing - while politics and the negotiation of interests are placed to the background.

"This is the first attempt to bring countries, cities, other urban partners and the Commission together. I am underlining the equal footing, there is no leader or whatever - the Brussels, the national. It is just the people who should be experts on the topic and who should be in the best will to try to discuss what are the biggest challenges in the given topic."

ELENA SZOLGAYOVÁ MEMBER STATE SLOVAKIA

Ideally, this will lead to actions that are implemented by the people present at the table

This technical approach is thought to work, because the people present at the table are also the ones who can implement the actions. Therefore, when partners agree on certain action points, the implication is that their respective institutions are also willing to act on it.

"In the partnership, the Commission is on board. So those are also the people and the DGs who - in theory - must make sure that whatever a partnership commits to in terms of an action plan, will actually lead to concrete proposals for change."

NICOLAAS BEETS DUTCH URBAN ENVOY

But relatively little provisions are put in place to ensure that actually happens

Whether this theory aligns with what happens in practice, however, is not sure, as it is left quite open how the outcomes will be picked up on the European level. The mechanism currently put in place is that the action plans are considered by the DG Meeting on Urban Matters (DG-UM), who provides "non-binding guidance"[4] to the actions. Yet, the sectorial DGs, who in the end will have to decide on many of these issues, are not included in this mechanism.

"It's nice if the Interior Relations Ministries support it, but on the European level it's also explicitly about the sectoral Ministers. The sectoral Councils need to negotiate and vote on these issues, so if they don't support the proposals, then we're doing it for nothing."

HANS VERDONK EU OFFICE OF THE G4 (FOUR LARGEST DUTCH CITIES)

In sum, in the Urban Agenda for the EU, much is left open in what will be done with the outcomes of the partnerships, raising the question of how the Urban Agenda can become a success in terms of achieving real tangible changes. This brings us to the third insight, about the future of the Urban Agenda.

3. THE FUTURE OF THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU DEPENDS ON ITS PRACTICAL OUTCOMES, AND THEIR ABILITY TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THE METHOD WORKS

The urban agenda must prove itself to be working

As the Urban Agenda is an experimental method to give cities a role in EU multi-level governance, its future and the future role for cities in the EU are not yet decided upon. Instead, as stakeholders saw it, a lot depends on the practical success of the Urban Agenda.

"For the moment I don't have a very strong political vision in the sense of what higher role the cities will gain through this, because we have to see still if it's working. So if it's working, I think we'll have some cases which should really be success stories and this will strengthen the voice of the cities."

JUDIT TOROKNE ROSZA EUROPEAN COMMISSION

4. 'Pact of Amsterdam' (2016), p.4

For that, the urban agenda's partnerships must deliver 'concrete results'

How can the Urban Agenda create such success stories? According to the stakeholders it can do so by achieving concrete results: real practical changes that improve how multi-level policy impacts cities. Achieving such results will prove that the method works, and by that strengthen its support base.

"If they manage to propose something really concrete, coming from practice, and they manage to give it to the European institutions, then we agree these are very concrete results. If that is the case, maybe it will influence the next period and make it, I don't want to say obligatory, but agreed by everybody."

JAN OLBRYCHT MEMBER OF EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Yet, what constitutes such 'concrete results' is not commonly agreed

Achieving such concrete results will to an important extent depend on the work of the partnerships[5], and the partners' ability to come to action points that they are willing to implement, while also being far-reaching enough to achieve tangible changes. However, there seems to be no agreement on what constitutes such outcomes.

"I think there is no common agreement between stakeholders on what are sort of bankable outcomes. When have we achieved as a partnership an outcome that is useful for a broader group. There is no real common agreement."

DORTHE NIELSEN EUROCITIES

And there are indications that not everybody wants to achieve the same thing

Each role within the partnership – cities, member states, the Commission - may have specific motivations that do not necessarily align with each other. In the interviews, it was noted that cities may for instance see the partnerships as an opportunity to have their own issues resolved on the European level, more than representing cities as a whole. Of member states it was mentioned that they may be wary of making big commitments as they do not want to give up their autonomy. Finally, the European Commission, may have an interest to strive for quick results to demonstrate the Urban Agenda's success before its own term is over.

CONCLUSION

To ensure its future, the Urban Agenda must demonstrate its own success by delivering concrete results. But how easy is it for the partnerships to achieve such concrete results? Can the partners find agreement on what needs to be done? To answer those questions, we must turn to the work of the partnerships. That brings us to the practical context of the Urban Agenda for the EU.

5. Yet it must also be noted that the results of the partnership are not the only form of impact created through the Urban Agenda for the EU: the Urban Agenda has also had a broader impact, in the sense that it for instance helped constitute/ strengthen national urban policies in several member states, and that it has become the common frame for urban policy initiatives launched by the Commission (e.g. Urban Innovative Actions has adopted the twelve topics of the Urban Agenda).

THE PRACTICAL WORK OF THE URBAN AGENDA'S PARTNERSHIPS

In the Urban Agenda's partnerships, cities, member states, the Commission and other stakeholders work together on specific urban themes, to identify barriers that exist for cities and formulate actions to resolve those. Currently there are twelve partnerships, in varying stages of the process. We investigated three of them to better understand the practical context of the Urban Agenda - **Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees, Air Quality and Circular Economy** - that provide a complimentary picture on various dimensions (for a full overview of their general features, see table 1 on the next page.)

As part of our study we investigated the partnerships' documents, held interviews with various partners, and – in the case of the Circular Economy partnership – attended two partnership meetings. Based on this we identified various issues. The first issue is what we identify as the key challenge for the Urban Agenda. The other four issues form additional challenges that specifically relate to the three most important roles in the partnerships – the urban, the national and EU-level partners – and the table at which they meet, the partnership meetings.

KEY ISSUE: BALANCING BETWEEN PRACTICAL AND FUNDAMENTAL
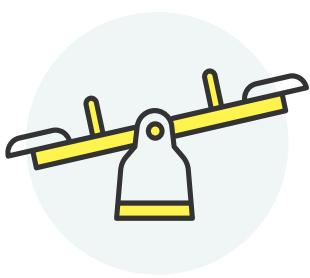
We discern a clear trade-off in the work of the partnerships between formulating practical and feasible actions on the one hand, and having those actions address fundamental multilevel issues on the other. Actions need to be practical to keep the energy going for the partnerships and allow them to move forward, but actions also need to be fundamental enough to resolve key barriers that exist for cities, and by that achieve real change. Doing both requires a challenging balancing act from the partnerships, which we observed the three partnerships perform in different ways.

OTHER ISSUES: CHALLENGES OF KEY PARTNERS AND THE TABLE AT WHICH THEY MEET

We also find that the multilevel collaboration in itself forms a challenge for the partnerships, as each partner brings with them their own challenges that influence the partnerships' process and their overall ability to formulate valuable actions. To achieve concrete results, partners must find agreement with each other, which inherently entails that the partnerships must deal with the following challenges:

Cities Involving the multitude of European cities in EU policymaking is a big organizational challenge, to which city networks such as Eurocities can fulfil an important intermediating role.

Member states Partners from the national level are less involved in the partnerships, raising the question of what their role should be in the Urban Agenda and how this can be reinforced.

Commission The Commission is motivated to quickly turn the Urban Agenda into a success, but the time pressure this places on the partnerships may not be beneficial to their process and outcomes.

Partnership meetings Deliberate and well-designed 'staging' of the partnership meetings may help partners to see new possibilities and overcome disagreements.

INTRODUCING THE PARTNERSHIPS

|	INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES	AIR QUALITY	CIRCULAR ECONOMY
PHASE	1st generation, action plan delivered	1st generation, action plan delivered	2nd generation, action plan in the making
THEME	Social	Environmental	Environmental
POLICY ISSUE	Relatively new issue, incited by European refugee crisis, with dynamic policy on EU level	Relatively old issue, with well-established policy on EU level	Relatively new and innovative issue, with little policy on EU level
COORDINATION	Coordinated by city (Amsterdam) together with Commission (DG Home)	Coordinated by member state (the Netherlands)	Coordinated by city (Oslo)
PARTNERS	*Urban areas:* Amsterdam (NL); Athens (GR); Barcelona (ES); Berlin (DE); Helsinki (FI) *Member states:* Denmark; Greece; Italy; Portugal *Commission:* DG HOME, DG REGIO, DG EMPL *Other members*: CEMR; European Investment Bank (EIB); Eurocities; European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE); Migration Policy Group; URBACT	*Urban areas:* Constanta (RO); Helsinki/HSY (FI); London (UK); Milano (IT); Utrecht (NL) *Member states:* The Netherlands; Croatia; Czech Republic; Poland *Commission:* DG REGIO, DG ENV, DG RTD, JRC, DG ENER, DG MOVE, DG AGRI, DG GROW *Other members:* Consortium Clean Air Ruhr Area, Eurocities, URBACT, HEAL	*Urban areas:* Oslo (NO); Flemish Region (BE); Kaunas (LT); Porto (PT); Prato (IT); The Hague (NL) *Member states:* Finland; Greece; Poland; Slovenia *Commission:* DG REGIO, DG ENV, DG CLIMA, DG GROW, DG RTD *Other members:* CEMR; Eurocities; European Investment Bank (EIB); URBACT; ACR+

Table 1 General characteristics partnerships

ACTION PLAN HIGHLIGHTS (OF THE TWO 1ST GENERATION PARTNERSHIPS)

PARTNERSHIP INCLUSION	PARTNERSHIP AIR QUALITY
Blending facilities Creates financing facilities through which grants from the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), European Social Fund (ESF), and other EU funds that cities cannot directly access, are blended with European Investment Bank (EIB) loans. As a result, grants become directly available to cities and financial intermediaries.	**Recommendation to 'identify gaps in regulations on air pollution emission sources'** Suggests to e.g. investigate the harmonization of Low Emission Zones (LEZ), to use the partnership's findings to influence EU level policy discussions, and to set up a multi-level governance working group to tackle unregulated issues.
Peer-to-peer academy Establishes, first in pilot form, an academy for policymakers at the local level with the scope to offer trainings and different kinds of activities to enhance their capacity and knowledge on the theme of migration and refugees.	**Code of Good Practice** Develops a code of good practice for Cities Air Quality Action Plans to ensure a consistent interpretation of Air Quality Action Plan content, which is usually drafted at the regional or national level, thereby improving multilevel coordination.
European Migrant Advisory Board Establishes a board comprised of migrants and (former) refugees that, in its first pilot year, will offer advice to the Partnership and its members in an effort to keep migrants and refugees involved in the development of the action plan.	**Health impact instrument** Action develops an instrument that measures air-quality related impacts on citizens' health as well as the benefits generated from air quality efforts, and to test this instrument in a pilot project.

KEY ISSUE: BALANCING BETWEEN PRACTICAL AND FUNDAMENTAL

In our investigation of the three partnerships, we found that they all perform a balancing act between formulating actions that are practical on the one hand, but also address fundamental issues on the other. How do the three partnerships do this, and what can we take from that?
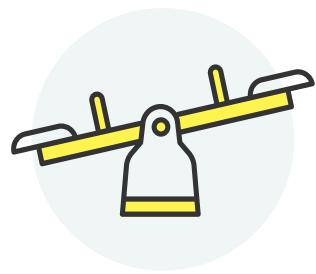
PARTNERSHIP INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Partnership delivers practival action that take first steps

What stands out the most from the Inclusion partnership is the practical character of its actions. The action plan of the partnership is full of practical measures, often in the form of new initiatives that the partnership seeks to raise. The goal is making a start, rather than tackling issues as a whole. Illustrative is the Better Finance action of 'blending facilities'. This action addresses the issue that cities have no direct access to the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and related funds, even though they do significantly face the problems that these funds targets. The 'blending facilities' solution does not face this issue head-on, but instead finds a practical loophole: by proposing to blend grants from AMIF and other funds with EIB loans to cities, cities - as a practical consequence – get direct access to these grants. Although this does not necessarily solve the overarching problem, it does provide a tangible first change.

Yet, bigger multi-level governance issues are harder to pick up

The issue of funding - that the 'blending facilities' action point also relates to - is the fundamental multi-level governance issue that this partnership appears to address. In its action plan, the partnership identifies a major bottleneck in the fact that cities are directly confronted with the consequences of the refugee crises and of migration in general, yet strongly depend on the national level in attaining resources. Therefore, the partnership also formulates an action aimed at *"bringing together the expertise from city-level, Member-State level and European Commission-level"* to *"further analyse and reflect on the regulatory and practical barriers to EU funding"* and *"jointly develop solutions to overcome these regulatory and practical barriers"*[6]. What the partnership proposes here, is in a way to continue itself. What this demonstrates is that the partnership wanted to tackle this more fundamental issue, but recognised that it was not feasible in the short run it had so far – it needs to continue the conversation. The question is to what extent this continued conversation will and can be organized, however, now the partnership has delivered its action plan.

"These are long processes. But I think, now, because there's force behind it, there is legitimacy, there is budget, there is practical support, we can take some steps in the two years that we have. We have to be realistic in what we can do, what our output can be in two years, and what follow-up we can give to that. The partnership is a vehicle to bring it further."

SABINA KEKIC CITY OF AMSTERDAM, CO-COORDINATOR OF PARTNERSHIP

Energy for creating new things (more than for improving what's already there)

Linked to the concrete character of the action points, is the partnership's apparent energy for creating new things. The peer-to-peer academy, the European Migrant Advisory Board, the toolbox for evidence-based policy, the pilots in two cities to test desegregation policies, they are all examples of new solutions, new tools and new initiatives

6. Background paper to the public feedback' for the Inclusion partnership, p.7

to tackle migration- and refugee related problems. What the partnership appears to be less focused on, is taking in account and changing what's already there. There may be a risk connected to this: by focusing strongly on new initiatives, energy might be taken away from improving what's already there. In terms of multi-level governance, there are undoubtedly *many* policies and initiatives on the city, national and European level concerned with these issues. The partnerships provide an opportunity to achieve a better fit between those many existing efforts, but this does require that actions are clearly linked to what's already there.

PARTNERSHIP AIR QUALITY

Fundamental problem analysis that makes strong case for multi-level governance

What stands out the most of the Air Quality Partnership, are not its action points but what precedes those actions: the problem analysis. In its action plan documents[7], the partnership gives a lot of attention to the problems surrounding the issue of air quality: it lays out how air quality is a huge problem with serious public health implications (as many European areas still do not meet air quality standards); it states how this issue requires a concerted effort of the European, national and local levels of government, with cities being the most *"immediate level of intervention"*[8]; and it points out how despite this need, multi-level policies and efforts frequently do not work in accordance and sometimes even counteract each other. The partnership sees this as affecting cities especially, because they are heavily confronted with pollutants that they have little control over. Therefore, the partnership pleads for what it itself is set out to do: *"much stronger and systematic dialogue between Cities and National/Regional authorities."*[9]

"About the Low Emission Zones I said: 'It's not the best solution. That would be to start at the source and make cars cleaner. Then you won't need these zones in five years. So let's focus on that.' The Commission argued however that the Real Driving Emissions legislation was just in place and that this was not going to be changed again soon. In other words: it was not a way forward."

RENÉ KORENROMP MEMBER STATE THE NETHERLANDS,
COORDINATOR PARTNERSHIP

Yet, action points still less concrete

As fundamental as the problem analysis of the Air Quality partnership is, its actions are less concrete. In its action plan, the partnership actually starts with a 'recommendation'. This recommendation to *"identify gaps in regulations on air pollution emission sources"* addresses the heart of the problem for cities: that they have little control over the pollutants that affect them. Yet, the partnership only formulates suggestions – not actions - on how to deal with this major bottleneck. What this seems to indicate, is that the partnership could find agreement on the central problem, but could not yet find agreement on actions to solve that problem. The partnership does come to various practical actions points: for instance, the actions to develop a Code of Good Practice for Air Quality Actions Plans, a health impact instrument, and a communication toolbox. Yet, it also formulates actions that are still in a sort of preparatory phase, as they propose to *"assess funding needs"* for air quality planning, to *"consider the possibilities"* of integrating different funding instruments, or to *"make recommendations"*[10] on improving existing funding.

7. 'Background paper to public feedback' and 'Final draft action plan' for Air Quality partnership
8. 'Final draft action plan' for Air Quality partnership, p.8
9. 'Background paper to public feedback' for Air Quality partnership, p.13
10 'Final draft action plan' for Air Quality partnership, p.7

Air quality as mature topic with fixed political positions

One possible explanation for the less concrete character of the action points is the political context surrounding this topic. In their reflections on the partnership, all three interviewed partners in some way referred to how partners engaged in the partnership from rather fixed positions. Some cities for instance support Low Emission Zones, while some member states were opposed to it. Some member states, on their turn, see solutions in stricter regulations of the car industry, while the Commission is hesitant to pursue this (also due to strong opposition of member states with big car industries). As partners thus want to achieve opposing things, it may have been difficult to formulate fundamental action points to which all partners could agree. As a result, the partnership is able to formulate various practical actions, but none of these actions really go to the heart of the fundamental multi-level problems that the partnership itself identifies.

PARTNERSHIP CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Balancing in action: the partnership working on the 'definition of waste'

The balancing act could also be found in the process of the Circular Economy partnership. During the meetings we observed, the partnership was in the midst of identifying one of its key issues: the definition of waste. This issue came up in multiple subtopics – from waste management, to water, to sludge – and was identified as a key barrier that prevents circular economy developments on the urban level. Partnership coordinator Håkon Jentoft, from the city of Oslo, tells the story:

"When you define something as waste, a product as waste, it is very difficult to get it back in a product again, reused or recycled. We can see this is because of the definition of waste. The Commission has developed what they called 'the end of waste criteria'. Which means that they take waste through a process and then get it back here. But that is not functioning."

The partnership has thus identified that European legislation prescribes that 'waste' must first go through a process before it can be used again as a 'resource', preventing circular applications that are meant to innovate this process in the first place. Yet, identifying this issue is one thing, changing it is another. Jentoft:

"The main problem is that the regulation is made and constructed to protect human health and the environment. It is not constructed to fit with the circular economy. So, the overall answer is that we should ask for the Commission or the member states and the Parliament to start on rewriting all the regulations with the perspective of the circular economy."

The 'new' issue of circular economy thus competes with much more 'established' issues of public health and environment that are already deeply woven into policy. The question is therefore how the partnership aims to tackle this, which is also the puzzle that the partnership was considering itself. Jentoft:

"This is very concrete, it starts with identifying a barrier within the existing different regulations that could end up with a recommendation, or an action to actually start a totally new legislation. We don't know if this will be carried out by the partnership or it is too big."

In sum, with the 'definition of waste', the partnership has found a central bottleneck in EU regulation that makes it very difficult for cities to achieve circular economy ends. Yet, the magnitude of this bottleneck is great: to overcome it, regulations must be completely 'rewritten' from the perspective of circular economy. It can be questioned whether the partnership is in the position to take this on in its full extent: it was for instance noted that the Commission is currently quite far in the process of drawing up a new waste regulation, making it unlikely that they are willing to start a new policy process anytime soon. The challenge ahead for the partnership thus lies in making concrete steps within this institutional reality.

CONCLUSION

In all three partnerships, we observed a balancing act between taking practical steps on the one hand, and addressing fundamental issues on the other. The Inclusion partnership leaned more towards formulating practical actions, the Air Quality partnership more towards identifying fundamental issues, and the Circular Economy partnership was in the process of finding a balance. Either way, in all cases the balancing act is accompanied by clear trade-offs. Concrete measures show the upside of creating energy and enthusiasm for the partnership and its actions, but perhaps do not (immediately) make fundamental improvements to the multi-level coordination of urban issues. Addressing fundamental issues does go the heart of what the partnerships are set out to do, but here political interests and institutional realities come into play, that diminish enthusiasm and prevent concrete outcomes to be formed. This raises the fundamental question: is there a way to balance both, while keeping the trade-offs to a minimum? In Part II of this research, we move on to find a solution to that question. First, however, we consider four other challenges of the practical context.

OTHER ISSUES: KEY PARTNERS AND THE TABLE AT WHICH THEY MEET

City level: important role of Eurocities (and other networks)

Involving cities in EU policymaking through the Urban Agenda provides great opportunities: for cities to make their voices heard, and for the EU to utilize the potential of cities. Yet, from an organizational perspective, it also forms a big challenge. In the partnerships, five to eight cities represent the urban dimension, but how can they make sure that whatever they want and do is useful for the over 800 cities that Europe counts[11] (Nabielek et al, 2016)? That this happens is not a given: challenges that interviewees noted were for instance that cities may also be motivated to advance their individual 'wish list' on the European level, or that partnerships lack the means to check whether their findings and actions are truly relevant for cities across the EU.

"We understand the Brussels context, as we are very familiar in being in this sort of settings and meetings. We give strategic advice to our members who are part of the partnership, but also help them to amplify their messages. Because we have access to a network of cities, we can bounce ideas that are being developed in the partnership. We ensure this dialogue and actively debrief our members on what is happening and vice versa."

JOANA CRUZ EUROCITIES

For these reasons we found city networks to play a pivotal role in the partnerships. Especially the network of Eurocities - though not exclusively Eurocities - visibly functions as an important intermediary between the urban

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11. Number of cities with more than 50.000 inhabitants.

and European level, in various ways. First, Eurocities delivers cities for the partnerships: in the partnerships we studied, many of the city partners were active Eurocities members that came to the partnership through the network[12]. Secondly, Eurocities also brings in specialized knowledge at the Europe-urban interface, as they have a good sense of what plays in cities while also knowing what plays on the European level. Finally, Eurocities provides essential connections with cities outside the partnerships, by asking its members to provide input for the partnerships, as well as actively disseminates the partnerships' outcomes in their network. All in all, Eurocities thus plays a crucial role in connecting the Urban Agenda to cities, by that mediating the problem of cities in the EU being plentiful and diffuse.

National level: problematic involvement of member states

Member states are explicitly a part of the Urban Agenda for the EU, and they fulfil an important role as partners. Although the first focus of the Urban Agenda is to achieve a better fit between the European and the urban level, it can be seen why the involvement of member states is important: in the multi-level governance of Europe, the national level is the vital level in between cities and Europe, with considerable political influence on what happens on both sides.

Yet, what became clear from many of the interviews, is that in the practice of the partnerships, the role of member states is somewhat uneasy. Interviewees noted that member states are harder to find as partners, that they participate less actively in the partnerships, and that they are overall more reluctant to take big steps in terms of the actions. This raises the question to what extent member states actually see the Urban Agenda as something that they want to bring further. This is a vital question to tackle, as a lack of involvement of member states may create problems: many actions of the partnerships need to be implemented by member states, or at least endorsed by them on the European level.

"A representative from a member state, at the end of the discussion about the partnership turned back to me and said in a polite way: 'good luck with your project'. I said, 'this is not my project, this is our project'. This is not a cities thing. This is a city, member state and Commission thing and it's unique, and something we should all endorse."

STELIOS DIAKOULAKIS CITY OF ATHENS

EU level: pressure to achieve results

The Commission plays a vital role in organizing the Urban Agenda for the EU (perhaps even more so now the Urban Agenda's co-initiator, member state the Netherlands, gives room to others as its trio-presidency with Slovakia and Malta has ended). The Commission provides support for the partnerships to do their work, it discusses their outcomes on the EU-level, it creates legitimacy for the Urban Agenda by keeping institutes such as the European Parliament closely involved, and it is responsible for structuring its future development.

"We're now in the end phase of this Commission, they want to achieve results. But I would say that the partnership needs a bit more space to breath, to be able to do really good work in this starting phase. You will only benefit from that during the rest of the process."

JAN HARKO POST CITY OF THE HAGUE

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12. *In all three partnerships we studied, one or more of the partners was active in an Eurocities working group, either as member or chairman.*

In our investigation, we found that the Commission is indeed very involved in the Urban Agenda and actively tries to turn it into a success. However, we also found that in these efforts, the Commission is putting quite some pressure on the partnerships to deliver fast results, providing them with deadlines that – thus far – not all of them have been able to meet. The Commission may have a good reason for this: it is nearing the end of its term, making it important to show the results of the Urban Agenda, and deepen its support base to ensure its future for the next term. Yet, such a 'quick' validation of the method is also risky, as too much time pressure on the partnerships might cause the actions to lose on quality, or discourage the partners.

The partnership meetings: creating engaging settings

The last issue concerns the meetings themselves. For our research, we observed two meetings of the Circular Economy partnership, where we made a two-sided observation concerning engagement. On the one hand, we observed active engagement of the partners, who gave presentations, made comments and invited external experts to share their perspectives. On the other hand, however, we also observed that the meetings themselves were not particularly 'engaging': they entailed full one- or two-day programs that mostly consisted of presentations and open discussions. This rather static format did little to elicit active engagement, and left it to partners to decide whether they wanted to contribute or not (which some did more than others).

The form through which people meet and interact– what we call the 'setting of the stage' (Hajer, 2009) - plays a vital role in shaping the outcomes that can result from it. Deliberate staging of certain forms of interaction may help to establish a group identity, invite input from silent partners, and create enthusiasm for the ongoing process. More importantly, deliberate staging can also help partners to move beyond what they initially see as possible, by radically shifting their perspectives and inciting their imagination towards new possibilities . Especially the latter might be crucial to the process of the partnerships, as partners must inherently overcome initial disagreements (caused by their respective positions) to achieve the concrete results that the Urban Agenda needs.

CONCLUSION

Each partner brings with them challenges that are important to deal with, if the partnerships are to reach agreement on concrete actions. Cities benefit from an intermediating entity, member states can still be more involved, and the Commission can be more careful with the pressure it places on the partnerships. Together, these challenges show that the multilevel collaboration in itself can be quite challenging for the partnerships. Apart from dealing with these respective challenges for each partner, deliberate 'staging' of the partnership meetings can help the partnerships to achieve a fruitful multilevel collaboration.

13. We give a profound example of this in our essay of 'Learning with Cities, Learning for Cities' (Potjer & Hajer, 2017: 11-13) with the 'Energetic Odyssey', where an imaginative 'backcast' was used to influence ministers from EU member states to sign a political declaration to establish windmill projects in the North Sea on an ambitious scale.

PART II

SYSTEMATISING EXPERIMENTATION THROUGH THE URBAN AGENDA OF THE EU

In Part I of this research, we came to conclusion that the Urban Agenda for the EU – as an experimental method to involve cities in EU policymaking – needs to deliver concrete results to demonstrate its own success, and by that ensure its future. Yet, delivering such concrete results requires quite a challenging balancing act from the partnerships, who need to formulate actions that are practical and feasible, but that at the same time also address fundamental issues. Moreover, we found that the multilevel collaboration of the partnerships for various reasons is a challenge in itself, making this balancing act all the more difficult. Is there a way we can imagine, in which the balancing act and the delivery of concrete results can be easier? In this part of the research, we look for alternative applications of the Urban Agenda that may do exactly that. In this, we start from the beginning and ask the research question:

WHAT IS THE UNIQUE STRENGTH OF CITIES AND HOW CAN THE URBAN AGENDA FOR THE EU HELP REALIZE THAT POTENTIAL?

We will answer that question by, first, exploring what constitutes the unique strength of cities and argue how the Urban Agenda can help realize that potential[14]. We conclude that cities have a great potential to experiment, and that the Urban Agenda can reinforce this potential by functioning as a system of experimental learning.

Then, we will investigate to what extent such experimental learning is already taking place in the partnerships, finally coming to conclusions on how the partnerships could further strengthen their experimental focus.

The 'Apartment Building of the Future': an innovative experiment in the Dutch city of Utrecht to realise 'zero-carbon' social housing. How can this small experiment of 8 apartments in one city contribute to the big issue of the energy transition in Europe?
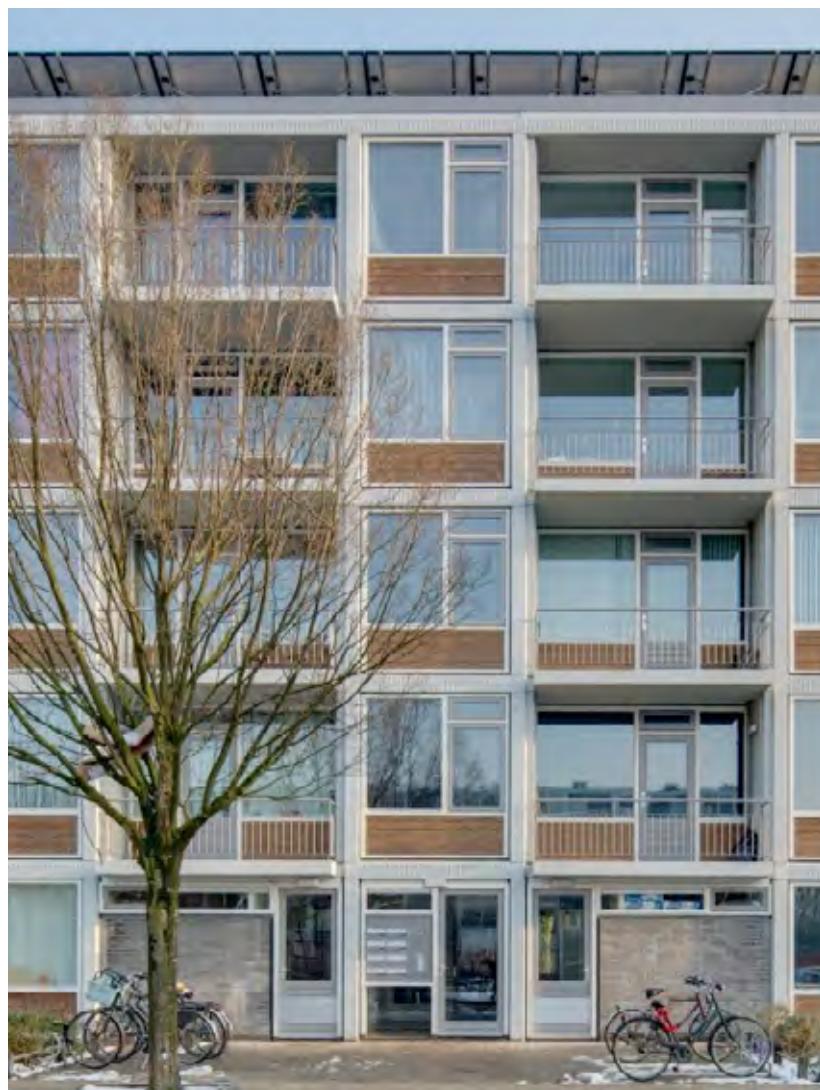
14. This argument is based on our essay 'Learning with Cities, Learning for Cities. The Golden Opportunity of the Urban Agenda for the EU' (Potjer & Hajer, 2017), which we wrote as a prequel to this research report. The essay can be found here: www.uu.nl/en/news/essay-learning-with-cities-learning-for-cities.

UNLEASHING THE EXPERIMENTAL POTENTIAL OF CITIES

In their recognition of the important role of cities, the Urban Agenda for the EU does not stand by itself. In recent years, cities have visibly entered the global stage: they participate in variety of transnational city networks that quickly gain global relevance, they show a clear presence at global conferences such as COP21, and they increasingly demonstrate leadership by undertaking bold action in their own cities. All this activity has resulted in a new recognition of cities, both in the political sense with milestones such as the global *New Urban Agenda* (signed six months after the Urban Agenda for the EU), and in the broader public discourse with influential city advocates such as the late Benjamin Barber who argued that 'mayors should rule the world' (2013).

As cities are taking up a global role, the question becomes increasingly relevant what it is that cities have to offer: *what constitutes the unique strength of cities?* We find that there are various answers. One typical line of reasoning can be find in the Pact of Amsterdam. In this document, it is stated that cities are the places where both problems and opportunities are heavily concentrated, and that Europe – just like the rest of the world - is only becoming more urbanized[15], making cities into a vital place to tackle Europe's most urgent challenges. Yet, although this reasoning is strong, we argue that there is more to it: the strength of cities also lies in what they are specifically good at doing – in what their special skill is, so to speak.

This special skill of cities is their *ability to experiment.* Cities are where 'the rubber hits the road': where problems are concrete and immediate, and where citizens depend on practical solutions for their quality of life. This incites city governance actors to be inherently practical and oriented towards concrete problem-solving: they work to find real practical solutions that improve citizens' everyday quality of life. This setting provides fertile grounds for experimentation as a governance strategy: research shows (e.g. Bulkeley & Cástan Broto, 2013; Evans, Karvonen & Raven, 2016) that urban experiments have widely proliferated in the past years, with experimentation increasingly becoming an important form of urban governance.

The great value of this rise of experimentation lies in what it is able to produce. Because experiments start from real practices, because they often involve collaborations of various public and private actors, and because they are all about 'learning by doing', they are able to develop new solutions that really work in practice, while at the same time also opening up how governance is done. In other words, they lead to innovation, both in terms of urban solutions and in terms of new forms of collaborative governance.

'Innovation' is a term that has great resonance in this time. Increasingly, policy actors acknowledge that innovation is direly needed, as to today's complex challenges – climate change, energy transition, poverty – governments lack clear-cut solutions and can no longer do it alone. Nonetheless, what is acknowledged less often, is that innovation is inherently the product of experimentation: to develop innovative solutions, you first need to try out new ideas in local settings to see whether and how they work. In that sense, cities form the perfect testbeds for innovations that eventually may have a much bigger relevance than being useful for those cities alone.

Yet, it must also be recognized that the experimental potential of cities has its limitations. The reality of urban experimentation is that of a scattered whole of small-scale experiments with varying degrees of success. To have real impact, experiments must be connected to their wider system, to be able to grow and influence existing

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15. Europe's urban population is expected to rise from 70% to 80% between now and 2050.

practices – but these connections are often missing. This is where the Urban Agenda for the EU comes in. We see the Urban Agenda as a promising coordination mechanism that can help enable the experimental potential of cities. But how would that work? For this we turn to the next paragraph.

THE URBAN AGENDA AS A 'SYSTEM OF EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING'

If the Urban Agenda for the EU is brought down to its basic set-up, it can be seen as operating on three levels. First, on the local level, the Urban Agenda recognises cities as playing a vital role in addressing European challenges, and sets out to enhance their role. Secondly, on the horizontal level, it starts from the practical experiences of cities, to see what barriers to effective governance exist across cities within the EU. Thirdly, on the vertical level, it brings together multi-level governance actors (as well as other stakeholders) to see how these barriers can be removed on all levels of government.

These three levels can provide the basis for the Urban Agenda to function in a way that it can unleash the experimental potential of cities. The Urban Agenda can do this by functioning as a 'system of experimental learning'. In this system, the ambition is to systematically learn from experiments on the local, horizontal and vertical level, and to make this learning a central element of multi-level governance, in the following way:

LOCAL	City governments emphasize experiments as a way to find innovative solutions to urban problems. In collaboration with other public and private actors, they initiate and support experiments in concrete settings. Because these urban experiments are about trying things out in practice, they will not always have success, and if they do, that success will often have key contextual factors. For that reason, experiments need a rich learning environment, in which experiments can constantly learn and draw inspiration from each other, which brings us to the horizontal level.
HORIZONTAL	City governments actively collaborate with each other and thereby provide a rich learning environment through a variety of networks. Cities will learn from each other's practices, and inspire and motivate each other to take action. Through collaboration, cities can together make a bigger impact and consequently have a stronger voice vis-à-vis higher levels of government. Nevertheless, they also remain dependent upon these higher levels of government. Therefore, it is vital that cities actively collaborate with them, which brings us to the vertical level.
VERTICAL	On the vertical level, there is is multi-level collaboration and coordination, in which higher levels of government set the right conditions for experimentation to take place on the city level. They provide city governments with sufficient resources, space and flexibility for experimentation, as well as facilitate processes of intercity learning. But, as coordinating authorities, they also formulate the overarching goals for city governments to meet, so that cities together are able to address urban challenges on a European scale. To make sure that this still relates to the practical needs on the city level, they periodically review the overarching framework and goals based on experience coming from practice, which brings us again to the local level.

Table 2 The System of Experimental Learning

Functioning as a system of experimental learning, can provide a valuable opportunity for the Urban Agenda torealize the potential of cities. But what are the partnerships doing now? Are they already in any way functioning as a system of experimental learning? And if so, how can this be strengthened? For this, we turn again to our investigation of the partnerships.

THE PARTNERSHIPS' FOCUS ON EXPERIMENTATION

In our investigation of the three partnerships of Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees, Air Quality and Circular Economy, we found three ways in which the partnerships, more or less directly, relate to urban experimentation. See the table on the next for an overview.

1. BY SETTING UP NEW INITIATIVES AND PILOTS

A first way in which the partnerships relate to urban experimentation is through the initiatives they aim to set up. From the action plans of the first two generation partnerships it becomes clear that the partnerships like to try things out, as they both aim to raise various pilots and new initiatives. The Inclusion partnership for instance wants to try out 'financial blending facilities for microfinance' through a pilot, and in a similar vein, the Air Quality partnership wants to pilot a business model for funding air quality measures. Also in the meetings of the Circular Economy partnerships, we observed that partners were talking about setting up new initiatives and pilots. The logic behind all this trying out seems to be the partnerships first want to test whether a measure works on a small scale, before they strive to roll it out on a big scale – an approach that makes sense given the limited means and authority of these partnerships.

2. BY SETTING UP MEANS TO LEARN FROM GOOD PRACTICES

A second way in which the partnerships – somewhat indirectly - relate to experimentation, is by setting up means through which cities can learn from good practices. The Inclusion partnership for instance want to raise a peer-to-peer academy, where policy makers come together to learn from each other's good practices, and the Air Quality partnership seeks to keep a register of good practices of urban planning. Although these means are not necessarily directed at good practices coming from urban experiments, they are interesting in the sense that they reinforce horizontal learning between cities, thereby implying that policymakers can experiment with (elements of) good practices in their own context. The peer-to-peer academy is especially interesting in that regard, as it acknowledges that learning entails more than making information and knowledge available, by emphasizing concrete exchange.

3. BY CONSIDERING INNOVATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Thirdly, the partnerships also consider innovative practices as a part of their 'scoping' activities to find out what actually plays in cities. This especially goes for the Air Quality Partnership, who made collecting innovative air quality practices one of its four main topics. Yet, none of the partnerships directly used their findings to come to conclusions on how such innovative practices could be strengthened. On the contrary, some interviewed partners noted explicitly that considering how experiments and innovations could be strengthened was not an aim of the partnerships; their aim was to identify and resolve urban bottlenecks.

"[We must] make sure that these transfer of knowledge and good practices works, really works. An example is Urban Academy that we are developing. The idea there is that we bring together cities who have already good practices and practices in specific fields and cities that will need to learn. And there is a concrete exchange between them, and so we create a network of peers that can continue working also after the Academy is built. So that it doesn't remain only an event or database of good practices that nobody would use."

AGNESE PAPADIA EUROPEAN COMMISSION
CO-COORDINATOR INCLUSION PARTNERSHIP

	INCLUSION	AIR QUALITY	CIRCULAR ECONOMY
LOCAL: NEW INITIATIVES & PILOTS	• Pilot 'financial blending facilities for microfinance' • Pilots in two cities on 'desegregation policies' • Pilot 'academy' • European Migrant Advisory Board	• Code of Good Practice for Air Quality planning • Pilot business model • Health impact instrument, test in pilot • Communication toolbox	• *Non-applicable: action points not yet decided*
HORIZONTAL: MEANS TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER	• Academy for local policy makers • European wide knowledge base on migrant integration • Toolbox for evidence-based local integration policies	• Keep register of best examples in urban air quality planning • Select examples of best practice in area of educational and information models • Mapping and assessing existing health impact tools	• *Non-applicable: action points not yet decided*
VERTICAL: CONSIDERING INNOVATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES	• E.g. in scoping papers, yet main focus is to establish 'barriers'	• Topic 3: Air Quality Good Practices, including collection of good examples of air quality innovations	• *Non-applicable: action points not yet decided*

Table 3 Experimental focus of partnerships

Assessing the partnerships' current focus on urban experimentation

The three ways in which the partnerships focus on urban experimentation to some extent align with the system of experimental learning: the new initiatives and pilots relate to the local level of experimental learning, the means to learn from good practices relate to the horizontal level, and the partnerships considering innovations to the vertical level. Nonetheless, the focus of the partnerships on experimentation can still become much more powerful, when they also explicitly consider how multi-level policy can learn from urban experimentation and innovation.

This vertical form of learning from experiments is the step that urban experimentation currently needs the most, and that the Urban Agenda for the EU can provide a crucial means for. Currently, there is still too much of a disconnect between experiments and their broader setting of multi-level governance. This disconnect fundamentally threatens the success of experimentation: for instance, because regulations and lack of funding make it difficult for experiments to exist, or because innovations coming from experiments have no entryway to change existing processes, and therefore lack influence. For that reason, the biggest challenge of the partnerships is to look beyond local pilots and horizontal exchange, and consider how multi-level governance can directly facilitate experimentation and innovation. How can the partnerships do this?

"As Utrecht, we did best the good practices: there I looked for the innovative measures, the showcases. But later we ended up doing nothing with it. It wasn't part of the agenda."

JEROEN SCHENKELS CITY OF UTRECHT, AIR QUALITY PARTNERSHIP

How the partnerships can facilitate urban experimentation and innovation

To illustrate how the partnerships can further facilitate urban experimentation, we use two examples coming from the partnerships. The first example comes from one of the partners of the Inclusion partnership, the city of Athens. There, one of the early responses to the refugee crisis was a housing program. The program was the product of practical problem solving *pur sang*: the city government rented private apartments – that were vacant anyway due to the severe economic crisis in Greece – renovated them and provided them to refugees, while at the same time also assisting refugees in other needs. Out of this initial response, later came the new innovative project *Curing the Limbo*, which seeks to further improve how the city helps its refugees. If the partnership systematically collects innovative practices such as these and puts them together, it can learn much from them: what makes these practices effective? What multi-level barriers do they run into? Can patterns be discerned in recurrent barriers that are found in various practices? And then last but not least, how can those recurrent barriers be resolved?

The second example, from the Circular Economy partnership gives insight into how such recurrent barriers can be resolved through the partnership. In the meetings we observed, it was mentioned on various instances that European and national legislation often prohibit innovation on the urban level. For instance: from a circular economy point of view it is valuable to experiment with the reuse of water, perhaps not for consumption (which has very strict health standards) but indeed for sectors such as agriculture. Nonetheless, EU and national legislation demands that all water must first treated in water treatment facility before it can be used again, making such experimentation impossible. Findings such as these, led the partnership to conclude at various times in their discussions that there is a need for legislation that 'doesn't prohibit innovation, but facilitates it', by opening up possibilities for experimentation.

"I think we need – what I would call – a general form of experimentation. In the sense of: regulation causes bottlenecks in a few ways. Let's take those regulations and let's see if we can experiment within them, with various solutions that can bring the circular economy closer. I think that's the direction to go, and member states and the Commission should provide space for that."

JAN HARKO POST CIRCULAR ECONOMY PARTNERSHIP, CITY OF THE HAGUE

If such a logic would be followed, the partnerships would form a unique place where multi-level governance actors learn from experimentation and innovation taking place on the urban level, by investigating how they can give space and support to urban experimentation, and by helping institutionalize successful experiments.

CONCLUSION

In various ways, the partnerships are doing experimental work, but there is still progress to be made: the greatest value ahead lies in focusing on how multi-level policy can support experiments and an experimental way of working. If the partnerships are able to do this, then the Urban Agenda will play a major role in systemizing urban experimentation, and by that unleash the experimental potential of cities.

At the same time, it will also help the partnerships to overcome their key challenge: to formulate concrete actions that are both practical and fundamental. Experimentation, namely, is about using one to get to the other: on the one hand, the partnerships can be practical in raising and supporting promising small initiatives. Yet, by providing the conditions through which these initiatives can grow and influence existing processes, they also allow them to – eventually – address fundamental issues. In other words, when the partnerships focus on experimentation, they do not have the perform the balancing act in one go, by formulating big policy proposals. Instead, by trying out, seeing what works, and then learning from it, the partnerships can perform the balancing act incrementally, through a sequence of small steps that together move towards big change.

CONCLUSION

The credo 'if mayors ruled the world' has been popular amongst urban policy elites. Increasingly, they advance the idea that cities are the forefront of the world's most dire issues, and that city governments can show leadership where national and supranational governments cannot. However, this research into the Urban Agenda for the EU shows that this idea is too simple. It is a fairy tale of a world based on simple and singular polities, with local policy makers in full control. In actual fact, we live in a complex multilevel policy reality. A world in which regulation on the national and supranational level strongly impacts what cities can and cannot do. Perhaps not always, but often for good reason, as we show in this report: air particles do not respect the borders of cities, so cities simply cannot control air quality by themselves; and EU regulation on waste may stand in the way of the birth of the circular economy but it was initiated to protect public health and avoid environmental harm. Taking examples such as these into consideration, the Urban Agenda for the EU is a more realistic approach to help cities in their quest to improve people's quality of life: it acknowledges the role of cities, but also acknowledges the broader system upon which cities depend. 'Allowing mayors to rule their worlds', may, in that sense, be the rival slogan emerging from the Urban Agenda initiative.

In this research we set out to answer the question of 'how the Urban Agenda for the EU can best enable cities to address urban issues on a European scale'. We found in Part I of this research that the Urban Agenda is an experimental method that give cities a 'small' place in EU multilevel policymaking, which can have a 'big' effect when it utilizes the potential of cities. Yet, as the method is explicitly informal and little provisions are made to achieve desired outcomes, the Urban Agenda is also vulnerable. To ensure its own future, the Urban Agenda must demonstrate its own success by delivering 'concrete results' in this early phase. The Urban Agenda's partnerships try to achieve such results, but their efforts are not without challenges: in the partnerships we studied, we observed a clear trade-off between formulating practical and feasible actions, and having those actions be ambitious and go the heart of the fundamental multi-level barriers that prevent cities from doing their important work. The partnerships must therefore engage in a challenging balancing act between the practical and fundamental, between feasible and ambitious. This balancing act is complicated all the more due to the fact that each partner brings with them its own position and challenges, making multilevel collaboration also a challenge in itself.

Still, how can this balancing act best be made? We provided a fresh perspective on that question, by in Part II considering – from the academic literature – what is really the unique strength of cities, and seeing how the Urban Agenda can help realize that potential. We came to the conclusion that cities have a great potential to experiment: cities are place like no other where innovative solutions can be found by testing them in practical and collaborative settings. The Urban Agenda can form a crucial means to enable the experimental potential of cities, but for that, it must make 'experimental learning' a central part of its multi-level governance processes. It can do so by systematizing experimentation in three ways: by stimulating experiments on the local level, by facilitating learning between cities and experiments on the horizontal level, and – most importantly – by enabling urban experiments and an experimental way of working through multi-level policy on the vertical level. To some extent the partnerships are already doing this: they are indeed setting up local pilots and horizontal forms of learning. Yet, what they are not yet doing, is most crucial: learning from urban experiments to improve multi-level policy. If the partnerships also do this, they can perform the difficult balancing act, as they create both space for promising

practical initiatives, and structures for those initiatives to incrementally grow out to address fundamental issues in meaningful ways.

We have said it before: the Urban Agenda for the EU provides the EU with a golden opportunity. An opportunity to create big impact through relatively small measures, and to utilize the experimental potential of cities. But it can only do this when it recognizes that bringing new players to the table is not enough: it must now also invent a new way of working together. Luckily, this does not demand grand measures or big policy overhauls. It just requires that the Urban Agenda commits to experimentation and learning, so that incrementally, it can transform how things are done. If the Urban Agenda is able to that, then together with cities, it will help build a stronger European Union, and bring it new relevance in a time in which the EU can no longer be seen as a given.

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<mark>APPENDIX</mark>

NAME	FUNCTION & ORGANIZATION
Nicolaas Beets	Special Urban Envoy for the Netherlands
Judit Torokne Rosza	Head of Unit for Inclusive Growth Territorial and Urban Development, DG Region, European Commission
Jan Olbrycht	Member of European Parliament and president of the Urban Intergroup in the EP
Dorthe Nielsen	Policy director at Eurocities
Elena Szolgayová	Director General at Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development, Slovakia
Hans Verdonk	City of Rotterdam representative at the EU office of the G4 (four largest Dutch cities)

1.Interviewed stakeholders of the political context of the Urban Agenda EU

NAME	ORGANISATION	PARTNERSHIP
Sabina Kekic	City of Amsterdam	Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees (coordinator)
Stelios Diakoulakis	City of Athens	Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees
Agnese Papadia	Commission (DG Home)	Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees (coordinator)
René Korenromp	Member State the Netherlands (Ministry of Infrastructure & Environment)	Air Quality
Jeroen Schenkels	City of Utrecht	Air Quality
Joana Cruz	Eurocities	Air Quality & Circular Economy
Håkon Jentoft	City of Oslo	Circular Economy
Siri Bellika	City of Oslo	Circular Economy
Jan Harko Post	City of The Hague	Circular Economy

2.Interviewed partners of three partnerships of the Urban Agenda EU

NAME	ORGANIZATION
Pedro Campos Ponce	Dutch Ministry of Interior Relations
Robert-Jan van Lotringen	Dutch Ministry of Interior Relations

3.Background interviews (for research design, not directly used for analysis)

PARTNERSHIP	DOCUMENTS
Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees	• 'Background paper to public feedback' (=action plan) • 'Progress of Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees'
Air Quality	• 'Background paper to public feedback' • 'Final draft action plan' • 'Partnership for Air Quality. Main findings and Issues' • 'Progress of Partnership on Air Quality'
Circular Economy	• 'Orientation paper Circular Economy'

4.Studied documents

URBAN FUTURES STUDIO