Delivering the Urban Agenda for the EU

SUMMARY

Our towns and cities are home to nearly three quarters of the EU's population, and most EU policies concern them, be it directly or indirectly.

While the revised 2014-2020 cohesion policy framework introduced a number of new instruments intended to enhance the urban dimension of cohesion funding, a shared vision of urban development has gradually taken shape at inter-governmental level, accompanied by increasing calls to give city authorities and stakeholders a greater say in policymaking. To help guide these discussions, the European Commission launched a public consultation following its July 2014 communication on the urban dimension of EU policies. Its findings indicated broad support among city stakeholders for an Urban Agenda for the EU. The European Parliament also prepared an own-initiative report on the issue, as part of a process that would ultimately lead to the signing of the Pact of Amsterdam on 30 May 2016, a clear political commitment to deliver an Urban Agenda.

With eight urban partnerships now in operation and the members of the remaining four announced in April 2017, past months have seen visible progress in terms of delivering the Urban Agenda, with recent developments including the setting up of a permanent secretariat for the Urban Agenda and the publication of background papers by four partnerships, with their action plans expected soon. This process looks set to expand further following the 2016 UN Habitat III conference in Quito, which identified the Urban Agenda for the EU as the main delivery mechanism in the EU for the UN's New Urban Agenda, a roadmap for global sustainable urban development.

This briefing is a further update of an [earlier one](#) published in June 2016.
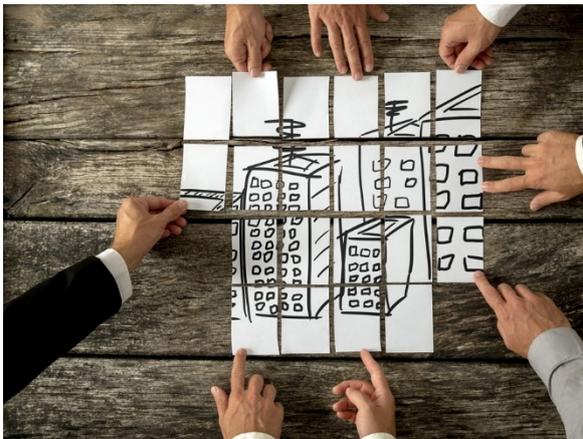
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Introduction

Towns and cities are a core part of the fabric of Europe's landscape and many of the policy challenges facing Europe have a disproportionate impact on urban areas. These range from issues such as social exclusion and migration to climate action and environmental deterioration. Crucially, however, Europe's towns and cities also contain the solutions to these very challenges: as places where people and resources congregate, they provide unrivalled opportunities for promoting sustainability, energy efficiency, economic innovation and social inclusion. There is much to be gained by ensuring more effective coordination between the many policies impacting on urban areas and by taking account of the experiences of local and regional authorities in delivering policy on the ground. This can be achieved by developing a common framework of action – an Urban Agenda for the EU.

The Urban Agenda takes shape

Towards a shared vision of urban development

With no legal basis for urban policy in the Treaties, discussions on urban development at EU level have taken place primarily within the framework of intergovernmental cooperation. Over time, ministers responsible for urban development have reached a consensus on specific objectives and values for urban areas through documents such as the 2007 Leipzig Charter on the sustainable development of cities, the 2010 Toledo Declaration on the role of cities in implementing the Europe 2020 strategy and the 2020 Territorial Agenda. However, the fact that these declarations were not binding on the Member States led to calls for more concrete action from the Netherlands and Belgium in 2013, supported by the presidency trio of Italy, Latvia and Luxembourg.

After decades of debate, 2015 marked a turning point for the Urban Agenda. Discussions were taken forward by the Latvian Presidency, building on the ministerial agreement reached in Athens in April 2014 and on the conclusions of the November 2014 General Affairs Council, which made explicit reference to continuing work on the Urban Agenda, with the June 2015 Riga Declaration of ministers for territorial cohesion and urban matters providing the political support needed to develop the Urban Agenda for the EU.

New cohesion policy developments 2014-2020

The new cohesion policy framework, which accounts for one third of the EU's total budget (heading 1b of the multiannual financial framework – MFF) places a particular focus on the urban dimension during the 2014-2020 programming period. One of the key developments in this area is Article 7 of the ERDF Regulation which provides that at least 5 % of the European Regional Development Fund resources allocated at national level under the investment for jobs and growth goal must be earmarked for integrated actions for sustainable urban development. The urban dimension has also been reinforced through Article 8 of the ERDF Regulation, which supports studies and pilot projects identifying or testing new solutions for sustainable urban development issues (Urban Innovative Actions (UIAs)), encouraging innovation in this field and the involvement of urban authorities in their preparation and implementation. Equally, the Urban Development Network (UDN), established under Article 9 of the ERDF Regulation, boosts local level involvement, advancing discussions on the implementation of the urban dimension by supporting capacity building, networking and the exchange of good practices between urban authorities implementing sustainable urban development strategies. By calling on the Commission to align the work of the UDN and the themes of UIAs to the framework of the Urban Agenda, the Pact of Amsterdam recognised the importance of these tools for delivering the Urban Agenda, establishing a direct link with the cohesion policy structure for 2014-2020.

The Dutch Presidency and the Urban Agenda for the EU

As one of the countries that has been in the vanguard of discussions on the Urban Agenda, the Netherlands set itself an ambitious roadmap for its presidency in the first half of 2016, achieving three key objectives: the signing of the Pact of Amsterdam, a political declaration establishing the Urban Agenda for the EU, its operational framework and priority themes; the creation of the first four **pilot partnerships;** and lastly, the adoption of Council Conclusions on the Urban Agenda, necessary to establish a firm political commitment to delivering on the Urban Agenda for the EU.

The Pact of Amsterdam

Signed on 30 May 2016, the Pact of Amsterdam sets out the objectives of the Urban Agenda: to strive to establish a more integrated and coordinated approach to EU policies and legislation that impact on urban areas; to involve urban authorities in the design of policies; and to strengthen policies' urban dimension without necessitating new EU funding, changing the current distribution of legal competences and decision-making structures or transferring competences to EU level. In terms of its operational framework, the activities of the Urban Agenda will be coordinated by the 'DG meeting on urban matters', which brings together national civil servants (directors-general) with responsibility for urban affairs and representatives of the European Commission, the CoR, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), and EUROCITIES. The pact also identifies the role of the key players in the Urban Agenda. These include, among others, urban authorities, Member States, the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, and partnerships, which the pact defines as the key delivery mechanism for the Urban Agenda, and whose action plans can provide input for the design of future, or the revision of current, EU legislation. An annex to the pact, the Working Programme of the Urban Agenda for the EU, specifies its operational framework and the Urban Agenda's working method, concrete actions and themes.

Pact of Amsterdam

Defines objectives and establishes the operational framework for the Urban Agenda for the EU

Focuses on three policy instruments: better regulation, better funding, better knowledge exchange

Identifies 12 priority themes for the Urban Agenda for the EU (see below)

Defines the actions and working method for institutional players and stakeholders

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The Urban Agenda for the EU in practice

The role of partnerships

A vital instrument for the Urban Agenda, partnerships have been set up for each of the 12 themes, to identify the issues that need to be addressed to enhance the urban dimension in a given policy area. Participation is voluntary, with the 15 to 20 members of each partnership, which include representatives of the European Commission, Member States, local authorities, city networks and others, working in partnership with one another, with no single partner dominating proceedings. Lasting three years, each partnership prepares and implements an action plan, which identifies bottlenecks and puts forward proposals for strengthening the urban dimension by focusing on three areas: **better regulation**, which looks at how to give existing rules a greater urban dimension, **better use of financial instruments**, which examines how to optimise use of current financial instruments, and **better knowledge exchange**, which considers means of improving existing networks. In addition, 11 cross-cutting issues have been identified

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that partnerships should consider when organising their work, such as good urban governance, sound urban planning or use of integrated approaches.

Twelve themes of the Urban Agenda for the EU	
Jobs and skills in the local economy	Climate adaptation
Urban poverty	Energy transition
Housing	Urban mobility
Inclusion of migrants and refugees	Air quality
Sustainable use of land and nature-based solutions	Digital transition
Circular economy	Innovative and responsible public procurement

Pilot partnerships

November 2015 saw the launch of the first four pilot partnerships, which will serve as a testing ground for the new framework. The partnership on housing, coordinated by Slovakia, will examine the provision of good quality affordable housing and housing policy, while Belgium and France will jointly coordinate the urban poverty partnership, which tackles poverty and promoting the inclusion of people at risk of poverty in deprived neighbourhoods, focusing on child poverty and homelessness. The partnership on air quality, coordinated by the Netherlands, will consider policies and systems to ensure good air quality, targeting sources of pollution such as industry, motor vehicles, and agriculture. Coordinated by the city of Amsterdam, the inclusion of migrants and refugees partnership will establish a framework to manage the integration of non-EU migrants and refugees in the areas of housing, public services and employment. All four pilot partnerships have now prepared background papers setting out their draft actions, and a public feedback process was launched in July 2017 to allow interested stakeholders to share their views on the proposed actions. This feedback will be used by partnerships for the preparation of their final action plans, due to be presented officially in October 2017.

New partnerships

A further four partnerships were launched in February and March 2017. The digital transition partnership, coordinated by Estonia and the cities of Oulu and Sofia, aims to provide better public services to citizens and to create business opportunities, covering areas such as health and social care services, eGovernment or future skills development. The partnership on the circular economy seeks to encourage the reutilisation, repair and recycling of materials and goods to stimulate growth and jobs. Coordinated by the city of Oslo, its February launch meeting set out plans to focus on the three vertical themes of urban resource management, circular business drivers, and circular consumption. The urban mobility partnership, whose principal coordinators are the Czech Republic and the German city of Karlsruhe, aims to ensure better conditions for urban mobility for EU cities, and has identified four initial themes: active modes of transport and public space use, innovative solutions and smart mobility, local public transport, multi-modality and governance. The partnership on jobs and skills in the local economy, meanwhile, seeks to identify how cities can foster quality and inclusive employment. Coordinated by Romania, the Latvian city of Jelgava and Rotterdam, it has outlined issues such as the 'next economy', jobs and skills, public services, business location, and effective local governance as key areas of action. All of these new partnerships have held their inaugural meetings, and a further four or five meetings are planned for 2017, with action plans to be drawn up during the course of the year.

The composition of the remaining four partnerships was agreed provisionally at the 4 April 2017 meeting of directors-general in charge of urban development. The coordinator of the partnership on climate adaptation will be the Italian city of Genoa, with the partnership on the sustainable use of land and nature-based solutions set to be coordinated jointly by Poland and the city of Bologna. The Dutch city of Haarlem has been appointed as coordinator of the partnership on public procurement, while the partnership on energy transition will be coordinated by London, Gdansk, and the Belgian city of Roeselare.

New resources for the Urban Agenda
Along with the launch of the new partnerships, recent months have also seen the development of a number of web-based and administrative resources to further support the rollout of the Urban Agenda. In October 2016, the Commission launched its one-stop shop, a website that provides cities with information about the Urban Agenda and funding for cities, including access to databases such as the urban data platform that promote knowledge sharing and better policy making on urban issues. Since the adoption of the 2017 EU budget, the European Commission and the European Parliament have released funding of EUR 2.5 million over a three-year period to support the running of the Urban Agenda secretariat, highlighting the political importance of the urban agenda for both institutions. This will help facilitate the organisational work of the different partnerships, promote synergies between them and help introduce the urban agenda to a wider audience through a dedicated communications strategy. The permanent secretariat, set up in January 2017, has recently launched a new website for the Urban Agenda for the EU, which is the primary source of information about the agenda and the work of its 12 partnerships.

Reflecting the need for accurate urban data, work on the collection of new territorial evidence for the Urban Agenda is being undertaken by ESPON, the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion, which actively promotes the use of territorial evidence in policymaking, with the process also supported by the European Commission's 2016 State of European Cities report prepared to help the work of the Urban Agenda for the EU, in particular its objective of better urban intelligence and information. These measures will help ensure that the necessary framework is in place to provide a solid evidence-based foundation for the new proposals put forward by the urban partnerships at the end of the three-year period.

Urban Innovative Actions
Directly linked to the themes of the Urban Agenda, Urban Innovative Actions support the Urban Agenda by helping to identify solutions in the field of sustainable urban development in the same 12 thematic areas, and tie in with the thematic objectives under the ERDF. The first call for proposals for **Urban Innovative Actions** (UIAs) was launched on 15 December 2015. Introduced under Article 8 of the ERDF, UIAs make funding available for urban authorities, providing them with a low-risk means of testing experimental solutions in the area of sustainable urban development, which can then be rolled out across the EU. Selected on the basis of calls for applications, UAI projects are chosen based on the following criteria: degree of innovation, quality, level of partnership, and whether results are measurable, as well as the transferability of a project to other EU areas. The first call for proposals, which has a budget of €80 million, covered the following four topics: **urban poverty**, **integration of migrants and refugees**, **jobs and skills in the local economy** and **energy transition**.

Urban Innovative Actions

- Innovative sustainable urban development projects
- Open to urban authorities (or groups thereof) of over 50 000 inhabitants
- Co-financing rate of up to 80 %
- Maximum of €5 million available per project
- Maximum project duration of three years
- Total budget of €372 million over a seven-year period
- Clear link with the Urban Agenda

A total of 18 projects were chosen from 378 applications, with approved projects including USE-IT! Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together, a project tackling urban poverty in Birmingham, which has received €2.9 million in funding, the CURANT project supporting the integration of migrants in Antwerp focusing on co-housing and case management for unaccompanied young adult refugees in the city or the FED Fossil Free Energy District project in Gothenburg, Sweden, which has received €4.6 million in funding to support the city's energy transition. Questions have been raised, however, about the geographical balance of the successful projects, with participants at a January 2017 meeting of the European Parliament's Urban Intergroup emphasising that not a single project from eastern Europe had been chosen under the first UIA call for proposals, with members also pointing to a tendency to award projects to large cities at the expense of smaller towns. Building on the success of the first call for proposals, a second call for proposals was launched on 16 December 2016. Open until 14 April 2017 and with a budget of €50 million, this call invited applicants to submit projects under the three topics of the circular economy, urban mobility and the integration of migrants and refugees, tying in with the themes of the latest partnerships.

The UN's New Urban Agenda

The UN's New Urban Agenda provides a framework setting out how global cities should be planned and managed to promote sustainable urbanisation and ensure they are more inclusive, environmentally sustainable and prosperous. Adopted unanimously by 167 countries at the UN Habitat III Conference in Quito in October 2016, it builds on the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which identified 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and highlighted the role of cities as drivers for future sustainable growth. This idea also lies at the heart of the New Urban Agenda. A key objective of the Habitat III conference was to reach consensus on a global roadmap for SDG 11, which urges countries to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Links with the Urban Agenda for the EU

The Urban Agenda for the EU represents the principal mechanism through which the UN's New Urban Agenda will be implemented across the European Union. The Pact of Amsterdam establishes a direct link with both the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, stipulating that the Urban Agenda for the EU will contribute to the implementation of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably SDG 11 'Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' and the global 'New Urban Agenda', as part of the Habitat III process. Against this background, the EU has outlined a specific commitment to implement the New Urban Agenda through the Urban Agenda for the EU. This commitment has been included in the Quito Implementation Plan accompanying the New Urban Agenda, which lists the commitments of the various partners to delivering the outcomes of the New Urban Agenda in their territories. The importance of the Urban

Agenda for the EU as a vehicle for helping the EU to meet its sustainable development goals under Agenda 2030 has also been recognised in the Commission's November 2016 communication 'Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability', which outlines a specific role for the EU Urban Agenda in this context.

Common vision for sustainable urban development

The Urban Agenda for the EU and the UN's New Urban Agenda set out a similar vision for achieving balanced and sustainable urban development based on a place-based approach, with the 12 main themes of the Urban Agenda for the EU being broadly reflected in the social, economic and environmental dimensions of the New Urban Agenda. As highlighted by the European Union Knowledge Network's (EUKN) overview of the two agenda frameworks, the New Urban Agenda outlines a wide range of urban priorities that will also be covered by the EU's urban partnerships, such as the inclusion of migrants, energy transition, climate change or the digital transition, with both agendas also setting out urban governance methods that are underpinned by equal partnerships between all players involved. Both agendas also advocate a strong system of multilevel governance founded on principles such as decentralisation, the devolution of powers and decision-making, inclusiveness and cooperation between various levels of government and stakeholders, including from the private sector and civil society.

New Urban Agenda

Prefaced by the Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All, which outlines the challenges and opportunities posed by urban growth, the document sets out the shared vision of the New Urban Agenda, a list of transformative commitments for sustainable urban development, covering its social, economic and environmental dimensions, and measures to ensure the effective implementation of the agenda. Individual countries are invited to make voluntary commitments to support the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. These should be concrete, measurable and achievable actions focused on implementation.

Improving urban intelligence and territorial evidence

More detailed urban data are vital to support the work of urban partnerships and ensure the successful delivery of the Urban Agenda for the EU and the New Urban Agenda. The European Commission has set out a further two commitments under the Quito Implementation Plan to help support this process: developing a global, people-based definition of cities and settlements, which will help facilitate monitoring and benchmarking by working to draw up a common definition for cities across the world, and a commitment on fostering city to city cooperation for effective implementation, which will encourage cities to link up with partner cities around the world to develop action plans on common priorities. With an online networking and support platform promoting technical and cross-regional cooperation, this measure will help cities to share knowledge and evidence in the field of sustainable urban development.

Voices in the debate on an Urban Agenda for the EU

European Commission

Following calls to give cities a greater say in policymaking, the Commission adopted a communication in 2014 on the urban dimension of EU policies, which launched a public consultation on an urban agenda. Its results revealed a general feeling that there was no need for new legislation, new funding sources or for the transfer of new competences to the European level but rather for better legislation that reflects urban realities and structured dialogue respecting subsidiarity. In response, the Commission proposed that the Urban Agenda focus on the three priority areas of **smart**, **green** and **inclusive** cities,

ensure the effective application of better regulation tools such as territorial impact assessments, improve the coherence and coordination of EU policies with an impact on cities and improve urban intelligence, benchmarking and monitoring by carrying out new urban research and harmonising urban data sources.

European Parliament

The European Parliament (EP) made an important contribution to the debate in 2011 with a resolution calling for a stronger urban dimension in EU policies and the development of a joint working programme or EU urban agenda. The EP strengthened the urban dimension further by successfully negotiating the delegation of powers to urban authorities under Article 7 of the ERDF Regulation during the trilogue discussions on the 2014-2020 cohesion policy package. It has also been heavily involved in the discussions on the Urban Agenda and adopted an own-initiative resolution (rapporteur Kerstin Westphal, S&D, Germany) on this topic on 9 September 2015. The resolution stresses that the Urban Agenda should involve the local level more closely at all stages of the policy cycle, based on a new multi-level governance method. It calls for an early-warning mechanism to allow local authorities to check compliance with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles, and argues that the Urban Agenda should strive to gain the best leverage from invested funds by creating synergies between EU programmes, and national and private-sector funding. The EP also calls for territorial impact assessments to ensure the feasibility of relevant EU policy initiatives at local level as well as the appointment of a special EU urban coordinator to monitor the coordination of policies with an urban dimension and the creation of a one-stop shop on urban policies, with the latter demand reflected in the final text of the Pact of Amsterdam. It highlights the need for more detailed urban data, and regular urban policy summits, drawing on the 'Cities of Tomorrow' forum, noting that the Urban Agenda should be in line with the EU's overall objectives, particularly the EU 2020 strategy, and be part of the Commission's annual work programme. A long-time advocate of an Urban Agenda, the Parliament's URBAN Intergroup was also closely involved in the discussions.

Committee of the Regions

As a body representing the interests of local and regional authorities at EU level, the Committee has played an active role in the debate on the Urban Agenda. Its July 2014 own-initiative opinion, 'Towards an integrated urban agenda for the EU', called on the Commission to present a white paper for an integrated urban agenda, which would seek to eliminate existing inconsistencies and overlaps and identify which elements of EU funding programmes have the potential to support urban development. The opinion argued that the white paper should lead to the urban dimension being anchored in the EU decision-making process (a concept referred to as '**urban mainstreaming**') rather than formulate a specific EU strategy. It noted the need for a new model of governance to ensure the closer and earlier involvement of towns and cities at all stages of the policy cycle. Its 2016 opinion notes that the aim of the Urban Agenda is to improve the quality of life in towns and cities and to develop new forms of urban governance, stressing that EU policies must not encourage competition between urban and rural dimensions. It urges the European Commission to play a strong coordinating role through the appointment of its First Vice-President as coordinator for the Urban Agenda. The opinion calls for a systematic review of ways of improving support for urban areas and recommends use of the European Investment Bank's Advisory Hub to help towns and cities access EIB financing instruments. In particular, the CoR calls for a white paper to evaluate the results of partnerships, including better governance.

The view of city associations

There has been wide support for the idea of an Urban Agenda among many city stakeholders. The **Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)** noted in its 2014 contribution that the EU should optimise the current *acquis* rather than create a new policy, arguing that the Urban Agenda needed to take account of urban and rural linkages and that the Commission should carry out local impact assessments of its policies for new legislation. In its 2015 position paper it argued that the Urban Agenda should facilitate local authorities' action on the ground by treating local governments as key partners, giving cities better access to EU funding and collecting accurate local data, among others. **Energy Cities** believes that the Urban Agenda should not be restricted to specific urban challenges and that cities should be given a greater role in EU policy development and implementation processes, calling for a new form of governance where local authorities voluntarily contribute to EU objectives. Whilst endorsing the 12 priority themes of the Urban Agenda, the April 2016 declaration of the **Mayors of the EU Capital Cities** called on the Commission to include the Urban Agenda for the EU in its annual work programme and reflect the urban dimension more systematically in its impact assessments, urging all parties involved to work quickly to remove the bottlenecks to current urban challenges.

Assessing the urban partnerships

A number of questions have been raised about how the partnerships will operate, a key issue in view of their role in implementing the Urban Agenda. During an event organised by the **European Economic and Social Committee** (EESC), the International Union of Tenants called for clarification on the voting principles to be used when partnerships adopt decisions, criticising the fact that civil society will effectively be represented by only two or three members in the partnerships, while academic Ivan Tovics stressed the need to ensure good geographical representation, with experts selected based on merit, not language skills or reputation, and to improve coordination, noting that improving the situation in one thematic area could have an adverse impact on others. The EESC has suggested that partnerships should have a more balanced representation, with greater involvement on the part of urban residents, emphasising a lack of information on how civil society organisations will be selected.

While many urban partnerships are still in the process of being developed, commentators have already highlighted a number of issues, which provide useful food for thought for the future. An interesting discussion of some of the experiences of the first urban partnership took place during the December 2016 policy lab on urban mobility organised by the European Union Knowledge Network (EUKN) and the Czech Republic's Ministry of Regional Development. Speakers at the meeting stressed that the nature of the work of urban partnerships meant that there was a need for experts not generalists, adding that members of partnerships should be able and willing to contribute both time and resources. Noting that the coordination of a partnership could amount to a full-time job, the meeting recommended that coordinators share experiences and learn from each other, calling also on partnerships to ensure they take account of the views of experts and stakeholders outside the partnership who wish to be active in its work.

A long-term advocate of the urban agenda, as reflected in numerous contributions such as its September 2014 contribution and its 2015 paper on the issue, **Eurocities** has recently questioned the process used to select the members of individual partnerships. In particular, it emphasised that although it had the right to nominate one city per

partnership, decisions regarding the membership of the partnerships were effectively made by the trio of the European Commission, the Netherlands and the presidency, in consultation with the Urban Development Group, which brings together national-level civil servants working in the area of urban affairs and represents the Member States. It pointed to a lack of transparency in the whole process, also noting that there seemed to be little involvement by the coordinators of partnerships. Meanwhile, the time and effort that organisations need to invest in order to be fully involved in the work of partnerships can make it difficult for them take part in their activities, a point raised by the **European Council of Spatial Planners** in its [report](#) on the March 2017 meeting of the Urban Development Group. In terms of the composition of the partnerships, it also argued that despite improvements in vertical coordination, the inclusion of teams of sector experts means that partnerships risked adopting a sector-based approach.

Outlook

After many years of discussion, the Urban Agenda for the EU has at last become reality. With the Pact of Amsterdam signed in May 2016 and the launch of the urban partnerships, a concrete plan is now being implemented to enhance the urban dimension of EU policy. Work has begun in earnest on the urban partnerships and the first four partnerships are expected to present their action plans in October 2017, with a report due to be drafted for the Council by the end of the year examining the progress of the Urban Agenda. Following this report, stakeholders and experts in the area of urban development will have an opportunity to share their ideas on how to move forward with the Urban Agenda at the annual CITIES Forum to be held in Rotterdam on 27 and 28 November 2017. For while Europe is standing on the threshold of a new era in urban policy, the coming months will be critical for the success of this venture. In many ways, the EU's new urban adventure has only just begun.

Main references

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