Implementing 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 policy-making. 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 the pact providing for the creation of urban partnerships focusing on key urban themes, all partnerships are now in operation. A total of 12 partnerships have now drawn up action plans, allowing the partners involved to contribute to the design of future, or the revision of current, EU legislation. As many of these plans are currently at the implementation stage, this is leading to a series of concrete deliverables, helping to ensure that the Urban Agenda for the EU is making a real difference on the ground. Developments such as better coordination at the Commission on urban issues have further consolidated the Urban Agenda, yet challenges remain. In this context, the Commission’s proposals for the cohesion framework post-2020, which include creating a European urban initiative to support the Urban Agenda, the imminent Commission assessment of Urban Agenda implementation and the planned renewal of the Leipzig Charter in 2020, all have the potential to strengthen the Urban Agenda. Successfully implementing the Urban Agenda, however, will ultimately depend on the partnerships’ ability to deliver actions and on the extent to which they are taken up by the Commission, a process requiring full commitment from all partners involved.

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This is a further update of an earlier briefing originally published in 2016 and updated in 2017 and 2018.
Introduction

Towns and cities are a core part of the fabric of Europe's landscape and many of the policy challenges facing Europe, such as social exclusion, environmental deterioration and migration have a disproportionate impact on urban areas. 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 coordinating 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 is the purpose of the EU's Urban Agenda.

The origins of the Urban Agenda

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 and the 2011 Territorial Agenda. After decades of debate, 2015 marked a turning point for the Urban Agenda. Discussions were taken forward by the Latvian Presidency, with the June 2015 Riga Declaration of ministers for territorial cohesion and urban matters providing key political support, while the Urban Agenda finally became a reality with the signing of the Pact of Amsterdam under the Dutch Council Presidency in 2016.

Cohesion policy developments 2014-2020

The 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 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Regulation, which provides that at least 5% of ERDF 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 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' (DGUM), which brings together national civil servants (directors-general) with responsibility for urban affairs and representatives of the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), and
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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 and key themes, setting out 11 concrete actions: the first action covers urban partnerships, with the other 10 focusing on improving the urban dimension of EU policies via vertical or horizontal coordination, impact assessments and knowledge.

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 themes (see below), 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, under the guidance of a coordinator, a city and/or Member State. Lasting three years, each partnership prepares and implements an action plan, which identifies bottlenecks and makes 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 that partnerships should consider when organising their work, such as good urban governance, sound urban planning or use of integrated approaches.

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<th>14 themes of the Urban Agenda for the EU</th>
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<td>Jobs and skills in the local economy</td>
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Partnerships in practice

November 2015 saw the launch of the first four pilot partnerships. The partnership on housing, coordinated by Slovakia, examines the provision of good quality affordable housing and housing policy, while the urban poverty partnership, jointly coordinated by Belgium and France, tackles poverty and promotes the inclusion of people at risk of poverty in deprived neighbourhoods. Coordinated by the Netherlands, the air quality partnership considers policies and systems to ensure good air quality, targeting various sources of pollution, while the inclusion of migrants and refugees partnership, coordinated by Amsterdam, establishes a framework to manage the integration of non-EU migrants and refugees in the areas of housing, public services and employment. Four more partnerships were launched in February and March 2017. Coordinated by Estonia and the cities of Oulu and Sofia, the digital transition partnership aims to provide citizens with better public services and to create business opportunities, while the circular economy partnership, coordinated by Oslo, seeks to encourage the reutilisation, repair and recycling of materials and goods to stimulate growth.
and jobs. The urban mobility partnership, coordinated by Czechia and Karlsruhe, aims to ensure better conditions for urban mobility for EU cities, focusing on themes such as active modes of transport, smart mobility or multi-modality, while the partnership on jobs and skills in the local economy, coordinated by Romania, the Latvian city of Jelgava and Rotterdam, will identify how cities can foster quality and inclusive employment, considering issues such as the ‘next economy’, jobs and skills, public services, business location, and effective local governance.

A further four partnerships were agreed at the 4 April 2017 DGUM. Coordinated by Genoa, the climate adaptation partnership aims to improve cities’ capacity to address and adjust to the impact of climate change by making proposals for better regulation, funding and knowledge, while the partnership on sustainable use of land and nature-based solutions, coordinated by Poland and Bologna, aims to examine suburbanisation and the role of nature-based solutions in development and outline measures for sustainable land use. Coordinated by London, Gdansk and Roeselare, the energy transition partnership aims to establish a smart, integrated energy system that is secure and resilient, affordable, fair and equitable, while the public procurement partnership coordinated by Haarlem, aims to develop and implement a procurement strategy as an integrated and supporting management tool for governance. The creation of the latest two urban partnerships was announced in 2018, covering the topics of security in public spaces, and culture and cultural heritage. Coordinated by the city of Nice and the European Forum for Urban Security, the partnership on security in public spaces will address the issue of threats to public security by focusing on urban planning and design to create safer cities, technologies for smart and safe cities and managing security and sharing public space, while the partnership on culture and cultural heritage, coordinated by Germany and Italy, will discuss cultural heritage as a resource for urban development covering such issues as adaptive reuse and urban reconversion and the resilience of cultural and natural heritage.

Implementing action plans

A total of 12 action plans have been finalised to date, one for each of the themes set out in the Pact of Amsterdam, while work has also begun on the drafting of action plans in the two remaining partnerships. As outlined in the pact, each action plan puts forward a series of measures to identify concrete solutions in the given thematic area by focusing on the three areas of better regulation, better funding and better knowledge. The implementation of actions is well under way in most urban partnerships, and the Urban Agenda website now includes a table of actions that is regularly updated to make it easy to monitor progress, providing detailed information on each action including the starting date of implementation, partners involved, outputs delivered and implementation status.

Examples of actions finalised under the Urban Agenda

Identification of gaps in regulation and implementation of air pollutant emission sources, an action under the air quality partnership action plan, seeks to contribute to better regulation by modifying existing EU legislation. Outputs delivered include a joint position paper to the open public consultation for the fitness check on the Ambient Air Quality Directives and various outreach events. An action under the Housing partnership’s action plan, Guidance on EU regulation and public support for housing, aims to provide clear guidance for the use of state aid support for social and affordable housing in European cities, with delivered output taking the form of an analytical position paper. Improving access to cities for EU integration funding, a measure outlined in the action plan of the partnership on the inclusion of migrants and refugees, involves drafting proposals to reduce regulatory barriers for local authorities and to promote tools for better access to EU integration funding. Output delivered included adopting and sending a funding a paper to relevant EU institutions.

According to the table, as at September 2019, of the 114 actions proposed under the partnerships’ action plans, 11 had been fully finalised, 30 actions were at the planning or inception stage, with the remainder in the process of being implemented or on hold (13 actions). The action implementation status of the individual actions largely reflects the timeline for the creation of the partnerships, with all finalised actions relating to the first four urban partnerships. The air quality urban partnership is the only partnership to date that has completed all the actions set out in its action plan.
Additional resources for the Urban Agenda

A number of web-based and administrative resources have been developed to further support the roll-out 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. The permanent secretariat, set up in January 2017, launched a website for the Urban Agenda for the EU, which is the primary source of information about the agenda and its partnerships.

Urban innovative actions

Urban innovative actions (UIAs) are an EU initiative, introduced under Article 8 ERDF, that provide resources for urban areas to test new responses to urban challenges. They link to the ERDF’s thematic objectives and support the Urban Agenda. The Pact of Amsterdam states that UIAs should be aligned with the Urban Agenda themes, and mentions them as a source of funding for actions set out in partnerships’ action plans. UIAs provide urban authorities with a low-risk means of piloting solutions in sustainable urban development, which can then be rolled out across the EU. Following calls for proposals, UIA projects are chosen on the basis of the following criteria: degree of innovation, quality, level of partnership and measurability of results, as well as the transferability of a project to other EU areas. The first two calls for proposals, launched in December 2015 and October 2017, allocated funding of €80 million and €60 million, with an indicative budget of €80 to €100 million for the third call closing in March 2018. A fourth call held in October 2018, with funding of €80 to €100 million, covered the new urban security topic and digital transition among other areas.

The UN’s New Urban Agenda

The UN’s New Urban Agenda provided a framework setting out how global cities should be planned and managed so as to promote sustainable urbanisation and become more inclusive, environmentally sustainable and prosperous. Adopted unanimously by 167 countries at the UN Habitat III Conference in Quito in October 2016, it built on the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which had the previous year identified 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and highlighted the role of cities as drivers for future sustainable growth. A key objective of the Habitat III conference was to reach consensus on a global roadmap for SDG 11, which calls on countries to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Links with the Urban Agenda for the EU

The Urban Agenda for the EU is the principal mechanism through which the UN’s New Urban Agenda is being implemented across the European Union. The Pact of Amsterdam established a direct link with both the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda, stipulating that the Urban Agenda for the EU would contribute to the implementation of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably SDG 11, as part of the Habitat III process. Against this background, the EU outlined a specific commitment to implement the New Urban Agenda through the Urban Agenda for the EU. This commitment was 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.

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 using a place-based approach, with the main themes of the Urban Agenda for the EU broadly reflecting the social, economic and environmental dimensions of the New Urban Agenda. As highlighted by the European Union Knowledge Network's
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 underpinned by equal partnerships between all players involved.

Voices in the debate on an Urban Agenda for the EU

European Parliament

The European Parliament 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. Parliament 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 was also 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 stressed 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 called for an early-warning mechanism to allow local authorities to check compliance with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles, and argued 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. Parliament also called 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 highlighted 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, Parliament’s Urban Intergroup was also closely involved in the discussions. In July 2018, Parliament adopted an own-initiative resolution on the role of cities in the institutional framework of the Union (rapporteur: Kazimierz Michał Ujazdowski, ECR, Poland). It calls for the Urban Agenda to be coordinated, reinforced and formalised, highlighting also that the Urban Agenda should not remain a voluntary process. In particular, it urges the urban partnerships to adopt their recommendations and action plans quickly and calls on the Commission to demonstrate how concrete proposals are taken into account, particularly in relation to better regulation, funding and knowledge, and to include them in future legislative proposals, where possible.

Advisory bodies and stakeholders

Representing the interests of local and regional authorities at EU level, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) 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, with a view 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 noted that the aim of the Urban Agenda was 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 urged 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 called for a systematic review of ways of improving support for urban areas and recommended use of the European Investment Bank’s Advisory Hub to help towns and cities access EIB financing instruments. The CoR also called for a white paper to evaluate the results of partnerships, including better governance.
More recently, at its July 2018 plenary session, the CoR adopted an opinion on the implementation assessment of the Urban Agenda for the EU. It noted the core point that the Urban Agenda for the EU sought 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. The CoR supported the Urban Agenda's approach and its multi-level governance working method across the broad policy priority themes identified in the Pact of Amsterdam, and emphasised the need to rethink approaches to the design of existing rules and regulations, enhancing the user-friendliness of the range of urban-focused funding resources available, and to improve knowledge exchange and cooperation on urban issues among different stakeholders. Highlighting 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, the CoR insisted on the need for much closer coordination between the action plans as their activities could have significant impacts on each other. Noting that the main concerns raised thus far related to a lack of resources, particularly to cover the costs of participation of the cities that are members of the partnerships, the CoR called for consideration to be given to setting up a financial mechanism for smaller cities in order to support cooperation initiatives under the Urban Agenda.

The Urban Agenda has broad support among many local stakeholders. The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) noted in its 2015 position paper 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, for instance. While 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 Agenda

Published in June 2019, the Commission report on 'The state of play of the Urban Agenda for the EU – Multilevel governance in action' provides a detailed overview of the main developments of the Urban Agenda since its launch. According to the report, of the 114 actions that are to be implemented by the urban partnerships, almost two thirds aim to deliver either policy recommendations, guidance documents and handbooks or urban data and indicators, which suggests that these actions have the potential to provide real solutions that can be of everyday use to practitioners on the ground. Looking more closely at which levels of government are actually being targeted by these actions, the report identifies the EU level as the main focus for actions in the field of better regulation and, to a lesser extent, better funding, while actions in the area of better knowledge focus primarily on the local level. A somewhat different picture emerges, meanwhile, when it comes to which institutions are leading the actions of the individual partnerships, with the local level emerging as the dominant action leader across all three pillars.

The report also summarises some of the main achievements of the Urban Agenda. According to the document, not only does the Urban Agenda represent a new model of governance, which aims to ensure the involvement of all levels of government and stakeholders more closely in the various policy cycles, it has also helped put urban issues on the EU agenda, by helping EU policy-makers understand the key role of cities, and given cities a stronger position at national and EU level by giving them more scope to get involved and have their voices heard in national and EU policymaking. This process has arguably also helped further strengthen the urban dimension of cohesion policy, as reflected in the Commission proposal to increase urban earmarking to 6% and establish a new European urban initiative. It has also enhanced national and regional urban policymaking, with the Urban Agenda inspiring a number of countries and regions to introduce or boost their urban policy based on the model of the Urban Agenda. Furthermore, the Urban Agenda has also helped bring Europe closer to the citizens, a valuable exercise at a time of growing populism across the EU.
Released a few days ahead of the biennial CITIES forum in Rotterdam in November 2017, the European Commission’s report to the Council noted that the Urban Agenda had achieved concrete results during its first year, with 12 urban partnerships in operation and a governance system in place. It considered that the working method based on multi-stakeholder involvement functioned well and could be rolled out in other policy areas, highlighting also the balanced nature of the cities in the partnerships as regards size and geographical location. The report argued that coordination on urban issues within the Commission had improved, noting that the Urban Agenda was fully embedded in work across the Commission and referred to in a number of key policy documents. It also pointed out that many cities had shown that they were able to make a meaningful contribution to EU policy-making. It emphasised the international dimension of the Urban Agenda, noting its role in delivering the New Urban Agenda in Europe and acting as a model for the Union for the Mediterranean Urban Agenda, an action-oriented roadmap designed to promote urban sustainability and resilience among the 43 Member States of the Union for the Mediterranean, and stressed the increasing role of cities in global initiatives such as on sustainable development. The Commission remained committed to promoting the Urban Agenda, convinced that cities were important actors that must be involved in the design and implementation of EU policies. The importance of the Urban Agenda was also recognised in the 2017 seventh cohesion report, which noted that the urban agenda should lead to more effective funding, better adapted to city needs.

The positive impact of the Urban Agenda on the urban dimension of EU policies was also emphasised in a July 2017 report by the European Urban Knowledge Network, which noted that the Urban Agenda was a key tool for improving multi-level cooperation between stakeholders on urban policy, enhancing coordination on urban matters between and with EU institutions. The report also highlighted the successful roll-out of the urban partnerships, involving the development of a multi-level working method welcomed by all partners, which had enabled direct communication between cities and the EU institutions and had the potential to strengthen the role of cities in EU policymaking. Nonetheless, it identified a number of concerns relating to the establishment of the partnerships, including a lack of balance in the size of the cities involved, the low level of Member State participation in the four partnerships created under the Maltese Presidency in 2017 and the absence of universities, businesses or ESIF managing authorities in the partnerships, and pinpointed several obstacles to multi-level cooperation. These included the lack of financial and human resources facing most coordinators and partners, with at times low levels of expertise, as well as an overly ambitious work schedule, all of which highlighted the importance of the support provided by the Commission and the technical secretariat. In addition, the report emphasised a lack of links between the Urban Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, especially at the level of the urban partnerships, and concluded with a number of recommendations, such as the need to provide more resources, improve the balance in partnership composition, boost partner involvement and make the partnership selection process more transparent. While emphasising that the Urban Agenda is a golden opportunity for the EU to harness cities’ potential, a 2018 report by Suzanne Potjer, Maarten Hajer and Peter Pelzer from Utrecht University argues that this will depend on what the Urban Agenda achieves in practice. The report considers that as the Urban Agenda has few provisions to guarantee outcomes it needs to deliver real results at an early stage if it is to secure its future. It also notes that achieving concrete results is a significant challenge for the partnerships, which are trying to strike a balance between practical measures and actions that address key multi-level issues.

Noting that the Urban Agenda represents a milestone for cities and for Europe, Eurocities’ November 2018 statement considers that the Urban Agenda delivers added value through a multilevel governance approach based on partnership, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation across the EU. In particular, it identifies the partnerships as one of the Urban Agenda’s most effective tools, providing a framework for the joint creation of solutions involving multiple stakeholders, and emphasises the positive role of urban impact assessments and urban innovative actions. Challenges remain, however, with Eurocities highlighting the need to strengthen the impact and credibility of the Urban Agenda, pointing to a lack of engagement on the part of the European Commission and the Member States in the work of the partnerships. More specifically,
Eurocities recommends establishing closer links with the REFIT platform to strengthen the outcomes of actions in the field of Better Regulation, increasing the resources for implementing actions to support the work of the partnerships, by directing resources at partners actively implementing actions, and increasing efforts to collect better urban data for an improved knowledge base. It also calls for the appointment of a European Commission vice-president responsible for urban affairs, the creation of a high-level group on the Urban Agenda made up of high-level representatives from the Commission, cities and Member States to provide strategic direction, and the organisation of one informal Council meeting on the Urban Agenda during each trio presidency. In addition, it proposes that the secretariat general be given the role of coordinating the Commission’s commitment to the Urban Agenda.

The urban agenda for the EU beyond 2020

On 29 May 2018, the Commission published its long-awaited legislative proposals for the cohesion policy framework for the 2021-2027 period. Comprising four proposals for new regulations – a common provisions regulation, a joint ERDF-Cohesion Fund (CF) regulation, a regulation on provisions for territorial cooperation, and a regulation for a new cross-border mechanism – the proposed package seeks to establish a simpler and more flexible framework for cohesion policy that will continue to cover all EU regions whilst also aligning cohesion policy more closely with the European semester and EU economic governance.

As part of a process of simplification, the 11 thematic objectives of the previous period have been reduced to five policy objectives: a smarter Europe; a greener, low carbon Europe; a more connected Europe; a more social Europe and, lastly, a Europe closer to citizens, which will foster the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas through local initiatives. The proposed new framework places a greater focus on sustainable urban development, with the proposal for a regulation on the ERDF and CF including a provision requiring Member States to earmark 6% of their ERDF resources for investments in sustainable urban development, up from the 5% allocation applicable in the 2014-2020 period, to be implemented through territorial instruments. In addition, all urban tools are to be combined in a single programme, the European urban initiative, which will be implemented by the Commission in direct and indirect management, with a total of €500 million to be allocated to this new initiative. According to Article 10 of the proposed regulation on the ERDF and CF, this new initiative will cover all urban areas and support the Urban Agenda, covering the following three strands of sustainable urban development: support for capacity-building, support for innovative actions and support for knowledge, policy development and communication. This new emphasis on urban issues has been recognised by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, with the package’s broader focus on sustainable urban development welcomed by the CEMR, which approves of the increase to 6% in the amount earmarked to this area. It also welcomes the fact that all urban areas will be covered, which will make it possible for small and medium-sized cities to apply for funding.

Endorsed at the informal meeting of EU ministers responsible for urban matters, the 14 June 2019 Declaration of Ministers in Bucharest has helped reaffirm the Member States’ commitment to the Urban Agenda. On a general level, it considers that the Urban Agenda has brought about vertical and horizontal cooperation among Member States, EU institutions and stakeholders by bringing cities and their representative organisations to the same table and emphasises that the three pillars of better regulation, better funding and better knowledge have proven to be the right approach. More specifically, it acknowledges the efforts invested by all partnership members in proposing concrete actions to improve regulations, funding and knowledge and recognises the need to put a stronger emphasis on improving the urban dimension of EU legislation by strengthening the link between the better regulation agenda and the work of the partnerships, highlighting also the need to involve larger numbers of cities beyond those directly involved in the partnerships. In addition, the ministers agree to support the implementation and continuation of the Urban Agenda in line with the guiding principles of the new Leipzig Charter in order to guarantee a coherent policy
framework for urban development at EU level, improve the Urban Agenda and ensure coordination between different initiatives by closer alignment of the EU’s territorial and urban agendas.

Outlook

After many years of discussion, the Urban Agenda for the EU has at last become a reality. Following the signing of the Pact of Amsterdam and the successful launch of all urban partnerships, 12 of the partnerships have now completed their action plans and work has begun in earnest on implementing actions within the framework of those documents. Yet despite these positive developments, challenges still remain, not least in terms of a certain imbalance in the composition of the urban partnerships and a general lack of both human and financial resources. The Commission’s proposals for the cohesion framework beyond 2020, which include a European urban initiative to support the Urban Agenda, could help address some of these issues.

While the Bucharest Declaration has helped reassert Member State support for the Urban Agenda, a number of events in the coming months look set to ensure the Urban Agenda remains in the spotlight. A long-awaited Commission assessment of Urban Agenda implementation is expected to be ready for the January 2020 CITIES Forum, an event that will provide an ideal opportunity for urban partnerships to take stock of progress thus far, while these discussions can, in turn, help feed into the debate on the renewed Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities, which is to be presented during the second half of 2020 under the German Presidency. The importance of these exchanges of ideas cannot be underestimated. Implementing the Urban Agenda successfully will depend not only on the partnerships’ ability to deliver actions but above all on the extent to which those actions are taken up by the Commission, a process requiring commitment and dialogue among all partners.

MAIN REFERENCES

Pact of Amsterdam establishing the Urban Agenda for the EU, 30 May 2016.

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