

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Implementation assessment of the Urban Agenda for the EU

(2018/C 387/03)

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Reference document: Report from the Commission to the Council on the Urban Agenda for the EU

COM(2017) 657 final

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Recognition of work pursued

1. re-affirms its commitments to renewing its initial 'Follow-up Strategy for the Implementation of the Urban Agenda for the EU' and to mapping its planned political level contribution to the implementation of associated actions;
2. acknowledges the efforts of the EU institutions to recognise the ever-growing role and influence of Europe's cities as key contributors towards achieving strategic EU targets and ensuring a Europe that is inclusive, ambitious in terms of implementing the sustainable development goals and globally competitive;
3. notes the core point that the Urban Agenda for the EU seeks to mobilise the experience and expertise of urban authorities and to enable them to contribute to the development and implementation of those EU policy processes and instruments that most impact on cities;
4. supports the view that the process around the Urban Agenda for the EU has brought about some degree of a renewed sense of interest in some Member States in developing or strengthening national urban policy;
5. welcomes the ground-breaking working methods of the Urban Agenda Partnerships in directly engaging urban authorities in the EU policymaking process for the first time and promoting a bottom-up approach; sees this approach as strongly tied to the Future of Europe debate as it paves the way for the local and decentralised involvement of citizens;
6. urges that, within the Future of Europe process, it is necessary to implement enhanced knowledge-sharing and inter-city cooperation to promote exchange of best practices in how cities operate, minimise the administrative burden associated with EU affairs, find more cost-effective ways of policy implementation, and avoid duplications, particularly in relation to the appropriate design of EU funding instruments and policy initiatives;
7. accepts that the Urban Agenda is very much a work-in-progress at this moment; notes that the November 2017 report by the European Commission declares overall satisfaction — but points out nevertheless that this verdict is based entirely on feedback from participants; hence the Committee of the Regions welcomes consultation on this assessment;
8. supports the Urban Agenda's approach and its multi-level governance working method across 12 broad policy priority themes as identified in the Pact of Amsterdam and the need to rethink approaches to the design of existing rules and regulations, enhancing the user-friendliness of the range of available urban-focussed funding resources and improve knowledge exchange and cooperation on urban issues among different stakeholders;
9. highlights that the Partnerships method is providing a platform to integrate the valuable perspectives of expert practitioners across a set of issues of recognised high priority to the EU and to incorporate their hands-on experience of how EU affairs impact on the daily life of cities and citizens;

Cross-cutting considerations and synergies

10. advocates for an Urban Agenda for the EU addressing all urban areas, including its often rural functional areas, in order to achieve a more integrated and holistic approach to EU policy and legislation, to involve more closely towns and cities at all stages of the preparation of these policies, and the need to broaden out participation to the greatest extent so as to truly involve all urban areas;

11. points out that many of the Partnership themes are themselves closely tied into other themes and that, in the spirit of integrated thinking, these should not be treated in isolation; insists on the need for very enhanced coordination between the action plans as their activities could have significant impacts on each other, for example (i) the Partnerships on Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based Solutions, on Housing, and on Climate Adaptation; (ii) the Partnerships on Climate Adaptation, on Energy Transition and on Air Quality; (iii) the Partnerships on Urban Poverty, on Housing and on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees;

12. welcomes the fact that the available data on urban issues has improved over recent years, but still sees a need for better mapping of the subnational, local and regional levels in order to enable evidence-based policy development;

13. stresses, with reference to point 12.6 of the Pact of Amsterdam, that the EU Urban Agenda must also contribute to gender justice and gender equality. Suitable tools include Gender Impact Assessment methods, a gender-sensitive data base, and gender-mainstreaming analysis of programmes and projects;

14. supports the call for the Urban Agenda's other cross-cutting considerations to be similarly respected in the Partnership actions: urban governance and urban planning, urban-rural linkages, meeting the impacts on societal change, the challenges and opportunities of small-and medium-sized cities, urban regeneration, demographic change, public services of general interest and links with the UN New Urban Agenda;

15. emphasises that many issues identified by the Partnerships connect with CoR Opinions, Resolutions, to the extent that the work of the CoR on topics with a clear urban dimension should effectively serve as a toolkit for the action plans; equally, the outputs and results emerging from the Urban Agenda may well be disseminated as best practice through CoR awareness-raising events and publications; highlights that the local authorities of many CoR members are represented in the urban Partnerships and calls for the CoR to be well informed of the activities of the Partnerships;

16. points out that many urban activities are both directly and indirectly linked with or dependent on cooperation between cities and their neighbouring authorities (surrounding areas), and therefore that these activities should be taken appropriately into account when implementing and assessing the EU Urban Agenda;

17. recalls its opinion on regeneration of port cities and port areas and the need to look into their specific challenges that require an integrated approach to sustainable urban development and city planning

18. notes that additional focussed synergies could be created with organisations represented across several Partnerships such as, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and Eurocities networks, the Urbact 3 programme for sustainable urban development, and the European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN);

Resourcing the Urban Agenda

19. commends the Partnerships for dedicating their own resources (as participation costs of are not provided) and the efforts carried out by the European Commission in facilitating the implementation of the Urban Agenda;

20. points out that after almost two years of implementing the Urban Agenda for the EU, the main concerns so far have been related to the lack of resources, particularly to cover the costs of participation of the cities that are members of the Partnerships (particularly small and medium cities);

21. notes that larger urban centres usually have the resources to dedicate towards engagement in European affairs — to access information, to target funding opportunities and even to seek to influence the course of policymaking — this is not the case for smaller authorities; insists that the Urban Agenda for the EU should adequately cater for the needs of smaller urban local authorities, which play an important part of their respective broader regional economies, to better inform their sustainable urban development;

22. calls for consideration to be given to the possibility of setting up a specific financial mechanism for smaller cities with a view to supporting cooperation initiatives under the Urban Agenda. The aim here would be to provide an incentive for stepping up the exchange of experience. Enhancing the educational role of cooperation (when experienced entities — mainly medium-sized and large urban centres — pass on information to small cities and towns) plays a particularly important role in achieving economies of scale and increasing the rate of socioeconomic growth;

23. is concerned by the distinct possibility of a lack of ownership emerging due to the current design and operation of the Partnerships, notably the voluntary profile of the overall governance structure, the passiveness on the part of certain Members States and some internal organisation issues arising from a lack of rules on the allocation of tasks and responsibilities among members; urges that these matters be addressed as the Urban Agenda proceeds;

24. welcomes the support provided by the technical secretariat to assist the Partnerships, at the same time calls for more emphasis to be placed on expertise and outcome-orientated approaches, so that the technical support is not just of an administrative nature. In this connection, there is also a need for greater transparency, and greater ownership of the Partnerships, if they are to benefit appropriately from the technical input, inter alia, from consultation of experts;

25. insists that to deliver credible and well-planned outcomes via the Partnerships, there is an obvious need for the Urban Agenda process to be able to rely on a stable multi-annual budgeting provision;

26. praises the initiative to create the 'Futurium' interactive website, which has been set up to gather all Partnership outputs in one place and to provide the wider stakeholder community with updates, as well as opportunities to discuss and provide input to proceedings; but cautions that an online 'one-stop shop' should not, in itself, be seen as a panacea for delivering the objectives of the Urban Agenda, especially as this tool is not sufficiently widely known by its potential target audience;

Better regulation and urban proofing

27. recognises that in order to realise the Urban Agenda there is a need for new legal mechanisms to be created between EU Institutions, Member States, cities and stakeholders to support the implementation of actions addressed to them and falling within their competence;

28. reiterates its calls for its implementation to be based on binding force as a Commission responsibility where all relevant DGs are mobilised to contribute at this stage just as they are currently doing in providing input to the Partnerships; similarly urges that Member State involvement should be at the relevant thematic ministerial level rather than simply reverting by default to the ministry charged with urban development;

29. underlines that one key aspect of the Pact of Amsterdam was to establish the link with the Better Regulation agenda of the European Union; accordingly recommends creating direct connections between the work of the Partnerships and the members of the REFIT platform, as well as putting stronger emphasis on improving the EU regulatory environment in the given policy field during the meetings of the Partnerships;

30. suggests that it would be useful to link the work of the Urban Agenda Partnerships more closely with the work of the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB) of the European Commission;

31. recalls the CoR efforts on implementing the Agenda in relation to the 'Better Regulation' component through the piloting, over recent years, of (territorial) urban impact assessments intended to provide rapporteurs with analysis of the potential effect of specific legislative proposals on the ground in a sample of city contexts;

32. believes that urban-proofing should become a core element of the design of EU policy; underlines that a more systematic assessment could be pursued of the impact of planned EU action on cities (at various scales) in order to ensure that the local perspective is appropriately reflected in an ultimate policy or legislation;

33. welcomes the recognition of the DG REGIO on the importance of implementing Territorial Impact Assessments when discussing new legislative proposals and would encourage the Commission to apply them more widely across all policy fields;

34. calls for cities and urban areas to contribute to EU priorities tailored to their specific development needs, and stresses that 'local development' should continue to be part of a wider EU approach to 'Territorial Development' and should be better defined as holistic concepts;

Future frameworks for a post-2020 Urban Agenda

35. considers that, based on the collaborative outputs that have emerged to date from the earliest Partnerships, the Urban Agenda for the EU serves as a solid evidence base to inform and even shape the direction of future European cooperation in both the ESIFs and elements of the centrally-managed programmes of the Commission post-2020;

36. requests that the future of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) proposal and Cohesion policy beyond 2020 reflect the role of cities and urban areas, enhancing the integrated tools and mechanisms to empower and support cities and regions directly; highlights that it is crucial for Cohesion policy to pursue the added-value of the integrated territorial approach and, in conjunction with its strong rural support, to also have a strong urban dimension as well as 'urban ownership' on the ground in cities and urban areas;

37. points out that, despite the growing importance of the lowest levels of governance (e.g. cities) in relation to the central level of governance in the EU, in some countries there are moves towards the re-centralisation of governance mechanisms at the expense of a loss of funding hitherto available for cities and regions allowing them to decide matters for themselves. This is a dangerous trend, preventing polycentric growth based on local development factors and local circumstances;

38. endorses the need for new integrated tools to be made more flexible and more proportionate, and for more-tailored guidance to ensure better understanding of these tools and greater certainty for those who want to use them;

39. calls for the Urban Agenda to prioritise making the highly-fragmented urban funding landscape more accessible for the benefit of towns and cities of all sizes, e.g. through working with key stakeholders including pan-European local and regional government networks and the CoR on the development of tailored information materials integrating the entirety of urban funding possibilities across each of the 12 themes;

40. urges that strong awareness-raising amongst LRAs about existing financing initiatives (the URBIS & EIB tailored loans schemes) be developed as well as streamlining the current advisory and financing landscape with a certain degree of tailoring to urban needs, are presented as the priority issues;

41. is aware of the need to streamline the urban investment financing landscape and to tailor services connected to the EIB loan scheme to the needs of individual cities; acknowledges the role of the new dedicated urban investment advisory platform URBIS has in providing urban authorities with financial and technical guidance throughout the key stages of preparing and implementing integrated urban projects, including development of investment strategies, preparation of project pipelines and exploration of innovative financing tools (e.g. combining of European Structural and Investment Funds with the European Fund for Strategic Investments);

42. highlights the continued importance of European Territorial Cooperation for cities and local authorities providing a European perspective to inform their development; underlines that more than one third of EU citizens live and work in Europe's border cities and Regions, which account for two thirds of the EU's GDP; remarks that cross-border and transnational Interreg projects have achieved many concrete outcomes on behalf of Europe's citizens in areas of relevance to the Urban Agenda, including mobility, climate adaptation, energy transition, training and job creation;

43. calls for the objectives and delivery mechanisms of the next generation of all non-Cohesion EU programmes with an urban component such as the Ninth Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, as well as policy initiatives such as the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, to be thoroughly integrated with the Urban Agenda;

44. emphasises that the Urban Agenda should feature prominently in future Commission Annual Work programmes, and asks that the rotating Presidencies of the Council renew high-level political commitment to the process, empower Member States to contribute and also formally report on the development of the Partnerships;

45. calls for cities and regions to have access to the European Council working groups and the European Parliament on urban matters and trilogues through their institutional representative, the CoR, so that they can follow and more accurately provide input into the work of the Council in areas that impact upon them and their competences;

46. stresses that the proposed action plans need to have an accompanying roadmap setting out realistic deliverables, target dates, indicators and targets towards the particular objectives, reflecting the multi-actor character of the Partnerships and developed in cooperation with different levels of administration, the private sector and civil society;

47. suggests that, once the Action Plans are finalised, a series of dissemination campaigns with appropriate feedback mechanisms should be organised via national Ministries and/or other multipliers including Brussels-based city/regional offices;

48. expects the assessment exercise of the European Commission in 2019 to outline how the Partnerships have contributed to the better regulation agenda, to improved access to funding and to better exchange of knowledge and best practices;

49. calls for the Partnerships to carry out their own assessment and give feedback as to whether their own expectations were met by the process and suggest possible improvements;

50. advocates the proposal to set up a steering committee to discuss future developments of the Urban Agenda, such as key messages arising from the Partnerships to inform future policy and programming decision-making, possible new thematic Partnerships, the application of cross-cutting issues, and promoting the results of the discussions; agrees on the appropriateness to consider additional topics, such as Security, Cultural Heritage, demography, urban nodes and TEN-T;

51. insists however on properly assessing the results as well as the structure and implementation measures of the current Partnerships before launching new ones;

52. proposes to involve the CoR in the organisation of the annual coordination meeting, in order to provide input, suggest actions, host meetings, and in particular to avoid overlapping with other potential events and discussions;

Conclusions

53. calls on EU institutions to reaffirm their commitment to the Urban Agenda for the EU and to formalise the process; states that the Urban Agenda offers too much by way of potential to improve the future functioning of our cities to be restricted to a mere networking exercise and must instead be recognised as a binding political commitment on the development and implementation of legislation and European and national funding programmes;

54. stresses that the Pact of Amsterdam provides for a stronger institutional role for the CoR as it invites the Committee, as the Union's advisory body formally representing regions and municipalities at EU level, to contribute to the further development of the Urban Agenda;

55. suggests the upcoming presidencies of the Council of the EU to promote some synergies between the discussions on the implementation assessment of the Urban Agenda for the EU and the renewed Territorial Agenda beyond 2020, in view of a more integrated approach of spatial planning and a territorial governance, in which should be involved local and regional authorities and spatial planners from a bottom-up and evidence-based approach;

56. recognises the importance of cities in the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030; calls for very strong synergies between the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and post-2020 EU policy priority-setting;

57. believes that a proper integration of the Sustainable Development Goals into EU policies will stimulate a more integrated vision throughout the Union on the future of our cities and regions; considers the urban dimension of the SDGs requires a comprehensive, integrated and effective approach; and thus asks for close cooperation with partners and other stakeholders as well as local and regional authorities to catalyse multi-stakeholders action;

58. asks that the European and national statistical authorities develop and improve data, indicators, tools and methodology to quantify and monitor contribution of EU policies to the urban related targets of the 2030 Agenda, increasing the provision of indicators detailed by NUTS2, NUTS3 and FUA level;

59. underlines that the UN's New Urban Agenda will guide the efforts relating to sustainable urban development of a wide range of actors for the next 20 years; calls for all levels of EU governance to work together to use the New Urban Agenda as a tool to achieve inclusive and sustainable urban development.

Brussels, 4 July 2018.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ
