

Research for REGI Committee – Social Challenges in Cities

Purpose



This study took place in a context where inclusive urban policymaking has become the key to broader societal cohesion and peace in Europe. There is not a sufficiently in-depth understanding, however, of the social challenges that vulnerable groups in cities are facing, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the fiscal pressures on European social security systems. This study provides much-needed insight into existing and new social challenges in European cities and policy responses and governance methods to address these challenges.

Key findings and recommendations

Urban policy responses on poverty and social exclusion

The findings suggest that the most important policy developments for national and city-level actions relate to inclusion, state–city cooperation, and access to services. Participatory methods of policymaking at the local level have become increasingly important and we advocate for it in European cities and at EU level. Yet, regardless of this trend, this study finds that participatory methods are not always conducted comprehensively. Therefore, multi-level governance that involves local stakeholders and authorities in the decision-making process could be practised more consistently and to a greater extent. It is essential to build the capacity of stakeholders to participate – namely, civil-society bodies, communities, public services – to allow them to take a more significant part in the process.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on Social Challenges in Cities. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3H5ewAR>

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Urban policy responses on spatial segregation and inequality

Poverty and social exclusion have a spatial dimension that is manifested differently across the Member States and regions, mainly resulting in spatial segregation. This is especially relevant to deprived neighbourhoods in the cities studied where it promotes stigmatisation and halts positive development, leading to greater segregation and social exclusion of vulnerable groups. Actions supporting vulnerable areas usually stem from urban renewal and regeneration programmes for deprived neighbourhoods that use integrated, place-based or partnerships approaches. They tackle both economic and social challenges, and encompass spatial segregation and territorial solutions that include improving the urban environment. However, there is a risk that such initiatives will lead to gentrification, which further pushes out vulnerable groups and increases wealth inequality. The findings of this study suggest that the most important policy developments for national and city-level actions relate to spatial segregation, gentrification, lack of quality data and environmental deprivation problems.

Urban resilience to COVID-19 and other external shocks

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated spatial and social disparities. The study findings show that marginalised groups have become even more vulnerable during the pandemic, due to the poor economic, social, institutional, physical and natural resilience of the cities in which they live. Poverty and social exclusion were also aggravated, resulting in problems in relation to housing, employment, education and health. In response to these challenges, the EU has provided additional funding to Member States that will be used to solve the direct consequences of the pandemic and to bring about structural change in specific policy areas. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to put in place a policy response and adequate preparedness for urban areas with regard to global threats such as COVID-19. The findings of this study suggest that the most important policy developments at national and city level for increased resilience to external shocks relate to ICT access, knowledge sharing, and strengthening the natural urban systems.

Collaboration at the strategic EU level

To address multidimensional social challenges in cities requires the development of a strategic framework that confront sectoral approaches to urban policy and planning. From the perspective of European cohesion policy, the key challenge is how to better support local governments in drafting strategic action plans and mainstreaming innovative local approaches. It is vital that urban stakeholders engage with the managing authorities (MA) in collective planning processes and the tailoring of funding objectives to local needs. However, our research revealed that few municipalities are active at decision-making level, and are instead most active at the level of implementation. The analysis of this study confirms that domestic politics, institutional arrangements and path dependencies mediate the impact of the partnership principle on power dispersion and spatial rescaling. Many cities encounter bottlenecks when collaborating with MAs. There is little interplay between 'bottom-up' local knowledge and 'top-down' operational and analytical expertise. MAs rarely ensure coordination and policy learning opportunities. Strategic vision is further hindered by mismatches between the funding allocated and local needs, as well as by restrictions on eligible activities and beneficiaries, and unclear monitoring rules. Lastly, few localities have the political weight and administrative capacity to align their action plans with wider European strategies.

Allocation of EU funds

A common European 'Aquis Urbain' (EC, 2009) refers to a method combining area-based, integrated, and participative approaches, including local partnerships. It seeks to concentrate cross-sectoral actions and funding into selected target areas. This approach became mainstream during the 2007-2013 period. Neighbourhood regeneration remained prominent in the 2014-2020 programming and is maintained for the upcoming period (2021-2027). Broad EU objectives embedded in Member States' operational programmes serve as a blueprint for the allocation of funding. Despite these clear aims, our research reveals that funding does not always reach the most vulnerable groups and neighbourhoods. Widespread discrimination against ethnic and racial minorities, as well as xenophobic sentiments, continue to divert funding away from 'unpopular' groups. This issue is compounded by a lack of meaningful participation by excluded and marginalised groups in decision-making processes, and their lack of organisational and administrative capacity to effectively compete for funding or to implement sustainable projects. Serious bottlenecks exist in fighting discrimination, especially with regard to residential and educational segregation and the prevention of forced evictions. Ensuring sustainable local commitment and implementation is yet to be addressed.

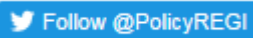
Cohesion policy implementation capacity

Wide variations exist in the implementation of cohesion policy in individual Member States, depending on the relationships between the national and regional levels. Such variations are associated with the placement of territorial programmes within the overall cohesion policy management structure. Absorption rates, in turn, vary in relation to the type of intervention concerned. The highest absorption rates are usually observed in the category of 'basic infrastructure'. This study reveals that stakeholders struggle to use integrated territorial investment and grassroots initiatives to access funding due to complex regulations, stiff competition within calls for tenders, and rigorous eligibility requirements. Although the new cohesion policy is considered simpler and more flexible than its predecessor in the 2014-2020 programming period, the fact that it merges more funds into one common regulation without outlining further specifications for accessing each fund means that the system remains complex. In turn, a lack of synergies, as well as instabilities in co-financing, affect the sustainability of individual projects, which often only last between three and five years. It is clear from our research that there is both a need and a desire to mainstream projects that are financed with EU grants, especially those projects that deal with social challenges.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/3H5ewAR>

More information on Policy Department research for REGI: <https://research4committees.blog/regi/>



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