Opinion of the European economic and social Committee on ‘Towards balanced development of the urban environment: challenges and opportunities’

(2009/C 77/27)

On 25 October 2007, pursuant to Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, Minister of State attached to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, and responsible for European Affairs, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, on behalf of the future French Presidency, to draw up an exploratory opinion on ‘Towards balanced development of the urban environment: challenges and opportunities.’

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 14 July 2008. The rapporteur was Mr van Iersel and the co-rapporteur was Mr Grasso.

At its 447th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 September 2008 (meeting of 17 September 2008), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion unanimously.

URBAN ENVIRONMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 Cities in their broad variety are at the core of demographic and socio-economic developments in Europe. Their impact and performances depend on their dimension, and on the range of activities as well as on the quality of life and work within their territory.

1.2 The EESC is supporting the basic ideas laid down in the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities and the Territorial Agenda of the European Union (1). The EESC notes that a number of DGs of the Commission and European Programmes and Agencies increasingly address opportunities and challenges in the urban environment, often referring to the Lisbon Agenda. A Green paper on territorial cohesion is expected in the autumn of 2008.

1.3 Further deepening and broadening of the European debate is desirable with respect to resilient and sustainable cities, and city-regions or metropolitan areas across Europe. To that end the EESC recommends the establishment of an EU High Level Group on ‘Urban Development and Sustainability’.

1.4 In this High Level Group a in-depth knowledge of specific interests of cities should be represented. The Green paper on territorial cohesion can be a welcome starting point.

1.5 In cooperation with the Commission — the Interservice Group Urban Affairs — such High Level Group may contribute to a more effective and targeted European debate on cities, amongst others by setting a prospective agenda, a list of relevant issues for cities, metropolitan areas and governments (2). The discussion will be put on a new footing. The cooperation between Commission and Council will be streamlined in an operational way. It will also stress the own responsibility of governments.

1.6 As reliable data are crucial, Commission and Eurostat can be supportive to extend statistical reporting at NUTS (3) 3 and 2 level to data concerning cities and metropolitan areas and their networks. Arrangements with Member States, the National Statistics Offices, and research institutes (4) are desirable for building-up appropriate databases.

1.7 ESPON (5) is very well placed as a centre for analysis and knowledge, for monitoring developments, and as a platform for analytical exchanges between Member States.

1.8 In a number of areas governments are setting conditions, but implementation and concrete action take mostly place at decentralised level, such as regarding internal and external accessibility, environment, education, family life conditions, etc.

(1) As far as the content of this agenda is concerned, the words of Mr Falco, French Secretary of State for Regional Planning, before the EP REGI Committee on 16 July 2008 could act as a guideline: ‘…we wish, in partnership with local decisionmakers, to draw up a common frame of reference for the sustainable community-based city. More specifically, this means launching a shared process for drawing up common criteria and indicators so as to give an operational content to the recommendations of the Leipzig Charter’.

(2) Nomenclature of statistical territorial units compiled by EUROSTAT.

(3) NUTS: NUTS 2: from 800 000 to 3 000 000 inhabitants; NUTS 3: from 150 000 to 800 000 inhabitants.

(4) TNO, a Dutch research institute, developed a monitor on a wide array of variables at metropolitan level: demography, economy (value added, labour productivity), labour market (unemployment, education, labour force), environment (air quality) infrastructure, offices market, tourism etc. Data come from Eurostat and additional sources to compare Randstad Holland with 19 other main European metabolises for 1995-2006. The data from Eurostat are made compatible with those from the OECD. They are annually reviewed. Other metropolitan areas could also be monitored.

(5) European Spatial Planning Observation Network.

Notes:


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entrepreneurship, knowledge and research, employment, migration, minorities and ethnic and cultural diversity, public investment and public services, attraction of (foreign) investments, public-public and public-private partnership, including private funding, and so on.

1.9 Europe needs well equipped cities and metropolitan areas. Technological dynamics and international economic integration mean that cities are facing directly international trends and competition. It is not surprising, and promising, that many cities and metropolitan areas are defining new ambitions. The best among them are poles of skills and knowledge at all levels and poles of future-oriented investments.

1.10 Due to demographic shifts, migration, ecological requirements, and the fall out from global economic changes the same cities are often also facing substantial challenges which may put a heavy burden on them and sometimes create deplorable divisions, undermining positive prospects.

1.11 As similar trends and characteristics in cities, whatever their cultural and socio-economic differences, are manifest across Europe, a continuous European debate and approaches will add to national settings and contexts. Besides analyses and the definition of desirable approaches, especially benchmarking and transparent best practices in the field of integrated approaches, making use of the Open Method of Coordination, will bear fruit.

1.12 As governmental policy objectives and instruments (legal, fiscal and financial), and regional and local implementation are necessarily complementary, a high-level debate on a variety of scenarios as well as analyses and benchmarks are likely to open new perspectives whatever the cultural and institutional differences between Member States.

1.13 The EESC emphasises the need of a commonly agreed approach between the DGs of the Commission towards cities and metropolitan areas. The visibility of this common approach should also be an incentive for national governments to come to integrated approaches towards cities, a request that is often made by cities to governments and the EU.

1.14 The analyses and benchmarks have to focus on a wide range of issues which are summarised in 4.12: Interlinked aspects of an agenda for cohesive urbanised areas and for the sustainable city of the future. These aspects reflect largely a regional expression of the Lisbon Agenda, which provides a very appropriate framework. Much work is already being done by public and private institutes and agencies, and by a number of big cities themselves, but an overall transparent and consistent approach is still missing.

1.15 Most big cities and metropolitan areas are facing complicated and difficult choices. An all-European engagement and support in analyses can certainly be of help to them in dealing with opportunities and challenges. By way of illustration it would be recommendable to establish (annual) awards or European labels for urban issues. There are outstanding examples in all areas: city planning, building design, migration, minorities and diversity, mobility, technology and market, ecological projects, energy saving, quality housing etc. These should be highlighted across Europe.

1.16 Governance is a crucial and very critical issue (6). Often it is overlooked or neglected, who is responsible and accountable for what. For cities, leadership, vision and consistency seem to be a prerequisite anyway (7).

1.17 Complicated administrative structures across Europe that are usually dating from long ago are as a rule not designed to up-to-date long-term regional policies in densely populated areas. At European level a discussion on how to make multi-level governance more effective can be most helpful. The same goes for new forms of public-public and public-private partnership in cities which are increasingly an indispensable support.

1.18 A long-term European agenda, increased commitment of the Commission, and monitoring at European level can be helpful in defining a consistent sense of direction at regional level and in cities. The Lisbon agenda provides a framework. Consistency is also indispensable to commit other public and private stakeholders and urban professionals in programmes and projects. Among these are schools and training institutes, higher education, architects and city-planners, regional social partners, chambers of commerce, companies, developers, including private funding, health services, cultural organisations, and others.

1.19 An European Agenda would favour a new model of a balanced polycentric development in Europe giving rise to new forms of living communities, also to the benefit of society as a whole. This process is underway, and it should, in the view of the EESC, get full recognition and support.

2. Context

2.1 The demographic landscape of the world is changing. Since 2007, for the first time in history, more than half of the world population lives in cities. The phenomenon of increasing urbanisation occurs in all continents. The trend is tending to intensify.

(6) See chapter 5 ‘Urbanisation and Governance’.
(7) In this respect the purposeful development of BILBAO over the last twenty years presents an impressive and convincing example.
2.2 At the moment more than 80 % of the population in Europe lives in urban areas, and a large part of this percentage lives in cities and agglomerations of more than 500 000 inhabitants. In a number of cases these figures are tending to rise as well.

2.3 Besides the Greater London and Ile-de-France and the traditional big cities — mostly capitals — other, often ambitious, centres are arising in attracting people and economic activities.

2.4 EU policies take this demographic shift and its corresponding social and economic consequences to a certain extent into account. Cities and urbanisation matter increasingly in a number of DGs: Research, Environment, Energy and Transport, Enterprise and Industry, Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. EU regional policy addresses urbanisation as well as expressed in urban programmes such as URBACT, JEREMIE and JESSICA (8), and urban projects in the framework of the EU Social fund (9). Within the Commission an Interservice group on Urban Affairs has been set up.

2.5 This picture reflects growing interest and focussed activity in the Member States themselves regarding the development of urbanisation and metropolitan areas.

2.6 In addition to an increasing number of analyses and studies concerning cities and urbanisation in the Member States numerous geographical maps are made by ESPON highlighting up-to-date demographic and socio-economic trends.

2.7 The Commission started an overall approach to cities in 1997 with a Communication 'Towards an urban agenda in the European Union' (10).

2.8 In a series of Informal Ministerial Meetings on Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion, from November 2004 in Rotterdam to Leipzig in May 2007, the Council of Ministers responsible for spatial development and urban affairs emphasised the significance of city development and territorial cohesion in Europe, and identified many areas of common interest.

2.9 This process resulted in May 2007 in Leipzig in the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities and the Territorial Agenda during the Slovenian presidency a follow-up was concretised in a project 'Territorial — Urban Coordination'.

2.10 Parallel to the Informal Ministerial Meetings contacts and exchanges between national top officials are also intensified. Sometimes research institutes are invited to deepen specific aspects around city development (11).

2.11 Notwithstanding analyses and enumerations of areas of the dynamic process of urbanisation an overall approach of the Commission and the Council vis-à-vis urbanisation and its future evolution in Europe remains unclear.

2.12 In February 2008 the European Parliament adopted a report of the ‘Follow-up the Territorial Agenda and the Leipzig Charter: Towards European Action Program for Spatial Development and Territorial Cohesion’ (12). This report emphasises the importance of an integrated approach to regional and town planning, aiming to enhance the ability of regions and cities to improve their adaptability to economic change in the interest of the quality of life of the European citizens.

2.13 In November 2007 the Committee of the Regions adopted an opinion on the 'Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion' (13). In this opinion the Committee ‘calls for the urban dimension to be dealt with in a separate chapter in the Fifth Cohesion Report, given the key importance of European cities for achieving the goals of the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies and for social integration, for instance migrants’.

2.14 There are substantial differences among European cities: big ones versus smaller ones, strongly urbanised versus less populated, different landscapes of for instance big cities and groups of cities, wealthy and less developed cities. But the common denominator is also striking: there is a spontaneous demographic shift to cities and the economic attractiveness of big cities is increasing whereas meanwhile these same cities are facing similar challenges.

2.15 The whole picture of opportunities and challenges becomes all the more visible as, nowadays, successful city planning is not only limited to spatial planning and housing, but takes also all relevant socio-economic factors explicitly into account in a so-called holistic approach. Increasingly future-oriented urbanistic and planning projects are developed on the basis of integral concepts of territorial, ecological, economic and social aspects.

2.16 Noteworthy in this respect is a project of the Dutch branch of the European Knowledge Network on Cities, Nicis Institute, in cooperation with the Member States concerning, governmental, legal, and fiscal instruments to promote sustainable cities. This project is carried out in the framework of the French presidency at request of the Délégation Interministérielle de la Ville. The Knowledge Network on Cities is a network organisation in which 16 Member States participate.

2.16 Nonetheless, although governments are favouring a progressive development of cities, approaches remain often ambiguous. The way in which developments are realised and managed successfully differs, sometimes strongly, from country to country, and even from city to city. This is certainly also the case concerning the development of city-regions or metropolitan areas.

2.17 The EESC defined its overall views on urbanisation since 1998 in an Opinion 'Towards an Urban Agenda'. This was followed by others among which two specific opinions on European Metropolitan Areas: socio-economic implications for Europe's future in 2004 and 2007. Equally in 2007 an opinion was published on the Territorial Agenda of the EU. Besides these, a number of EESC opinions discuss specific areas which are of interest for cities and urbanisation (see appendix).

3. Analysis and evolution

3.1 Cities and the way in which people live in communities mirror historical periods and the corresponding evolution of society.

3.2 Besides strategic and political reasons, economy and security were major driving forces in shaping communities and cities and their interconnection.

3.3 Modern history of cities in Europe starts when mature agricultural societies and their economic and commercial exposure shaped them across the continent. Later, subsequent stages of industrialisation changed existing cities, and gave also rise to new towns. From late 19th century onward industrialisation made these towns and cities grow exponentially. The long historical evolution, including cultural heritage, industrial areas, housing etc., is quite visible in most of them.

3.4 During the last decades traditional industrial basins changed fundamentally. A number of them often underwent, and are still undergoing, painful restructuring because traditional industrial processes are gradually dying out.

3.5 New processes are underway because of technological dynamics and internationalisation. There is a transition from bulk production to tailor made productions and numerous specialties and continuous renewal on the one hand, and on the other by a strongly extending services sector. Mobility increases tremendously and demographic shifts take place amongst others from rural areas to cities and through migration.

3.6 The environment for people among the western world is becoming limitless and virtual with very wide horizons, whereas the same developments affect also the daily physical environment of all fields of human activity.

3.7 This daily environment for very many people is no longer the individual village, town or city, but it increasingly embraces broader regional entities which creates a new kind of urbanisation.

3.8 Network-cities or network-regions are reinforcing spontaneously and/or deliberately. Look at the developments of big cities and metropolitan areas in Europe. One notices in the modern urbanised society, a new geographical reality coming up, consisting of dominant zones of economic influence and a large number of sub-zones which often as a rule do no longer correspond with existing administrative entities.

3.9 An essential characteristic of these new city-regions is their critical scale, needed to manage urbanisation properly to the benefit of all citizens, their quality of life and work. The critical scale may vary considerably from case to case, depending on specific geographical, economic and demographic circumstances.

3.10 After a decade of domestic studies and discussions on the 'future map' of Germany, in 2004 eleven metropolitan areas were identified, which are qualified as dominant zones of economic influence. Despite initial sceptical reactions further elaboration of the concept is now underway. The relationship and interdependence between metropolitan areas and rural areas is a topical issue.

3.11 In the same period studies were carried out by DIACT (\(^{14}\)) in France, followed by an identification of a number of metropoles. In January 2008 a policy paper was presented 'Imaginer les métropoles d’avenir' (\(^{15}\)) which can be an incentive for further promotion of these centres in France, and for appropriate legislation to that end. There has been a lot of activity on city-regions in the UK as well.

3.12 More or less similarly focused initiatives are taken by other governments and/or regional and local authorities. In countries such as Scandinavia, the Baltic countries, Ireland and Austria primarily in and around the capitals, in the Netherlands in the Randstad. In large Member States such as Spain, Italy and Poland, more predominant centres arise.

\(^{14}\) Délégation interministérielle à l’aménagement et à la compétitivité des territoires (ancienne DATAR) (Interministerial delegation for spatial planning and competitiveness (ex DATAR)).

\(^{15}\) ‘Imaginer les métropoles d’avenir’, report of Dominique Perben, MP, former Minister of Transport, on request of President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Fillon. Mr Perben presents a diagnosis of urbanisation and metropolisation in Europe and in France, followed by ‘challenges and actions’ for big cities and city-regions of more than 500 000 inhabitants in France. He presents also nineteen concrete proposals concerning actions and legislation. This subject will also be raised during the French presidency of the EU, second half of 2008.
3.13 Besides principal centres, a pattern of sub-centres arises which makes urbanisation, though certainly not equally spread over the continent, an important characteristic of the European landscape.

3.14 Social and economic developments give rise to a polycentric urbanised Europe which will no longer be restricted to a limited geographical area like the traditional ‘blue banana’ or to an exclusive group of capitals.

4. Challenges and opportunities

4.1 A crucial issue is: what will be and what must be the sustainable city in future Europe as a promising community for its citizens? In view of a European discussion on the complicated urban developments one has to distinguish a number of predominant factors and trends which cover often different realities within and between big cities or city-regions across Europe.

4.2 A number of these factors and trends are the following:

— demographic changes, amongst these:
  — ageing population
  — cities as attracting poles of young professionals
  — increased ethnic and cultural diversity resulting from immigration;

— groups of cities and municipalities are identified as network-cities and regions or metropolitan areas;

— transport and mobility: zones of economic influence are more and more interconnected across Europe, and beyond;

— international investments and headquarters, implying also business services;

— an increasing number of knowledge and research centres;

— the rise of new industrial and service sectors and an emphasis on creativity;

— changing dynamic labour markets;

— development of gateways;

— modern housing and adjusted spatial planning;

— building-up of new alliances within urbanised areas;

— revitalisation of urban centres and reduction of urban sprawl;

— leisure and events;

— emphasis on culture (including historical and natural heritage) and cultural facilities.

4.3 Meanwhile existing problems in cities are sharpening and new challenges are arising:

— sustainability, environmental aspects, energy;

— depopulation of city centres;

— limitations on the extent of public urban spaces and challenges linked to the quality of such spaces;

— infrastructure, transport systems and accessibility;

— managing mobility;

— challenges for lowly qualified people: work, education, housing;

— challenges arising from an ageing population;

— lack of sufficient entrepreneurship, in particular in depressed areas;

— illegal migration;

— education and skills;

— failed or neglected spatial planning at an earlier stage, e.g. banlieues;

— marginalised communities and criminality;

— risk of terrorism.

4.4 The demographic landscape of big cities and metropolitan areas is often challenging, but offers also opportunities. The picture is differing from city to city: it depends on the composition of the population and on economic opportunities, but also on national policies. Successful integrated policies of host countries usually result in a high(er) degree of inclusiveness.

4.5 The relationship between rural areas and cities is a real challenge. Quite contrary to generally accepted popular and political views a harmonious relationship between rural areas and cities for living and working conditions within metropolitan areas is crucial and opposite to the often usual perception of either-or, or we-they. This fits perfectly well in the new model of polycentric development.

4.6 Although the points of departure for cities can be different due to diverging levels of development, most differences are gradual. Essentially the pattern of urbanisation in the new Member States reflects the same phenomena, be it as yet at a certain distance. Renovation is one of the primary goals. As economic growth will result in higher public expenditure, and in more private investment and higher income levels, urbanisation will progressively show the same characteristics across Europe.
4.7 In policy papers and project proposals regarding urbanisation the Commission refers nowadays systematically to the Lisbon Agenda. Increasingly the Council and national documents highlight the same link. In the Community Strategic Guidelines the Commission speaks of cities as motors of regional development and centres of innovation, but also of the need to improve internal cohesion by fighting social exclusion and criminality, and to enhance quality of life in deprived neighbourhoods.

4.8 The Lisbon Agenda started as a top-down process. Meanwhile Commission and Council have become convinced that bottom-up forces have to be activated as well. Among these bottom-up forces, cities in full development are important actors: a decisive part of the modernisation of European territorial and socio-economic structures is primarily taking place through public and private investments, and through concrete measures in regions and cities. Cities are usually the best geographical level for the public, private and universities sectors working with civil society to interact to create Europe’s necessary innovation.

4.9 For that reason the EESC is of the opinion that big cities and metropolitan areas have to identify their own Lisbon Agenda in the areas of competitiveness, sustainable development and social cohesion and inclusion. Such an Agenda should offer a future-oriented structure and long-term programme to policymakers and all other stakeholders at regional level. In doing so, self-confidence of cities and city-regions will be fostered increasing their expressiveness, nationally and internationally.

4.10 A long-term regional Agenda in more densely populated areas in Europe must be integral or holistic, i.e. all aspects should be interlinked. The better the conditions for private investment, the more opportunities for job creation and for public services and care about vulnerable groups, such as (lonely) elderly and lowly qualified people (16). Specific and focused attention for sustainability and the overall quality of the built environment will help to make such cities and regions more attractive for the population as well as for (international) investment. Better provisions for social cohesion will facilitate job creation. Overall and maintained strategies will enhance credibility towards the population (17).

4.11 It should also kept in mind that markets often do not function as a consequence of spatial rigidities: housing, development policy, infrastructure, transport and mobility. The solution of such rigidities has as a rule to be found at metropolitan level. Integration of markets can also bring with it that national borders are getting obsolete (18).

4.12 Interlinked aspects of an agenda for cohesive quality urbanised areas and the sustainable city of the future are the following:

- creating conditions for an up-to-date economic development, SMEs as well as international investment and headquarters, promoting economic clustering;
- correct implementation of EU-legislation and simplification of regional and local regulations;
- employment policies and regional social dialogues;
- education and training at all levels for all categories including life-long learning, work-learn trajectories and e-learning;
- family friendly living conditions, such as affordable child care;
- R&D, i.e. research facilities, technology campuses and science parks, innovation;
- physical infrastructure:
  - participation in trans-European networks,
  - mobility management (19),
  - multi-modal public transport systems,
  - public-private partnerships, including private funding;
- virtual infrastructure:
  - telecommunications,
  - ICT as basic requirement, and diffusion of broadband and interconnectivity;
- sustainable development:
  - implementation of environmental policies,
  - avoidance of negative aspects of urban sprawl, favouring urban density,
  - specific areas, such as waist management, water management and energy efficiency, e.g. in construction and housing, in (public) transport, via road-pricing etc.;


(17) In Germany a new concept of metropolitan area is called ’eine neue Verantwortungsgesellschaft’, i.e. a ‘new community of responsibility’. See Manfred Sinz, Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs: ‘From Metropolitan Regions to Communities of Responsibilities’.

(18) An example is the absorbing capacity of the financial market in London. In another context can be mentioned examples of regions like Lille-Courtrai, Copenhagen-Malmö and Vienna-Bratislava.

— social cohesion (20):
  — sustainable city planning and architecture,
  — social housing for vulnerable groups,
  — equal services of public interest (health, education, security) across the region,
  — networks of public transport throughout the region including linkages to depressed neighbourhoods,
  — focussed attention for ethnic and cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue,
  — dismantling barriers which make the lives of city dwellers more difficult, particularly older people and people with disabilities,
  — public actions to diminish high rates of unemployment among young people in deprived neighbourhoods: education, new economic activities, promotion of entrepreneurship, events,
  — culture, cultural facilities, events,
  — sports and leisure,
  — tourism,
  — promotion of a commonly felt regional identity.

4.13 For the modern city and city-region state-of-the-art ‘Baukultur’ (21) is decisive, i.e. the overall architectural concept that is based on a holistic approach in which architects, planners, designers, the construction industry, developers and end users work together to create and maintain a quality built environment to provide solutions for sustainable cities (22).

5. Urbanisation and Governance

5.1 Europe needs resilient and sustainable cities, and city-regions or metropolitan areas that are able to present themselves internationally.

5.2 This places ‘governance’ at the top of the agenda. There is a broad agreement on the analysis of opportunities and challenges, there are increasingly exchanges of view among cities, but apart from the difference of conditions between cities it remains unclear who is responsible for what in concrete situations:
  — commonly agreed definitions concerning big cities and city regions are desirable (23);
  — the division of labour between national governments and the big cities and metropolitan areas and what is expected from these varies considerably;
  — there are often confusion and misunderstandings in countries where more than one ministry is responsible for aspects of urban affairs;
  — what should be the role of the Commission?
  — existing regional and local administrative barriers concerning ‘governance’ at regional or local level is often a barrier to necessary actions;
  — complicated problems are often caused by unsatisfactory multi-level government;
  — there are considerable differences in the way cities communicate with the population and valuable actors, in the organisation of ‘participative democracy’;
  — the role of specialised non-governmental organisations, e.g. regarding ‘housing’, education, minorities, business, and others is often vaguely defined and so does the extent to which cities and city-regions take profit from these;
  — there is a not always consistent approach to public-public and public-private partnership in view of city programmes, decisive investments and creative solutions;
  — there is a need of long-term approaches concerning the sustainable city for the future;
  — transparency and legitimacy are indispensable tools for long-term strategies.

5.3 Practical evidence shows that leadership, vision and consistency are as a rule a condition for a successful management of change and continuing progress of cities.

5.4 As big cities and metropolitan areas are poles of attraction and the daily environment for so many people, and as their potential socio-economic significance for Europe is unquestionable, the EESC considers a profound discussion of their impact in its entirety necessary, not only nationally, but also at EU-level.

(20) This subject is deepened in a French report ‘Une Nouvelle Politique pour les Banlieues’, Palais de l’Elysée, 8 February 2008. The report makes a number of proposals to fight the danger of ghettos in cities. In particular, the report presents state and regional/local initiatives concerning education, training, and job and company creation in deprived neighbourhoods. The French presidency is planning several EU-conferences on this issue.
(23) See as a useful example also the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) in the United States, formerly the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area since 1959.
5.5 As the Treaty until recently had no provisions concerning spatial development, and due to subsidiarity, the role of the Commission and the Council remained ambiguous. Via direct consultation with cities, DGs of the Commission meanwhile carry out increasingly a wide variety of projects in urbanised areas. Issues are R&D, environment, employment and transport (24).

5.6 Cities tend to become also more pro-active towards Brussels, because EU-legislation affects them directly. Themes are environmental regulation, public procurement, youth unemployment, public order and security, migration, deprived areas.

5.7 The same goes for the Lisbon Agenda at large. European criteria for the various topics are increasingly being assessed for regional application: which are the effects of the implementation of proposals and/or adopted regulation at urban and metropolitan level. Examples prove that without taking into account of specific urban circumstances implementation can turn out to be more costly than the benefit of contributions to projects by the Structural Funds.

5.8 Against this background the EESC welcomes the initiative of the Commission to present shortly a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion. A discussion on the Green Paper will also be an opportunity to deepen the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities.

5.9 The above-mentioned agenda in 4.12 is a heavy one. Situations are usually very complicated. Up till now a consistent strategic view on big cities and city-regions was developed only in a limited number of cases. In many cases a clear sense of direction is rather lacking which is partly due to ambiguous positions of governments and differing views within national administrations and at metropolitan level itself.

5.10 On the other hand, a long-term vision and consistency at metropolitan level is indispensable for the building of commitment of existing and, eventually, new communities, for private stakeholders, and for the creation of beneficial alliances within organised civil society. At the moment this looks all the more difficult because the concept of metropolitan areas is a rather recent phenomenon, which makes a fruitful debate in Europe only more desirable (25).

5.11 This is not to say that all cases are similar, on the contrary. Apart from demographic and socio-economic differences across Europe, there is a wide range of different administrative and cultural traditions between countries and regions. Concrete situations, lifestyles and views on organisation vary considerably. In some cases a single leading idea or vision for towards the future has been decisive. More generally, the Lisbon Agenda may be helpful to identify a common ground for discussion and approach.

5.12 Often the central government does not create sufficient room of manoeuvre for cities to determine their own destiny. Policies are primarily top-down, and so are bureaucratic procedures. By contrast, promotion of self-determination could create the right conditions to implement adequately desirable strategies and policies. By a redefinition of the position of big cities and city-regions or metropolitan areas these could become real ‘communities of responsibility’.

5.13 Self-determination and mutual respect between cities and their surroundings will boost responsibility and accountability of local and regional authorities, and will contribute to a desirable pro-active attitude of civil society and the private sector.

5.14 To be effective, in many cases it will be necessary to redesign existing local and regional administrative entities (municipalities and others) and their competences.

5.15 The population of Europe’s cities may turn still more diversified both in terms of jobs and income, and culturally. Potentially all ingredients are in place to create an enriched urbanisation, but if processes are not managed properly potentials are not developed and the cohesion of society may be jeopardised.

5.16 Targeted discussions, agenda-setting, and effective monitoring at European level can be most helpful to define a consistent sense of direction at regional level. Such consistency is not only needed for public actors, but it will be indispensable to commit other public and private stakeholders and urban professionals.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS