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Urban Agenda: Assessment from the European Parliament's Perspective



Regional Development



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Urban Agenda: Assessment from the European Parliament's Perspective

Abstract

The 2016 Pact of Amsterdam launched the Urban Agenda for the European Union. Within its framework, partnerships of urban authorities, Member States and other stakeholders have developed action plans to achieve better funding, better knowledge and better regulation for the priority theme of their partnership. This study provides an overview and critical assessment of the current state of play including the position of the European Parliament. Two partnerships, (1) Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based Solutions and (2) Housing, are studied in more detail.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AESOP	Association of European Schools of Planning
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CF	Cohesion Fund
CoR	Committee of the Regions
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DG	Directorate-General
DG ENV	Directorate-General for the Environment
DG JRC	Joint Research Centre
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
DG RTD	Directorate-General for Research & Innovation
DGUM	Directors-General Meeting on Urban Matters
DIPC	Development and Investment Partnership Contract
EC	European Commission
EEA	European Environment Agency
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
EIB	European Investment Bank
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EP	European Parliament
ERHIN	European Responsible Housing Initiative
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESPON	European Spatial Planning Observatory Network
EU	European Union
EUI	European Urban Initiative

EUKN	European Urban Knowledge Network
FEMM	European Parliament Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee
FUA	Functional Urban Area
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HFP	Housing (Policy) Focal Points
HLTF	High-Level Task Force
ICLEI	Local Governments for Sustainability (acronym based on its name when founded)
IFI	International Fund for Ireland
IMEUMRUM	Informal Meeting of EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters
INCASÒL	Catalan Land Institute (in its Catalan acronym)
ISOCARP	International Society of City and Regional Planners
ITRE	European Parliament Industry, Research and Energy Committee
LEADER	Acronym of ‘Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale’: Connecting the rural economy’s development actions
NBS	Nature-based solutions
REGI	European Parliament Regional Development Committee
SGEI	Services of General Economic Interest
SIA	Strategic impact assessment
SLU	Sustainable land use
SUL	Sustainable use of land (alternative name for SLU)
UAEU	Urban Agenda for the European Union
UN	United Nations
URBACT	Urban Action Europe

LIST OF COUNTRY ABBREVIATIONS

AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
CY	Cyprus
DE	Germany
ES	Spain
FR	France
HR	Croatia
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
NO	Norway
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
SI	Slovenia
UK	United Kingdom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Urban Agenda for the European Union

The Urban Agenda for the European Union (UAEU) is an informal, multi-level cooperation partnership programme in which urban authorities, Member States, the European Commission, EU organisations and other stakeholders (e.g., NGOs or businesses) all voluntarily participate. The Informal Meeting of EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters (IMEUMRUM) agreed to launch the UAEU in the [2016 Pact of Amsterdam](#). In contrast to earlier initiatives, the UAEU provides a multi-level, multi-stakeholder and structured governance approach to handling urban complexities in a balanced, sustainable and integrated way. The UAEU aims to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of the EU 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth by strengthening the urban dimension and organizing the relevant participants in a structured way.

The UAEU lists twelve priority themes that have each been explored by one partnership. Parties with adequate experience and expertise could become a member of a partnership which should comprise 15-20 partners. Partnerships work according to a bottom-up approach. Each partnership has produced an action plan based on a common process of cooperation. In these actions plans, partnerships have defined actions necessary to achieve better regulation, better funding and better knowledge for the respective priority theme. Some of the partnerships have included recommendations for the improvement of future policies, governance and practices in their action plans. In addition, all partnerships have had to consider the relevance of eleven cross-cutting issues (i.e., effective urban governance and citizen participation) for the selected priority themes.

Aim of the study

This study aims to evaluate the UAEU. It provides a brief summary of the process leading towards the UAEU, its implementation, the lessons learned and challenges encountered. It also assesses the roles played by organisations of different levels of government, in particular the European Parliament (EP) as well as towns and cities. Moreover, it assesses the operation of two of the partnerships, the Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions Partnership and the Housing Partnership. Finally, it signals areas for improvement for the future development of the Urban Agenda and the European Parliament's involvement in the process.

General conclusions

Even though EU policies have an impact on urban areas, the EU does not have a specific urban competence. An urban agenda for the EU has been discussed at least since 1997. The UAEU aims to overcome the shortcomings of previous attempts by creating a framework of partnerships with clear rules for participation, working methods and expected outcomes.

The EP has supported the establishment of an urban agenda. The "urban" agenda is not opposed to rural areas, but it is opposed to national or central EU approaches, which may separate "Europe" from local contexts.

The EP aims to use the Urban Agenda to build bottom-up EU policies using the experience of urban authorities and other participants involved in urban policies. This multi-level governance approach acknowledges that all types of urban areas, including towns and cities outside national and regional capital regions, play an important role in achieving the EU 2020 objectives.

Reviews by the European Commission and by scholars are positive about the approach of the UAEU and the direct involvement of towns and cities.

Not all partnerships address all cross-cutting issues as defined in the Pact of Amsterdam. The purpose of addressing these issues is to integrate policies, to avoid contradictions and to make the Urban Agenda more effective. Partnerships address fewer of the cross-cutting issues that are relevant for small and medium-sized towns than other issues, such as, urban regeneration or effective urban governance.

Partnerships

The UAEU has operated in the form of partnerships that address priority themes. The partnerships have developed action plans with proposals for better regulation, funding and knowledge.

The Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions Partnership (SUL-NBS) has two main aims. Firstly, it aims to promote the liveable compact city model. This model ensures efficient land-use and avoids overcrowding as well as urban sprawl. It does so by providing urban public and green spaces, affordable housing and good living conditions. Secondly, the partnership aims to promote nature-based solutions which address societal challenges by solutions inspired and supported by nature. The SUL-NBS action plan focuses on better knowledge, such as on rural land take for urban uses, and rising awareness about the benefits of the liveable compact city model and nature-based solutions. Specific proposals for better funding and better regulation play a smaller role. A specific action calls for the amendment of the impact assessment directive so that it requires a report on differences in land take between the alternatives studied. Further action is required to go beyond simply raising awareness.

The Housing Partnership aims to contribute to better policies and frameworks improving access to adequate and affordable housing by promoting the increase of housing supply. By analysing the bottlenecks that hamper the realization of affordable housing, the partnership played a core role in acknowledging the importance of housing policy at the EU level. Based on ten policy themes, the partnership developed twelve actions aiming at better regulation, knowledge/governance and funding, as well as a number of recommendations for better policies, governance and practices in the longer term. These recommendations aim to strengthen the role of cities in tackling the unaffordability of housing, not only on a local and national level, but also at EU level.

Recommendations

- As the current set of partnerships does not exhaust the priority themes of the Urban Agenda, additional partnerships offer new chances to propose new activities to create better shared knowledge, regulation and funding.
- Novel partnership themes arise from the European Parliament's intention to consider urban and rural development as two sides of the same coin rather than two different coins. Focusing on their relations, such as with the topic of urban issues in declining areas, will influence the formulation of those Urban Agenda actions which are improving citizens' well-being beyond urban borders.
- Cross-cutting issues defined in the Pact of Amsterdam that current action plans have not addressed, provide further potential for new partnerships; particularly issues which are relevant for small and medium-sized towns.
- The specific format of partnerships which hold many international meetings in a short period of time favours international organisations, Member States and larger cities. Due to this format,

small- and medium-sized towns are less able to participate which can be seen as detrimental as valuable local experience is not being seized upon according to the current agenda. New partnerships can cater for this issue by enabling small- and medium-sized urban authorities to contribute to action plans without extensive travelling.

- By involving both urban practitioners and specialists in EU policies/regulations, partnerships could connect local practices with EU policy-making. Urban practitioners have insights into the impact of EU policy and on its capacity to address urban issues. Specialists in EU policies are able to work on the way in which the EU can support urban authorities by specific changes in EU directives, regulations and practices. To facilitate this process, adequate funding will be necessary.

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

KEY FINDINGS

This study provides an overview and assessment of the state of affairs of the Urban Agenda for the European Union (UAEU). Specific emphasis is on the role of the European Parliament (EP) and the partnerships of Sustainable land use and nature-based solutions and of Housing.

The establishment of the Urban Agenda for the EU in 2016 signalled a major breakthrough for the involvement of towns and cities in EU policy making and implementation. Alongside national governments and the European Parliament, urban authorities have worked in partnerships on setting the agenda on subjects as housing, sustainable land use, circular economy and urban poverty. The Urban Agenda as governance tool has provided a framework to set the agenda, clear rules for participation, specific working methods and clear expectations on the outcomes.

This study aims to provide useful, authoritative and timely information to members of the REGI Committee on *“Urban Agenda: Assessment from the European Parliament's Perspective”*.¹ The primary purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive overview, as well as a critical assessment of the state of play of the UAEU, focusing on the EP's positions as well as its role in the process. More specifically, the study pursues the following aims:

- to provide a brief summary of the process towards the UAEU and its implementation;
- to assess the roles played by organisations of different levels of government, in particular cities and the EP;
- to summarize the relationship between the UAEU, cohesion policy and broader policy processes;
- to provide a critical assessment of the Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based Solutions Partnership and of the Housing Partnership; and
- to provide recommendations for the future development of the Urban Agenda and the EP's involvement in the process.

The study focuses on the activities of two specific actors:

- the relevant positions and policy actions taken by the European Parliament; and
- the participation of small- and medium-sized towns.

The main conclusions are presented in the Executive Summary above and in more detail in Chapter 6, which also contains the recommendations. The conclusions are based on Chapter 2 on the Urban Agenda, which gives a short overview of the state of play and the role of the EP. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on two examples for partnerships: the Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based Solutions Partnership and the Housing Partnership. Chapter 5 discusses the assessment of the Urban Agenda.

¹ The European Commission (EC) also launched an assessment study. According to its scoping document, this assessment *‘will be broad, covering all aspects of the UAEU’* (European Commission, 2018a, p. 6) rather than focusing on specific interested parties (EP and small and medium-sized towns).

2. THE URBAN AGENDA

KEY FINDINGS

Even though the EU impacts urban areas in different ways, it has been difficult to develop a specific policy focus on urban issues. An urban agenda policy has been discussed since at least 1997. The UAEU aims to overcome the shortcomings of previous attempts by applying an innovative framework of partnerships with clear rules for participation, working methods and expected outcomes.

The EP has supported the establishment of an urban agenda. The idea of an “urban” agenda is not to exclude the “rural”, but to better connect European and local levels. The EP aims to use the Urban Agenda to build EU policies on local know-how “bottom up” in the context of multi-level governance. It also highlights the fact that towns and cities outside the national and regional capitals matter.

The current state of play includes the European Commission’s proposal for a European Urban Initiative, the EP’s first reading of the proposed ERDF regulation in the form of proposed amendments, including rural areas instead of urban areas only, as well as the evaluation of the UAEU and proposals for the future of the 2007 Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities.

2.1. Background of the Urban Agenda

The European Union has a long and established position in rural areas. A large part of the EU’s budget is reserved for its Common Agricultural Policy. However, most of the EU’s population lives in urban areas (EUROSTAT, 2016). Urban issues occur not only in economically disadvantaged regions addressed by EU regional policy, but also in more affluent regions. This is due to spatial inequalities between neighbourhoods, communities, towns and villages within regions. Therefore, inequalities between regions, but also inequalities within regions are issues of economic, social and territorial cohesion. These intra-regional inequalities do not disappear by addressing inter-regional inequalities, as EU regional policy does when addressing the most disadvantaged regions, but may persist or even grow in response to economic development (Artelaris and Petrakos, 2016).

Urban authorities² which address economic, social and territorial cohesion are confronted with EU regulations and directives that impact their policies and activities (Evers and Tennekes, 2016). Localised networks of public and private actors addressing urban issues are, for example, confronted by single market principles of competition. They aim to open up localised markets to enable one single European market throughout the European Economic Area. State aid rules, for example, impact the way affordable housing is provided. Another example are public procurement rules, which put an end to service provision by local providers based on trust by giving room to market providers based on contracts (Korthals Altes and Taşan-Kok, 2010). Apart from rules guiding the single market, directives on issues such as the environment, consumer protection, regulation on data protection, as well as grants and financial instruments to promote development limit the way that urban authorities can formulate their policies to address urban issues of economic, social and territorial cohesion. Evers and Tennekes (2016; see Table 1) indicate that six types of impact occur.

² In the Pact of Amsterdam (IMEUMRUM, 2016) ‘urban authorities’ are defined as the public authorities responsible for the governance of urban areas.

Table 1: Types of EU impact on urban and rural areas

Types of impact	Meaning	Examples
Area-based designations	Areas where spatial restrictions or benefits apply	Seveso, Natura 2000
Intervention required	Interventions must follow if certain quality standards are not met	Air quality, water quality, nitrates
Area-based investment	Particular projects in a particular place receive EU funding	Regional policy, Life+, TEN-T
Sectoral investment	Funds dispersed based on generic eligibility criteria	CAP pillar 1, fisheries, Horizon 2020
Generic rules	Authorities affected by these rules must restructure their ways of working	Public procurement, state aid
Territorial cooperation	Cooperation is actively encouraged or mandated by the EU	Interreg, Floods directive

Source: Evers and Tennekes, 2016.

The six different types of impact on the activities of urban authorities show that a large part of their impacts were not considered by policy-makers drafting EU directives and regulations. After all, the Treaties do not define a specific urban competence for the EU (Atkinson, 2015). On the one hand, urban areas are subject to many European regulations and directives, on the other hand, urban authorities have to cope with issues that are not on the agenda of EU policy-making. This paradox affects the societal legitimacy of the EU whose legitimacy is being endangered for being seen as not taking EU citizens' problems into account in a concerted way, given that EU policies affect those areas in which most EU citizens live. Urban issues were therefore perceived as not playing a central role in the process of drafting EU interventions impacting on urban practices.

There have been many past attempts to include urban issues in a more central way onto the agenda of the European Union (Atkinson, 2015; Purkarthofer, 2019). The European Commission (EC) announced its first intention to agree on an urban agenda in its 1997 communication, *Towards an urban agenda in the European Union* (EC, 1997). This was followed by agreements at informal ministerial meetings³ but resulted in 'insufficient' (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.86) progress. One of the perceived barriers to success is that the EU works usually within the confines of a particular domain (Evers and Tennekes, 2016). After all, EU jurisdiction is drafted for specific domains and the EU applies the subsidiarity principle within the boundaries of these specific domains. There is no specific legal basis for urban policies in the EU Treaties. In this regard, the shared (Member States and EU) competence of economic, social and territorial cohesion requires a more integrated approach, but so far it has been difficult to develop urban cohesion policies⁴. On top of that, previous attempts have been formulated disconnected from the urban practices and were not funded (Purkarthofer, 2019). The need for a different approach was also reflected in a public consultation on the key features of an EU urban agenda (EC, 2015a).

Given this historical development, the agreement of the informal meeting of EU ministers responsible for urban matters (IMEUMRUM, 2016) on the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) – the '*Pact of Amsterdam*' of 30 May 2016 – effected a breakthrough. It was seen as an exciting development, because cities were going to set the EU agenda (Mamadouh, 2018; Potjer et al., 2018; Purkarthofer, 2019). Part of the excitement raised by the Urban Agenda for the European Union can be understood within the context

³ They included the 2005 Bristol Accord, the 2007 Leipzig Charter, the 2008 Marseille Statement, the 2010 Toledo Declaration, the Territorial Agenda 2020 put forward in 2011, and the 2015 Riga Declaration (EC, 2018a; Purkarthofer, 2019, p. 86-87, 92).

⁴ The rural development programmes developed in the CAP can be seen as another instrument to come to more integrated approaches in rural areas.

of the history. Finally, the EU succeeded in formulating the Urban Agenda for the European Union, with a distinct role for urban authorities (Potjer et al., 2018; Purkarthofer, 2019). The UAEU, which is not only a cooperation of urban authorities, but also of other stakeholders, is aimed at developing concerted actions achieving better regulation, better funding and better knowledge. The following section (2.2) provides an introduction to the Pact of Amsterdam and the Urban Agenda. Section 2.3 discusses the role of the European Parliament in relation to the UAEU. Section 2.4 discusses the current state of play.

2.2. The Pact of Amsterdam and the Urban Agenda

To overcome the shortcomings of previous attempts to develop an urban agenda (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.87), the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) builds on partnerships as clearly-structured cooperation frameworks for different stakeholders tackling complex urban challenges in an integrated way (EC, 2018a). The 2016 Pact of Amsterdam laid the foundation for the current practice of the UAEU. It conveys the agreement reached by the informal meeting of EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters (IMEUMRUM, 2016).

The Urban Agenda is an informal, multi-level cooperation of relevant parties. As such it is an instrument *"to realise the full potential of the European Union and deliver on its strategic objectives"* (IMEUMRUM, 2016, p.3). The UAEU works by involving *"Urban Authorities in achieving Better Regulation, Better Funding and Better Knowledge"* (EC, 2019b, p.3). Better regulation includes, apart from generally applicable criteria of good legislation, the need for EU regulations *"to better reflect urban needs, practices and responsibilities"* (IMEUMRUM, 2016, p.5). Better funding means the improvement of *"funding opportunities for Urban Authorities across all EU policies and instruments"* (p.5). Better knowledge is about enhancing the knowledge base and the exchange of best practices to contribute to evidence-based urban-policy-making within a context of diverse of urban governance structures (IMEUMRUM, 2016). The Directors General Meeting on Urban Matters (DGUM), which convenes once per EU presidency (i.e. twice per year), coordinates the UAEU.

Twelve priority themes based on the EU 2020 priorities *"for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth"* were listed in the Pact of Amsterdam. Each priority theme is addressed by one partnership. Parties with experience and expertise on the priority theme, such as urban authorities, Member States, EU organisations and other stakeholders can become member of a partnership, provided they are committed to the work of the partnership. Furthermore, the Pact of Amsterdam states that partnerships should have a balanced composition of about 15 to 20 partners. Twelve UAEU partnerships were constituted at three meetings of DGUM⁵ (EC, 2017, p.4):

- 2016 Amsterdam partnerships: (1) Housing, (2) Inclusion of migrants and refugees, (3) Air quality, and (4) Urban poverty;
- 2016 Bratislava partnerships: (5) Circular economy, (6) Digital transition, (7) Jobs and skills in the local economy, and (8) Urban mobility; and
- 2017 Malta partnerships: (9) Climate adaptation (including green infrastructure solutions), (10) Energy transition, (11) Public procurement, and (12) Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based Solutions.

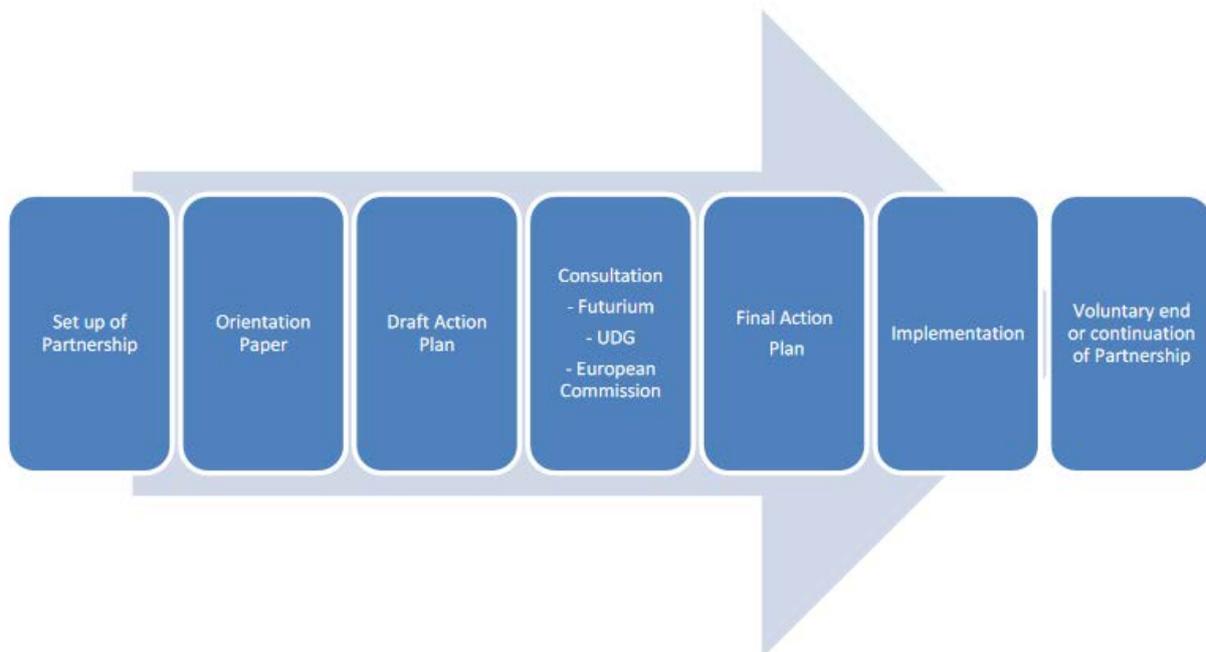
Two other partnerships started in 2019: Security in public spaces (kick off meeting in Paris, in January)⁶; and Culture/cultural heritage (kick off meeting in Berlin, in February)⁷.

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/urban-agenda-eu/what-urban-agenda-eu#Next-Steps>

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/security-public-spaces/about>

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/culturecultural-heritage/about-0>

Figure 1: Main milestones of a partnership according to the European Commission



Source: EC (2018a), p.3.

Each partnership follows a standard procedure (Figure 1) that takes about three years (Purkarthofer, 2019). As the twelve original partnerships have finalised their action plans (UAEU, 2019) and are in the implementation phase working towards 'voluntary end or continuation' (Figure 1), it is an opportune moment to reflect on the achievements and to ask questions as regards the continuation or the establishment of new partnerships.

The 2016 Pact of Amsterdam proposes that all partnerships should acknowledge the relevance of eleven cross-cutting issues for the theme of their partnership (Box 1).

Box 1: Cross-cutting issues of the UAEU

1. *“Effective urban governance, including citizens’ participation and new models of governance.*
2. *Governance across administrative boundaries and inter-municipal cooperation: urban-rural, urban-urban and cross-border cooperation; link with territorial development and the Territorial Agenda 2020 (well-balanced territorial development).*
3. *Sound and strategic urban planning (...), with a place-based and people-based approach.*
4. *Integrated and participatory approach.*
5. *Innovative approaches, including Smart Cities.*
6. *Impact on societal change, including behavioural change, promoting, among other things, equal access to information, gender equality and women empowerment.*
7. *Challenges and opportunities of small- and medium-sized Urban Areas and polycentric development.*
8. *Urban regeneration, including social, economic, environmental, spatial and cultural aspects, also linked to the brownfield redevelopment with the objective of limiting greenfield consumption.*
9. *Adaptation to demographic change and in- and out migration.*
10. *Provision of adequate public services of general interest.*
11. *International dimension: link with the New Urban Agenda (Habitat III) of the UN, the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN and the Paris Agreement on climate change.”*

Source: IMEUMRUM, 2016, p.7-8; italics by authors.

Ten articles in the Pact of Amsterdam address the Commission. In these articles, the public consultation on the Urban Agenda launched by the Commission (EC, 2015a) in July 2014 is welcomed. The Commission is called upon to facilitate the Urban Agenda, to take up the outcomes to strengthen the urban dimension of the EU, especially in relation to better regulation, better funding and better knowledge, and to ensure the continuity of the agenda (IMEUMRUM, 2016).

The specific composition of interested parties in a partnership and the resources that they are willing to commit may influence the partnership's achievements (Purkarthofer, 2019). Input to the UAEU from outsiders to the partnerships has been welcome via Futurium⁸, an interactive website.

Financially, only the first four partnerships (Housing, Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees, Air Quality and Urban Poverty) benefited from an incentive of €50.000 provided by the Netherlands allowing to pay for assistance in 2016. Later, EC- and EP-funds financed an UAEU secretariat⁹. However, the coordinators must cover their own costs (IMEUMRUM, 2016).

Furthermore, the EU has taken urban issues on board outside the context of the UAEU and meetings of ministers responsible for urban matters. The name of the Directorate-General for Regional Policy has been changed to include specifically a reference to urban policy. Before the establishment of the UAEU, the EU has earmarked a minimum of 5% of the European Regional Development Fund [ERDF] for sustainable urban development (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.91; Regulation (EU) 1301/2013, article 7). The EU cohesion policy provided funding for urban matters as enacted in the funding schemes URBAN I (1994-1999), URBAN II (2000-2006) and URBAN+ (2007-2013). Finally, the purpose of the European Territorial Cooperation programme URBACT III for the current funding period 2014-2020 is to provide a platform of "knowledge exchange and networking" (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.91).¹⁰

2.3. The Role of the European Parliament

In the 2016 Pact of Amsterdam, the EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters (IMEUMRUM, 2016, p.14) rendered their thanks to the EP for its active contribution to the Urban Agenda and encouraged further cooperation with the Committee on Regional Development (REGI), the URBAN Intergroup, and all other Committees and Intergroups with "a clear urban dimension" (article 45). The ministers also welcomed the EP's emphasis on better regulation with a view to "strengthening of the urban dimension in EU policy" (article 46) and the EP is invited "...to consider, where appropriate, the results and recommendations of the partnerships (...) when discussing relevant new and existing EU legislation" (article 47).

The European Parliament stressed the importance of an urban agenda in various resolutions. The following sections describe some of the most relevant EP resolutions from 2011 (cohesion policy: Section 2.3.1), 2015 (urban dimensions of EU policies: Section 2.3.2) and 2018 (roles of the cities: Section 2.3.3). In these resolutions, the EP supports the establishment of an urban agenda, and stresses that the Urban Agenda must be defined by stakeholders and authorities in urban regions. "Urban" must not be understood as opposed to rural, but as opposed to a top-down agenda of European institutions and Member States. Furthermore, the EP has formulated four criteria that will be used for the assessment of the UAEU in Section 5.3.

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/urban-agenda>

⁹ The UAEU secretariat is, based on an EC tender to provide "management, expertise and administrative support to the partnerships" (EC, 2016a), held by the firm ECORYS. The technical and thematic expertise to the partnerships includes, amongst other aspects, "providing analysis and advice on issues that are tackled within the process of preparation of the Action Plan and refer to EU legislation, funding and knowledge" (EC, 2016b, p. 15).

¹⁰ It is jointly financed by the EU, largely by the ERDF (https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index.cfm/en/atlas/programmes/2014-2020/Territorial%20co-operation/2014tc16fir003)

2.3.1. European Urban Agenda and its Future in Cohesion Policy

In its resolution of 23 June 2011 on the *European Urban Agenda and its Future in Cohesion Policy* (2010/2158(INI)), the EP addresses issues such as local needs versus European priorities, multi-level governance and the partnership principle, the sub-delegation of responsibilities, integrated strategic planning and comprehensive financial planning. The resolution refers to the *Development and Investment Partnership Contracts* (DIPC) of the Cohesion Policy developed for the 2014-2020 period: Member States must involve “*political leaders of key urban areas and associations of local and regional authorities*” (EP, 2011, paragraph 12) in cohesion policy. The partnership principle may be implemented by repeating similar approaches from the LEADER programme. That is, the use of “*LEADER’ type support groups and action plans*” (paragraph 13). Thus, the way the UAEU has been set-up fits the vision supported by the Parliament through this resolution.

2.3.2. The Urban Dimension of EU Policies

In the EP resolution of 9 September 2015 on the urban dimension of EU policies (2014/2213(INI)), the parliament voices the “*opinion that EU policies should support and enable towns, cities and functional urban areas to express and attain their full potential as motors of economic growth, employment, social inclusion and sustainable development; believes, therefore, that these towns, cities and functional urban areas need to be more closely associated with the entire European policymaking cycle*” (EP, 2015b, paragraph 1). The EP asked the Commission and Member States to introduce “*an early warning mechanism [...] allowing subnational governments to be involved in the policy processes from an early stage and allowing for well-informed territorial development strategies and more efficient implementation of future legislation*” (paragraph 2).

The partnership approach of the UAEU can function as such an early warning system as it is based on the involvement of urban authorities and aims to provide an agenda for better regulation.

Acknowledging the fact that there is no explicit ‘urban’ EU competence, the EP asks for “*a joint effort by the Commission, the Member States, the local authorities and other stakeholders to rationalise, coordinate and implement EU policies with an urban dimension through a practical, integrated and coordinated, yet flexible, approach, ‘in and with’ the towns, cities and functional urban areas, taking account of the local territorial specificities and respecting each Member State’s institutional architecture*” (paragraph 5).

The Parliament urges the Commission to present “*a communication detailing the features of the future European Urban Agenda, based on the ‘urban acquis’ and the extensive consultation with various stakeholders*” (paragraph 7). The Parliament also calls on the Commission “*to apply a more place-based integrated territorial approach*” (paragraph 8) in urban areas.

In several paragraphs, the EP raises points aiming to improve funding for urban areas, implying that the urban dimension should be better taken into account in cohesion policies including by better involving urban authorities in policy processes. This results from confidence in “*a new multi-level governance method*” (paragraph 18) by which “*the local level*” (paragraph 19) should be involved in EU policy-making. The EP indicates that such a “*new model of multi-level governance*” (paragraph 20) must:

- be based on partnerships and genuine collaboration, which means that it must go “*beyond simple stakeholder consultations*” (paragraph 20);
- combine formal and informal governance structures;
- “*correspond to the new realities of the digitalised ‘network’ society*” (paragraph 20);
- be adapted to the scale of urban challenges;

- improve democratic legitimacy “of the European project” (paragraph 20) by bringing governments closer to citizens.

Furthermore, the EP “recommends that this ‘sui generis’ tailor-made model become the working method of the future European Urban Agenda after its acceptance by the partners and after consulting all relevant stakeholders” (paragraph 20). The EP also asks for practical solutions, such as the appointment of an urban coordinator, the establishment of “urban one-stop shops” and the organisation of urban summits. The EP highlights the need for better knowledge sharing between cities and the use of platforms to do so.

The EP considered that the UAEU should be based on a “shared and regularly updated conceptual framework with a thematic focus on a limited number of challenges in the larger context of the Europe 2020 goals of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth” (paragraph 24). The challenges addressed must comply with the following four conditions:

- Be in line with this conceptual framework;
- Be of a major character and have “significant impact” on urban areas;
- Be beyond what can be unilaterally solved by the Member States; and
- Be of added value in an EU approach.

These four conditions are used as building blocks for the assessment of the Urban Agenda in this report (see Section 5.3).

2.3.3. The Role of Cities in the Institutional Framework of the Union

In the recital of its resolution of 3 July 2018 on the role of cities in the institutional framework of the Union (2017/2037(INI)), the EP interprets the UAEU as an agenda that follows “the principle of subsidiarity and competences under the EU Treaties” and it “creates a platform of cooperation between Member States, regions, cities, the Commission, Parliament, the Union’s advisory bodies, and other stakeholders in the context of partnerships, with a view to making an informal contribution to the design and revision of both future and existing EU legislation” (EP, 2018, recital P).

The Parliament notes that the involvement of “towns, cities and urban and metropolitan areas, as well as small and medium-sized cities” (paragraph 1) in EU decision making is facilitated through their involvement in the Committee of Regions. Moreover, the European Parliament also emphasizes that cities and other local authorities play a key role in the implementation of EU policies “since cities have proved their capacity to efficiently manage integrated actions for sustainable urban development, they should be given a greater role in the implementation of all relevant policies” (paragraph 6). Cities are also seen “as a tool of public diplomacy, bringing people from different countries together and addressing issues that, for various reasons, are absent from high-level policy agendas” (paragraph 7). The parliament also considers that cities do not always have “the appropriate tools and administrative capacity” (paragraph 8) to participate in EU tenders and welcomes activities to facilitate this in a one stop shop for cities¹¹.

As regards the Urban Agenda the European Parliament raises some specific points in this resolution. First, the EP is positive about the UAEU as “a new model of multi-level governance based on partnership by engaging cities in the review of existing legislation and reflecting on the future shape of policies” (paragraph 9); second, it also highlights the following issues with regard to the future development of the Urban Agenda:

¹¹ This is the following website: https://ec.europa.eu/info/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development_en

- It calls on the Commission to assume a more coordinating role. Accordingly, the Commission *“should acquire more of its ownership, and should commit to carefully examining and, where possible, implementing the recommendations received”* (paragraph 10);
- Furthermore, Urban Agenda partnerships should make swift progress towards making specific proposals and the Commission should take these proposals into consideration and *“incorporate them, where appropriate, into future legislative proposals”* (paragraph 11)
- Parliament also calls on the Commission to consistently report to Parliament on the outcomes of concrete actions proposed in the Urban Agenda and the way these are taken into account by the Commission.
- The EU should reassess the establishment of a European Urban Policy.
- The EP calls for a strengthening of political representation of cities and municipalities in the Committee of the Regions.
- Beyond the Urban Agenda itself, the EP recommends to prepare territorial impact assessments for *“all policy measures and legislation that affect the local level”* (paragraph 20). There should be a dialogue with representatives of local and urban authorities, which must be able to contribute to these territorial impact assessments.
- The EP encourages cooperation between the Council and local authorities. In case of EU legislation affecting the local level, the EP considers that the Council should consult cities and regions.
- The EP also considers that cities, urban centres and municipalities (including rural areas) should enable public debate on a *“European public space characterised by the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms, and by values such as equality, non-discrimination and justice”* (paragraph 22). Cities play an important role in the development of civil society as cities are at *“the level at which people can most readily become involved [...] and can contribute to awareness-raising campaigns on EU citizens’ rights”* (paragraph 23). In this way, cities, towns and villages *“become centres of debate on the future of the Union and its policies”* (paragraph 25). The EP: *“Calls for the attribution of sufficient support to cities and local authorities to enable them to improve the urban dimension of EU policy-making”* (paragraph 27). Debates and consultations must be held in urban areas outside national or regional capitals to allow easy access for local citizens.

2.3.4. Concluding Discussion on the European Parliament’s Resolutions

The EP has supported the establishment of an urban agenda in the resolutions mentioned. The idea of an “urban” agenda is not the opposite of a rural approach, but it is the opposite of national or central EU approaches, which may separate “Europe” from local contexts. The EP aims to use the Urban Agenda to build EU policies on local know-how and understanding. Previous experience with rural areas, such as with LEADER, may also be used in urban areas. The EP indicates in its resolutions that local issues matter in Europe and that a multi-level governance approach must be used. In the view of the EP, the Urban Agenda is a tool to reformulate the European level and its institutions to make them more responsive to local discussions.

This relates to the idea that towns and cities outside national and regional capitals matter, too: The Urban Agenda must not be an agenda of capital regions, but of all towns and cities. This is an ambitious step. After all, the EU is an organisation of Member States and not of local authorities. Member States decide how they are organised internally. However, the EP assumes that to ensure the quality of EU policies relevant to the local context, these policies should not be imposed top-down, but built on silo

insight into local issues. This must be achieved by local debates that invite public participation. It must be the Urban Agenda for the EU and not an agenda imposed by the EU.

2.4. The State of Play

2.4.1. Commission Proposal for a European Urban Initiative

The Commission proposes to introduce a *European Urban Initiative* (EUI; Box 2), which will support the UAEU, replacing the current *Urban Innovative Actions* (EC, 2018b). The Urban Innovative Actions is a programme that runs from 2015 to 2020 and in which cities over 50,000 inhabitants may ask for financial support¹². Although establishing partnerships is one of the criteria for the selection of bids, this relates to cooperation with stakeholders with external expertise (such as companies and research organisations), but not to the development of networks among cities.

The European Commission (EC, 2019a) published an explanatory memo about the European Urban Initiative. In this memo the Commission indicates that EUI aligns with the Pact of Amsterdam in which the Ministers for Urban Matters:

"...call upon the European Commission to further strengthen in a transparent way its coordination and streamlining of policies directly or indirectly impacting on Urban Areas, in order to enhance the complementarity of the policies and strengthen their urban dimension, in particular in the areas of Better Regulation, Better Funding and Better Knowledge." (IMEUMRUM, 2016, article 38)

Box 2: European Urban Initiative

Article 10 European Urban Initiative

1. The ERDF shall also support the European Urban Initiative, implemented by the Commission in direct and indirect management.

This initiative shall cover all urban areas and shall support the Urban Agenda for the European Union.

2. The European Urban Initiative shall consist of the following three strands, all with regard to sustainable urban development:

- (a) support of capacity-building;
- (b) support of innovative actions;
- (c) support of knowledge, policy development and communication.

Upon request from one or more Member States, the European Urban Initiative may also support inter-governmental cooperation on urban matters.

Source: EC (2018b).

The Commission (EC, 2019a) proposes to set aside € 500 million of the ERDF (for the 2021-2017 period) for the EUI. To put this in perspective: in the 2014-2020 budget period about € 350 billion was reserved for cohesion policy (Widuto, 2019) and over € 200 billion is proposed to be allocated to the ERDF between 2021 and 2027 (EC, 2018b). This amounts to about 0.25% of the ERDF. The overall allocation of the ERDF to sustainable urban development will be much more substantial as the Commission proposes that this will be at least 6% of the *"ERDF resources at national level under the investment for jobs and growth goal"* (EC, 2018b, Article 9) for which over € 190 billion is proposed (6% of € 190 billion is € 11.4 billion). Apart from the *"investment for jobs and growth"* goal the ERDF includes a goal on

¹² 371 million Euro has been allocated in the multiannual financial framework 2014-2020, based on article 8 'Innovative actions in the area of sustainable urban development' ERDF, to test innovative ideas in real world practice (Regulation (EU) 1301/2013).

European Territorial Cooperation, which is commonly referred to as the “Interreg programme” in which also local and regional authorities participate.

EUI activities will be allocated to (1) capacity building (20% of the budget and a follow-up of the URBACT programme), (2) innovative actions (60% of the budget), which are based on the current Urban Innovative Actions and which are envisioned to be linked to the UAEU, and (3) knowledge, policy development and communication (20%), to “support the deepening and evidence-based demonstration of urban facts and policies” (EC, 2019a, page 2) and the Commission expects that this will also support the UAEU.

The Commission’s proposal is to forge a value chain of: (1) the identification of urban challenges; (2) development of instruments and approaches to address these challenges; (3) results that will be capitalised and the transferability of outcomes will be assessed; (4) dissemination and deployment of the results; and (5) the assessment of the process bringing it all back to step 1: the identification of novel urban challenges (EC, 2018b). Cities will be represented in strategy steering¹³. The process of the Urban Agenda is not fully captured by the EUI, but it is a supporting instrument.

2.4.2. EP’s First Reading of the Proposed ERDF Regulation

The EP concluded its first reading of the proposed regulation of the ERDF (EC, 2018b) in early 2019. In this context, the following amendments are particularly relevant:

- The EP stressed that where the Commission used the wording “including in urban areas” the emphasis should be much wider and be replaced by “including urban areas and rural communities”. “These actions should be the two sides of the same coin, based on both the central urban hubs and their surroundings as well as the more remote rural” (EP, 2019, amendment 22). This two-sides-of-the-same-coin idea, including the view that by improving the quality of life in rural areas there will be less congestion in urban areas, may have an impact on the future of the Urban Agenda. Also, the EP has amended the text on “sustainable urban areas” by including ‘rural communities’ and ‘peri-urban areas’ to this aim. The allocation of funds for sustainable urban areas has been raised from 6% to 10% (amendment 24). The EP aims to support localised policies in both urban and rural areas.
- As regards the relationship between the EUI and the Urban Agenda, the EP added that the EUI is “aiming to stimulate growth, liveability and innovation and to identify and successfully tackle social challenges” (amendment 25). In its amendments, the EP is consistent in broadening the scope of urban areas to ‘functional urban areas’, which means that urban is not restricted to areas with an urban form, but includes surrounding areas that have close functional relationships with cities. Compared to the proposal of the Commission, the EP emphasises the need for local management (see the resolution of 3 July 2018) by adding the following: “Local authorities should be actively involved in establishing and implementing the European Urban Initiative” (amendment 114).

The following amendments may be of relevance for the assessment of two specific partnerships in this study. As regards the Housing partnership, the EP notes: “investment in housing, when owned by public authorities or non-profit operators for use as housing designated for low-income households or people with special needs” (amendment 54) should be added to the objective of a more social Europe. The idea that the advancement of affordable housing lies within European power and jurisdiction is relatively novel and corresponds to ideas developed in the Housing partnership (see Chapter 4). In regard to the

¹³ Cities were not represented in the organisation of the Urban Innovative Actions, which was organised as a top-down call.

Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based Solutions Partnership, the EP has added '*enhancing green infrastructure in functional urban areas*' (amendment 43) to Policy objective 2 on a greener, low-carbon Europe. Such green infrastructures may support both fundamental concepts in this partnership. Green infrastructures can support "liveable compactness" as a principle for the sustainable use of land (see Chapter 3) and can be developed as nature-based solutions.

2.4.3. Next Steps: EU-Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters

The notion of functional urban areas as expressed in the EP amendments on the ERDF regulation is also important for the Council. In a presentation at an ESPON conference functional urban areas are presented as "*main theme that will be developed during the Romanian Presidency*" (Necşuliu, 2018) as part of a continuation of the work on the UAEU.

2.4.4. Next Steps: Leipzig Charter of 2007 Evaluated

The Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities that the EU Ministers responsible for urban development signed in May 2007 marks a milestone between the 1997 EC Communication *Towards an Urban Agenda in the European Union (EC, 1997)* and the 2016 Pact of Amsterdam. Member States committed, "*to adopt and strengthen an integrated approach to urban development*" based on two key principles: by 1) making "*greater use of integrated urban development policy approaches*", and by 2) giving "*special attention to deprived neighbourhoods within the context of the city as whole*" (Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, 2017, p.9).

The Leipzig Charter's impact was evaluated¹⁴ ten years later. This was done in preparation for the German Presidency of the EU-Council in the second half of 2020 and the negotiations for the Multi-annual Financial Framework 2021-2027. As regards the first key principle, the evaluation concludes: "*the general idea of integrated urban development with a strong area-based logic has entered the political mainstream in Europe*" as well as EU policies, as reflected in the implementation of EU structural funds for cohesion policy (Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, 2017, p.79). Progress on the second key principle has been more difficult to achieve. The evaluation indicates that this is probably due to large investments needed in an era of austerity (2012-2016) following the global financial crisis: "*Dedicated, comprehensive national funding schemes for deprived neighbourhoods as in France or Germany are the exception rather than the rule.*" (p.79). The evaluation report concludes therefore that strengthening urban development area-based approaches drawing on strong political and stakeholder support are still relevant ten years after the Leipzig Charter was signed. The evaluators desire further development along the lines of priority themes and governance of the UAEU and the New Urban Agenda. An update of the Leipzig Charter is foreseen at the Informal Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters to be held in Leipzig on the first of December 2020.

2.4.5. Conclusion on State of Play

Key institutional interested parties at EU level have taken steps to go forward with an urban agenda. The European Commission has proposed a European Urban Initiative, which allows more bottom-up initiatives and stakeholder participation than its predecessor (the Urban Innovative Actions). The European Parliament is supporting a local approach of both urban and rural communities, as expressed in its first reading position on the ERDF for the 2021-2027 period. Committing a larger part of the budget to these localised approaches is part of the process of broadening the Urban Agenda to also

¹⁴ The evaluation is based on an expert-survey in 35 countries of Europe (28 EU member states, 5 EU candidate countries, Norway and Switzerland), desk research and three case studies (Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, 2017).

include rural communities. Member States are also working on further developing the UAEU, e.g. through the new Leipzig Charter. This process is to be concluded in the second half of 2020.

A new conceptualisation of the UAEU is needed given that the first twelve partnerships of the Urban Agenda have adopted their final action plans. This means that they have reached the end of their life cycle (see Figure 1) within the framework of the UAEU¹⁵. Without new initiatives, the UAEU will come to an end.

¹⁵ The partnerships may decide to continue their activities outside the UAEU framework.

3. SUSTAINABLE USE OF LAND AND NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS PARTNERSHIP

KEY FINDINGS

This partnership aims to promote liveable compact cities and the use of nature-based solutions. The liveable compact city model aims for efficient urban land use. The goal is to provide public and green spaces, affordable housing and good living conditions in urban areas, while avoiding overcrowding and urban sprawl. Nature-based solutions address societal challenges with solutions inspired and supported by nature.

The action plan focuses on better knowledge, such as on urban land take, and on increased awareness. Less emphasis is placed on specific proposals for better funding and better regulation, even though the plan includes a guide for good practices.

One specific action proposes the inclusion of an assessment of land take in the requirements of the Directives 2001/42/EC (on Strategic impact assessment) and 2014/52/EU (on Environmental impact assessment).

Further action is needed to go beyond raising awareness.

3.1. Aim and Key Concepts

The aim of the Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions (SUL-NBS) Partnership is to “ensure the efficient and sustainable use of land and other natural resources to help create compact, liveable and inclusive European cities for everyone” (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.7). This aim, which was not pre-defined by the Pact of Amsterdam, has been the outcome of early debates within the partnership. It involves the following two specific objectives, the key concepts of which are defined in Box 3:

1. promoting a “liveable compactness city model”, and
2. main-streaming and promoting “nature-based solutions as a tool to build sustainable, resilient and liveable urban spaces”.

Box 3: Key concepts of Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions Partnership

- **“Liveable compactness:** an approach to sustainable urban development [...], acknowledging the frequent trade-off between compactness and inclusiveness. The concept seeks to strike a balance, avoiding both over-crowding and excess urban sprawl through efficient use of land, and providing for adequate amount of public and green space as well as affordable housing and living conditions.”
- **“Nature-based solutions:** [...] a way to address societal challenges with solutions that are inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits and help to build resilience. Such solutions bring more nature and natural features into cities, landscapes and seascapes, through locally adapted, resource-efficient and systemic interventions.”

Source: SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.3.

3.2. Process, Partners and Actions

The Directors-General Meeting on Urban Matters (DGUM) initiated the SUL-NBS Partnership during its 4th April 2017 meeting in Malta. In a period of 18 months, the partnership achieved the milestones from initiation to the final action plan (Figure 1). In that period, six international meetings were held in

Warsaw¹⁶ (Kick off, July 2017), Barcelona (October 2017), Zagreb (December 2017), Bologna (January/February 2018), Vilnius (April 2018) and Stavanger (June 2018).

The partnership developed a list of 25 bottlenecks at the kick-off meeting (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, pp.73-74). This list of problems hampering the efficient and sustainable use of land and natural resources provided the input for the orientation paper adopted at the next meeting (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2017). The action plan was finalised by October 2018.

The membership of the partnership changed in the year between the orientation paper (October 2017) and the action plan (October 2018). The urban authority of Águeda (PT), which was the smallest urban authority in the partnership, decided to leave the partnership. Three international organisations, ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), the European Environmental Agency (EEA) and ISOCARP (International Society of City and Regional Planners), joined the partnership (Box 4).

Box 4: Partners in SUL-NBS Partnership at the time of the action plan

Coordinators: Ministry of Investment and Economic Development (PL), City of Bologna (IT).

Urban Authorities: Antwerp (BE), Cork (IE), Métropole Européenne de Lille (FR), Stavanger (NO), Verband Region Stuttgart (DE), City of Zagreb (HR).

Member States: Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovenia.

Other stakeholders: European Investment Bank (EIB), INCASÒL (Catalan Land Institute), EUROCITIES (a network of major European cities), ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), European Environmental Agency (EEA) and ISOCARP (International Society of City and Regional Planners).

European Commission: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), Directorate-General for the Environment (DG ENV), Directorate-General for Research & Innovation (DG RTD), Joint Research Centre (DG JRC).

Observer: URBACT (a European exchange and learning programme promoting sustainable urban development).

Support: ECORYS (a consultancy firm), European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN).

Source: SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.7-8.

A public consultation on the draft action plan took place during the summer of 2018¹⁷. Not all of the bottlenecks, which the partnership had defined in the kick-off meeting, resulted in direct actions; some of them are addressed indirectly (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.73) and it remains to be seen whether the issues are resolved effectively. In practice, the partnership has prioritised some of the bottlenecks identified, whereas others have not been addressed¹⁸.

The action plan acknowledges that the EU has no direct competence for the main subject of the partnership, referred to as "*the governance of urban areas and urban land use planning*" (p.11). Because Member States develop their own land use planning policies, "*many common issues [...] are managed in different ways*" (p.11). This diversity is due to a lack of overarching EU policy structuring planning practices in a way that they can be understood as national or regional variations of an underlying EU policy.

¹⁶ Hosted by one of the coordinators, the Ministry of Investment and Economic Development (PL).

¹⁷ According to the final action plan, it took place between 27 June until 7 September 2018 (SUL-NBS partnership, 2018, p. 10); this appears to be incorrect as the draft action plan is dated 27 July 2018 and the online public feedback opened 1 August 2018, and was indicated to be open for six weeks, until Wednesday, 19 September 2018 (<https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/sustainable-land-use/sustainable-use-land-and-nature-based-solutions-public-feedback-starts-today> (accessed 03/06/2019)).

¹⁸ Five bottlenecks were addressed by 4 of the actions and 4 bottlenecks were not addressed by any action of the actions.

"Nevertheless, urban planning is a strongly structured discipline well rooted in... European urban history and overlaps with many other policy areas. Scientific research on urban planning topics is active at European level and the Partnership has strongly relied on the support of academic structures connected to the partners" (p.11). An example of an academic structure in urban planning is the *Association of European Schools of Planning* (AESOP), which organises an annual conference and which was established in the mid-1980s. The *European Spatial Planning Observatory Network* (ESPO, 2019) was running a project on sustainable urbanisation at the time of writing. Furthermore, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre is working on relevant data and modelling activities¹⁹. The European Environmental Agency (EEA, 2011) has developed an indicator of land take to monitor urban sprawl. It measures how much agricultural land, forests, natural landscape, etc., are taken by urban and other land developments.

The partnership considers the implementation of the principle of liveable city compactness as an answer to urban growth, resulting in an undesirable sprawl over many European landscapes. Equally, liveable compactness helps counter 'town cramming' (Hall, 2001). This phenomenon is defined as the concentration of people in dense cities in which housing becomes unaffordable and environmental qualities are lacking. Liveable compactness aims to balance density and high-quality green spaces and public spaces and emphasises affordability in urban concentration areas.

The issues of urban sprawl and the quality of urban life are indeed discussed by many planning agencies, stakeholders and academics in Europe. Issues of town cramming addressed by academics include the lack of green space in urban areas (Davies and Laforteza, 2017; Wolff and Haase, 2019), the concentration of environmental stress in urban areas (De Roo, 2000; Artmann et al., 2019), and the governance of urban sprawl (Pagliarin, 2018).

Although the action plan repeatedly notes that its topic is outside the "direct competence" (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.31, p.40) of the EU, the topic is closely related to the issue of economic, social and territorial cohesion. The competence for cohesion is shared between Member States and the EU and responsibilities are divided according to the principle of subsidiarity. Based on such a well-defined EU objective, i.e. of economic, social and territorial cohesion, the European Commission approved state aid supporting national and regional policies to limit urban sprawl and to improve the quality of life in urban areas (Korthals Altes, 2015). Based on the subsidiarity principle, national and regional planning policies operationalise the rather abstract concepts of economic, social and territorial cohesion, thereby structuring planning policies. The EC already has a quite general, umbrella for planning policies in place. The EC is able to support well-established EU cohesion objectives²⁰ when environmental and bio-diversity protection are at stake, by promoting the quality of life in urban areas.

Most of the actions which the SUL-NBS Partnership developed on SUL (Table 2) address the issue of better knowledge. The 'better-regulation' action, listed as number 1 (Table 2) that aims to include land take and soil properties in impact assessment procedures (required by the directives 2001/42/EC (on Strategic impact assessment) and 2014/52/EU (on Environmental impact assessment)) serves the improvement of knowledge aiming to make better informed decisions.

¹⁹ Such as the 'Land-Use based Integrated Sustainability Assessment modelling platform' (JRC, 2016).

²⁰ The register of state aid cases, kept by the EC, shows, however, that Member States rarely ask permission to use state aid for policies that aim at liveable compactness; an exception is the case SA.31877 Land sale and housing development Apeldoorn NL, Official Journal of the European Union, 2011, C343, 11-12.

Table 2: Proposed Actions in action plan

Action	Main emphasis	Addressing	Coordinator
1. Including land take and soil properties in impact assessment procedures	SLU	Better regulation	Bologna and UNIBO
2. Funding and finance guide for brownfield redevelopment	SLU	Better funding & knowledge	Luxembourg
3. Identifying and managing under-used land	SLU	Better knowledge	INCASÖL and Government of Catalonia
4. Indicators of land take	SLU	Better knowledge	Bologna and UNIBO
5. Promoting FUA cooperation as a tool to mitigate urban sprawl	SLU	Better knowledge	Poland
6. Better regulation to boost NBS at EU and local level	NBS	Better regulation	Bologna and UNIBO
7. Better finance on nature-based solutions	NBS	Better regulation and funding	Zagreb
8. Awareness raising on nature-based solutions and urban sprawl	NBS and SLU	Better knowledge	Bologna
9. Developing common targets and indicators	NBS	Better knowledge	Stavanger

Source: SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.20.

3.3. Assessment

As explained in the previous section, some of the bottlenecks identified during the SUL-NBS Partnership kick-off meeting and incorporated in the orientation paper (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2017) are not directly addressed by the partnership’s action plan. These include: the empowerment of public administrations, the social dimension of urban policies, the regeneration of cultural heritage and the barriers of geographical or topographical features to achieve a balanced urban development. Rather than ensuring a balanced mix of actions focusing on better regulation, better governance and better funding, most actions aim for better knowledge.

This raises the question whether a lack of knowledge is the main obstacle towards the provision of liveable compactness in the EU. The Pact of Amsterdam provides insight into the expected contribution of better knowledge to the Urban Agenda. Better knowledge works in two ways, first, by enhancing the knowledge base and, second, by exchanging best practices and knowledge (IMEUMRUM, 2016, p.6). ‘*Reliable data*’ is expected to (1) portray the various contexts of urban authorities, to (2) allow for evidence-based urban policy and to (3) provide tailor-made solutions. The idea was that knowledge was fragmented and that previous ‘*successful experiences*’ (p.6) could be made use of by actions developed in the framework of the UAEU.

The agenda for ‘*better knowledge*’ produced by the SUL-NBS Partnership, however, is not limited to producing reliable data to support urban authorities. A majority of the actions, especially those addressing sustainable use of land, are meant, for example, to raise the awareness of urban authorities for the benefits of creating liveable compactness in functional urban areas. Monitoring land take, for example, does not help urban authorities to find solutions to develop alternative land used options, but may contribute to raising the awareness of the extent of urban sprawl taking place.

The question is whether the UAEU is the proper instrument to raise awareness. The UAEU is not a top-down programme in which EU institutions, Member States and international organisations are expected to convince urban authorities that they must change their policies. The essence of the UAEU is that it is a bottom-up programme, in which urban authorities striving to make land use sustainable or to apply nature-based solutions are provided with better regulation, better funding and better knowledge to achieve these aims. One of the main goals of the action plan was to develop actions that help urban authorities in *"identifying and striving to overcome unnecessary obstacles in EU policy"* (IMEUMRUM, 2016, p.5). Such obstacles exist, as the EU impacts urban areas in many ways (Evers and Tennekes, 2016; Table 1). Not all issues arising from EU impacts on urban areas are addressed by the action plan. The Urban Agenda was developed because of the awareness that specific actions are needed. With this line of reasoning the SUL-NBS action plan can be regarded as a missed opportunity. The UAEU is not an instrument for raising awareness at the level of urban authorities. On the contrary, it is an instrument to provoke measures at EU level. Based on local insights, it is meant to address specific actions for better knowledge, better regulation and better funding at the European level. This opportunity is missed when the action plan only formulates actions to raise awareness at the level of fellow urban authorities.²¹

One of the bottlenecks that the partnership identified was the *"Lack of enforcement and implementation (The need to empower public administration)"* (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.73). None of the actions in the action plan address this bottleneck directly. However, without public administrations implementing efficient and sustainable land use and nature-based solutions, the objective to ensure SLU and NBS will continue to be an illusion. Not addressing all the identified bottlenecks directly may have resulted from the partnership's short-term focus on formulating rapid actions within twelve months of the kick-off meeting, rather than facilitating a more fundamental approach. The UAEU has been set-up to produce action plans in a short time frame, which might have caused the focus on short-term actions which can be instantly implemented. The partnership's highest priority topic requires, however, actions that take longer to implement and which may result in long-term change.

Apart from these more general observations on the partnership, the question remains whether the proposed actions may contribute to a legislative agenda for the EU. In the action plan, there are three actions which address better regulation.

First, one of the actions (action 1 in Table 2) recommends the inclusion of land take and soil properties in impact assessment procedures. This action addresses the issue of how land take (which includes urban sprawl, but also includes more orchestrated extensions of urban areas) can be integrated in Directives 2001/42/EC (on Strategic impact assessment) and 2014/52/EU (on Environmental impact assessment).

Second, the action plan includes a proposal (in action 5) to come to a *"harmonization"* (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.42) of Functional Urban Area (FUA) definitions.

Third, action six recommends the integration of nature-based solutions within existing directives and other EU-level documents. The partnership's analysis is imprecise on exactly which directives and documents it should address. Mentioned are directives and policies in the fields of flood protection, bio-diversity conservation, impact assessment, resource efficiency, climate change adaptation and public procurement. The idea is that nature-based solutions must be integrated into many regulations

²¹ Moreover, awareness-raising is not only about better knowledge (e.g. cognition), but it is also about affection. Affection is a concept that goes beyond the scope of the Urban Agenda, which focuses on achieving better knowledge, better regulation and better funding.

and policy actions but, “the concept still remain[s] fuzzy and a more concrete implementation in terms of targets and actual implementation is needed” (SUL-NBS Partnership, 2018, p.44).

A reflection of the authors of this study on these actions is the following.

Firstly, the inclusion of land take and soil properties in impact assessment procedures should be discussed at EU level. Land take affects the environment directly and indirectly; studying alternatives for land take as part of an Environmental impact assessment (EIA) or Strategic impact assessment (SIA) makes sense. Moreover, as regards impact assessments for large urban development areas, incorporating a “liveable compactness” alternative in the assessment could add value.

Secondly, a harmonization of definitions of functional urban areas (FUA) is not necessary, because such a harmonised definition already exists. The OECD and the European Commission jointly developed a methodology to define FUA. This definition is used by EUROSTAT in its *Methodological manual on territorial typologies* (EUROSTAT, 2018). Regulatory actions are unnecessary. A point left for discussion may be how EUROSTAT and Member States could be convinced to publish more data based on the FUA definitions. However, an additional harmonization round resulting in yet another further definition on top of the existing definitions would make matters even more complicated. Discussions on statistical definitions might also become an excuse for the avoidance of addressing matters on the ground.

Thirdly, the authors support the action calling for better integration of nature-based solutions in many European directives and other legislative proposals. In practical terms, nature-based solutions could be incorporated in directives and proposals that are currently on the agenda. By doing so, the concept would become more concrete. As the action itself is addressing many potential policy areas, it would be wise to make an inventory of the agenda and to prepare proposals to ascertain that NBS will fit the specific policy context.

Based on the emphasis of the European Parliament to consider urban and rural areas as two sides of one coin, the CAP reform could be part of the better funding agenda for NBS. Functional urban areas include not only cities, but also their commuting zones (EUROSTAT, 2018). The CAP reform contains nine main objectives including the objective to contribute “to the protection of biodiversity, enhance ecosystem services and preserve habitats and landscapes” (EC, 2018c, p.11). This seems an excellent starting point for the realization of NBS. NBS may also play a role in the other eight objectives.

Overall the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The actions in the action plan focus on quick gains, but are probably insufficient to fundamentally change practices towards SLU and NBS.
- Most actions aim to produce better knowledge for actors. However, many actions do not go beyond raising awareness on issues of sustainable land use or nature-based solutions. These actions do not produce knowledge that enables urban authorities to achieve sustainable land use or to apply nature-based solutions.
- This lack of specificity of the actions may relate to the complexities in knowledge, funding and regulation, which also show a large diversity between different functional urban areas throughout the EU. Having defined an agenda for SLU and NBS as its common ground, the partnership has put much effort into awareness-raising.
- The lack of specificity may also be due to the fact that action plans with feasible actions have to be produced swiftly within the UAEU. Additionally, participants of stakeholder organisations

and Member States may not all have had recent relevant experience. This process may also have resulted in overlooking funding opportunities, e.g. CAP funding for NBS.

- It remains to be seen what the next step for this partnership will be. The UAEU process has been finalised, but implementation of the action plan alone will not achieve efficient and sustainable land use; it is one step forward, but further steps must follow.

4. HOUSING PARTNERSHIP: AFFORDABLE HOUSING

KEY FINDINGS

The Housing Partnership aims to contribute to better policies and governance frameworks to provide access to adequate and affordable housing. Since housing is not an EU-competence, the partnership fulfilled a core role in analysing the bottlenecks that hamper the realization of affordable housing in urban areas.

Based on ten policy themes, the partnership developed twelve actions to address better regulation (three actions), better knowledge/governance (seven actions) and better funding (two actions) and a number of recommendations for good future policies, governance and practices.

Top priorities of the partnership include strengthening the role of cities and tackling housing unaffordability at local, national and EU level.

4.1. Aims and Key Concepts

The EU does not have a competence or mandate on housing. The Housing Partnership therefore functions as a platform to discuss housing and affordability at EU level. The partnership aims *“to contribute to the creation of better legal and financial conditions for EU cities that need to invest in new, renewed, affordable housing for their populations on a broad scale. More specifically, the focus of the Partnership is on addressing affordable housing needs through legislation, knowledge creation and funding, as well as aiding the supply of affordable housing”* (Housing Partnership, 2018, p.10). The partnership defined affordable housing as housing positioned between emergency housing and market housing. Affordable housing includes social housing, affordable rental housing, and affordable home ownership.

The Housing Partnership recognizes housing as a priority in the achievement of EU 2020 goals *“for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”* (EC, 2017, p.4) in cities²². The Housing Partnership (2018, p.11) acknowledges the existence of a diversity of inequalities, e.g. in education, health, employment and income, and recognizes that these inequalities are exacerbated by unaffordable housing having an impact on social exclusion and spatial segregation. To summarize, the partnership calls for more housing investment, which has not returned to its pre-crisis level (Housing Partnership, 2018). Housing investment is thus to cater for the housing needs of those individuals deemed to fall within the category of ‘vulnerable’. With this reasoning, the partnership attributed to housing what can be described as a *‘basic capability’*²³ in terms of housing providing *“a real opportunity to avoid poverty”* (Robeyns, 2005, p.101).

4.2. Process, Partners and Actions

The partners, which totalled 20 (the desired maximum; see Section 2.2), consisted of experts²⁴: six cities, city alliance or city-linked umbrella organizations; five countries plus observers from two countries; three umbrella organizations, of which one is from a country (social landlords) and two are European (social landlords) and international (tenants) organizations; three EU institutions and programs; and one expert, a member of a faculty of urban studies from a university.

²² The Housing Partnership uses the EC's definition of the term urban as Functional Urban Area (Housing Partnership, 2018, p.10).

²³ Borrowed from Sen (1987).

²⁴ Experts are expected to be able to deal with the technicalities and complexities of the policy field at hand (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.96).

Work on the partnership started in December 2015²⁵ and involved six consortium meetings, seven thematic focus meetings and two workshops. It culminated in the finalization of the action plan exactly three years later (Housing Partnership, 2018, p.2).

In terms of content, the partnership kicked off its work by identifying bottlenecks in the provision of affordable housing (Housing Partnership, 2018, p.12). These focus themes are listed as follows:

1. state aid, competition law, involving the definition of services of general economic interest (SGEI);
2. investments and instruments, loans, innovative funding;
3. land use, spatial planning, land development and anti-speculation;
4. security of tenure;
5. co-management, co-design of multi-apartment buildings;
6. VAT issues related to affordable housing;
7. European Semester and the 'Golden Rule'²⁶;
8. renovation, energy efficiency;
9. rent stabilization;
10. support for vulnerable groups.

In terms of working methods, the partnership prepared briefing and analytical papers. The partners discussed these during 15 meetings including the kick-off meeting and the last meeting in which the action plan was adopted. Three subgroups on (1) State Aid, (2) Finance and Funding and (3) General Housing Policy prepared these documents.

The Housing Partnership also carried out three types of consultation: (1) public feedback on the first five actions; (2) so-called inter-service consultation within the European Commission, resulting in feedback on background papers and summaries of proposed actions; (3) consultations with other EU-initiatives and structures; such as the European Parliament's Urban Intergroup in 2017 and the European Parliament's Regional Development (REGI) Committee in 2018 (p.16-17). Last, but not least, the Housing Partners attended conferences to exchange and discuss the latest analyses and insights with stakeholders.

Based on the analysis of the ten focus themes, the partnership recommended twelve actions which aim to strengthen the Urban Agenda with better knowledge, better regulation and better funding. These actions aim to facilitate cities in their ambition to provide sufficient numbers of affordable housing for vulnerable groups. Apart from the twelve actions, the action plan formulates three main recommendations on good future policies, governance and practices. These outputs from the Housing Partnership action plan are the focus of the next section.

²⁵ The Housing Partnership is one of four pilot partnerships (the others are Air Quality, Urban Poverty and Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees) of the UAEU and started December 2015 (kick-off meeting in Geneva) before the endorsement of the Pact of Amsterdam on 30th May 2016 (see also Section 2.2). In 2016, the pilot partnerships received financial support from the Netherlands and EU budget followed from 2017 onwards.

²⁶ The 'Golden Rule' refers to the idea that public investment by debt, as alternative to immediate taxation, will be allowed, if public investment benefits future generations, who can use these benefits to pay back the debts (Truger, 2015; see also EC, 2015b). The idea is that tax frictions due to instabilities of both investments and the economic system can be reduced by financing part of the investments by debt (Musgrave, 1939).

4.3. Assessment

4.3.1. Process

In a scientific article²⁷ Purkarthofer (2019, p.98-99) formulates four conclusions as regards the process of drafting the Housing Partnership action plan.

- The mix of practitioners and policy-makers was experienced as inspiring;
- Tensions arose from the consensus decision-making approach, as it was not always supported by equal contributions from partners;
- Not all partners shared the idea that the UAEU would provide a possibility to affect EU legislation directly in the longer-term and function as a knowledge exchange platform 'plus';
- The partnership approach came with limitations. Financial resources were sufficient to fund a secretariat, but partners had to cover their own expenses, limiting participation of smaller parties.

A concerted approach with policies in Member States and the EU was considered to be essential for the UAEU's success.

4.3.2. Action Plan

The Housing Partnership's twelve actions and three types of governance recommendations are listed in Table 3. The actions aim for (1) better regulation, (2) better knowledge and governance, and (3) better funding for cities to increase the supply of affordable. The recommendations in Table 3 focus on the longer-term: good policies and governance, good practices based on the European Responsible Housing Initiative (ERHIN) and a proposal for a future focus on three themes. All actions and recommendations do not specify a role for the EP.

As the UAEU aims to involve lower levels of government, cities in particular, Action 11 of the '*better funding*' dimension in the action plan plays an important role. Action 11 calls for improving the capacity of cities and affordable housing providers to access available cohesion policy and EIB funding. The EP, as legislator for all EU funding arrangements, may be able to facilitate this.

Similarly, Action 12 is also focussing on funding. It calls for an adaptation of the European Semester by taking affordable housing into account. It recommends the provision of better information about the state of housing affordability. It also calls for an active use of the investment clause in the European Semester and investment programs for affordable housing. The EP could support these recommendations for monitoring and investment.

When it comes to the *strengthening of the regulatory framework*, the Housing Partnership formulated three actions (Actions 1-3 in Table 3). In the future, the EP may be able to play a role in creating support for these regulatory measures. The state of play is as follows:

- Action 1, which calls for guidance on EU regulation and public support for housing, elaborates that urban authorities do not know how affordable housing can be supported without violating state aid rules. Even though some capacity building by knowledge exchange has been achieved when working on the action plan (Action 2), more EU guidance of urban authorities

²⁷ Based on some expert interviews of respondents involved in the UAEU or the Housing Partnership, held in Belgium and the Netherlands in 2017-2018.

and possibly future legislation will be required, in order to ensure more investment in affordable housing.

- Such guidance, as the Housing Partnership explains after consultation with the EC, will not lead to a fundamental change in state aid regulation in the short term, as Action 3 proposes. Action 3 deals with the narrow definition of the target group for Services of General Economic Interest to social housing²⁸. The Housing Partnership notes that the EU aim of social cohesion requires a broad target group in order to reduce legal uncertainty around investments. The application of state aid principles is expected to reflect the fact that the EC acknowledged a probable failure on the housing market (p.25).

Table 3: The Housing Partnership proposed actions and potential EP involvement

Dimensions	Action	Proposed Actions	EP involvement
Better regulation	1	Guidance on EU regulation a public support for housing	
	2	Capacity building for the application of state aid rules in the affordable housing sector at a city level	(If legislative change is required)
	3	Revision of the SGEI decision with regard to the narrow target group of social housing	(If legislative change is required)
Better knowledge and governance	4	Affordable housing good practice database	
	5	Policy guidance for social and affordable housing supply in Europe	
	6	Exchange programme for urban housing professionals	
	7	Monitoring system for affordable housing in the European Union	(Support to set up; possibly legislation)
	8	Exchange on affordable housing at members-state level	
	9	Recommendations on the improvement of the EU urban housing market data – reintroduction of National Focal Points on Housing Policy (HFP)	
	10	Recommendations on the improvement of EU gender-poverty-energy nexus data	EP FEMM, EP ITRE
Better funding	11	Recommendations on EU funding of affordable housing	(Facilitate Cohesion Policy EU funding and EIB-funding for cities)
	12	Recommendation on the European Semester and affordable housing	(Support to set up; possibly legislation)
Recommendations on future good policies, governance and practices	Good policy and governance at local, regional, national, EU level	Eight priority areas for policy development, among which protection of vulnerable groups; land use planning models to speed up development, tenure neutral consumer rights; combination of multi-level funding; etc.	(Support to set up; possibly legislation)

²⁸ The target group is indicated as “the provision of social housing for disadvantaged citizens or socially less advantaged groups, who due to solvency constraints are unable to obtain housing at market conditions” (EC, 2012, p.4). This suggests, according to the Housing Partnership (2018) that while many households are unable to obtain housing at market conditions, they cannot be supported. These households are not ‘disadvantaged citizens’ nor ‘socially less advantaged groups’. Many ‘ordinary’ citizens have no access to market sector housing.

	Good practice	ERHIN code of conduct for CSR	(Possibly legislation)
	Themes for the future	* Long-term investment in partnership with cities; i.e., Fransen et al. (2018) * Impact assessment in affordable housing production * Responsible construction sector	(Support to set up; possibly legislation)

Source: Housing Partnership (2018).

The Housing Partnership completed or is close to completing many of the *knowledge/governance actions* (Actions 4-10). For example, the good practice database (Action 4) is planned to be launched in 2019, as is the URBACT action planning network (Action 6), while the policy guidance for the supply (Action 5) was launched in December of 2018, and the exchange on affordable housing at country-level (Action 8) was also accomplished by the end of 2018. The timelines for Action 7, which calls for setting up a monitoring system for affordable housing in the EU, and Action 10, which calls for the improvement of EU gender-poverty nexus data, both extend beyond the publication of the action plan.

Action 10, which calls for the improvement of EU gender-poverty nexus data, particularly for women, will be one option for the new EP to exert influence upon. The European Parliament Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) Committee played a role in 2016 in drawing attention to the phenomenon. Meanwhile after the kick-off of the EU Energy Poverty Observatory gender-disaggregated data is still insufficiently available. This action will require cooperation with many EU stakeholders among others with the FEMM Committee and the European Parliament Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) Committee.

In short, the Housing Partnership has achieved some of its actions during its term or shortly after the presentation of its action plan in December 2018. For other actions (3, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12), the partnership foresees a longer time horizon running into the next EU programming period 2021-2027.

The *governance recommendations* in Table 3 also go beyond the partnership’s term and set out good future policies, governance and practices. To achieve good policy and governance at local, regional, national and EU level, the partnership turned to a number of undealt focus themes; i.e., protection of vulnerable groups, anti-speculation, renovation and energy efficiency, co-management and co-design, spatial planning, rent stabilization and control and tenure-neutral security of tenure. The partnership argues that these priorities align with other documents at the EU level and beyond, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Declaration on Responsible Housing (ERHIN code of conduct for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)) (Housing Partnership, 2018, p.64).

In the case of land use, the partnership sets out a number of options that can help speed up the development of affordable housing in different contexts (p.68). The partnership hopes that EU funding will develop different combinations across government levels, including the EU (such as European Investment Bank (EIB) loans; p.70-71). The partnership considers long-term investment in social infrastructure, including affordable housing, an avenue of future development. This conclusion parallels those in the report of the High-Level Task Force on Investing in Social Infrastructure in Europe, which was published in December of 2018 (Fransen et al., 2018), as was the Housing Partnership Action Plan.

To summarize, the aim of the Housing Partnership Action Plan to stimulate the supply of affordable housing for EU citizens was not achieved. Strengthening the role of cities remains a top priority. But next to local and national levels, the EU should also address housing affordability.

5. PROGRESS AND ASSESSMENT OF THE UAEU

KEY FINDINGS

Reviews by the European Commission and by others are positive about the UAEU's approach and the direct involvement of towns and cities. It is however a challenge to sustain this involvement, especially for small and medium-sized towns.

The action plans sparsely address EU cohesion policies directly.

Generally, the partnerships adopted the eleven cross-cutting issues. This happened to a lesser extent for issues relevant to small and medium-sized towns. There are opportunities to focus on cross-cutting issues, not yet addressed, in the context of current priority themes.

The UAEU has developed in line with conditions set by the EP (2015). It is based on a common framework (Pact of Amsterdam). While a major achievement, it may still increase its prominence. It is based on the principles of subsidiarity and has added value, which may evolve depending on its further development.

5.1. Progress of the UAEU

The work on the UAEU started swiftly and the first partnerships held their kick off meetings before the endorsement of the Pact of Amsterdam in May 2016. In November 2017 the Commission (EC, 2017) transmitted a progress report to the Council. In it, the EC concluded that the UAEU was well on its way and was positive about the result so far. The UAEU puts urban questions on the agenda. Also, the UAEU's working method - based on *"multi-level governance, multi-stakeholder involvement and integrated approach - is functioning and could be used in other policy fields"* (EC, 2017, p.12). Furthermore, the EC was positive about the commitment to the UAEU by Member States and urban authorities. The Commission expects urban authorities to assume a more significant role in *"international processes on sustainable development, climate and disaster risk reduction"* (p.12). It believes the urban dimension ensures that international processes come closer to the daily lives of citizens.

The progress of the UAEU shows, according to the Commission, *"there is scope to strengthen urban policy in the EU and the necessity to discuss this further"* (p.12). The EC concludes that cities are as much places for the implementation of EU policies and instruments as well as places for policy development. Cities are actors *"addressing the challenges they face"* (p.5), which is demonstrated by their participation in the UAEU partnerships.

The Commission points to the issue that *"...not all cities can invest time and resources to work at national and EU levels. It is therefore important to raise awareness and foster engagement of cities not directly involved in the work of the partnerships"* (p.5). It was therefore important *"to support and build capacity"* (p.5) at local level by enabling *"innovative cooperation between the administration, the business sector and citizens"* (p.5).

In terms of progressing the UAEU, the EC acknowledges the EP as *"a very important player in the Urban Agenda for the EU through policy inputs to the partnerships and funding for the Secretariat"* (p.6). Furthermore, the EC notes that the EP must play an important role in the development of the UAEU after the action plans have been concluded. *"Once the actions are finalised, they will be transmitted to the European Parliament to consider how they can be taken up in its work as co-legislator"* (p.6).

Last, but not least the EC announces the intention to assess the UAEU in 2019. At the time of writing this document, the study was underway (see note 1). The Commission is positive about the potential

of the Urban Agenda approach to come to a “*shared understanding of the best ways to work with cities*” (p.13), in order to “*support them in their development*” (p.13). The EC promises to promote the UAEU based on a conviction that urban authorities must be involved in the “*design and implementation*” (p.13) of EU policies. Although, results of the coming assessment and new policies by an incoming Commission might result in other priorities, there are no prospects for such a change²⁹.

In the next sections the UAEU is evaluated from other points of view: the assessment of partnerships (Section 5.2), the way how the UAEU can be reviewed using four criteria developed by the EP (2015) (Section 5.3), the way cross-cutting issues are taken into account in the partnerships (Section 5.4) and the relationship of the UAEU and EU cohesion policies (Section 5.5).

5.2. Assessment of Partnerships

Although some commenters have suggested that the Urban Agenda is a genuinely new working method for the EU (Mamadouh, 2018), partnerships as such are not a new phenomenon in the EU.³⁰ The UAEU partnerships are innovative in two ways. UAEU partnerships (1) give cities a direct and central role and (2) provide a framework of operation, i.e., work towards developing action plans (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.87, 92-93, 95; compare Potjer et al., 2018).

Purkarthofer (2019, p.88) argues that the UAEU’s structured approach of largely “*discursive*” or “*sermon*” policy intervention has the potential to be superior to the “*complexity, ambiguity and fragmentation*” that often dominate European spatial planning and urban policy based on most EU-documents³¹. The Leipzig Charter is regarded as an exception (p.91). Impact is to be strategically achieved by soft and informal norms that are spread “*through the presentation of knowledge and data, the transfer of knowledge, moral suasion, exhortation, persuasion, and the framing and shaping of attention by affecting what is considered worthwhile of knowing*” (p.89).

Furthermore, impact is to be ensured by involving all types of actors from government, local actors in particular to private actors, as well non-governmental actors (Purkarthofer, 2019, p. 94). In practice, it is noted that not all partners are equally enthusiastic to join: “*While cities and stakeholders are keen to join the partnerships, ministries from the Member States are in some cases less enthusiastic, presumably because their participation in the policy-making process is anyway ensured through formal mechanisms*” (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.94-95). The involvement of Member States is confirmed as somewhat ‘*problematic*’ (Potjer et al., 2018, p.18). Member States are said to be hesitant as they do not have a direct stake in urban policy: “*the stakeholders push the gas pedal, the Commission is set to idle and the Member States hit the brakes*” (Purkarthofer, 2019, p.95). Stakeholders should therefore be involved to keep the structured process of policy implementation moving across different players on different levels.

5.3. The Four Conditions of the EP

The EP (2015) developed four conditions for the challenges addressed by an urban agenda (Section 2.3.2). The question is: How does the UAEU, which was developed later, relate to these conditions?

²⁹ In June 2019 the European Commission (2019b) published a brochure on the UAEU with a positive foreword by the commissioner for regional policy.

³⁰ Partnerships are understood in many different ways. Partnership is, for example, since 1988, one of the guiding principles in EU cohesion policy; since 1991 one of the features in the LEADER approach for regional and rural development (Purkarthofer 2019, p.93).

³¹ The conclusion that strategic papers from the EU do not show explicit impact on policy implementation from interested parties by country is based on expert interviews with the Housing Partners in Austria and Finland complemented by research results of an ESPON project.

First, the Urban Agenda must be in line with a conceptual framework which is shared and regularly updated (EP, 2015b, paragraph 24). The Pact of Amsterdam can be seen as such a framework shared by the ministers of urban affairs and endorsed by the Commission. It focuses on specific priority themes for which partnerships are set up, and cross-cutting issues are defined. In subsequent meetings of the ministers for urban matters, new partnerships have been launched. There is a link with the broader EU agenda of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth. Therefore the Urban Agenda meets the first condition.

The second condition relates to the impact and '*major*' character of the agenda. Here questions may be raised, whether these ambitions will be fully met by the first round of action plan development. Not all actions that are defined in the action plans are '*major*' or will result in '*significant impact*'. Partners may have been too careful in defining actions for them to have a major impact in existing structures, as these may encounter resistance. Furthermore, the focus on quick results may have held partners back from proposing major actions, which may need some more time to be developed.

The third condition is subsidiarity. The agenda must address issues that cannot be solved by Member States alone. Many actions, especially actions relating to better knowledge (a majority of actions), may not meet this criterion. However, the actions on better funding and better regulation were often directed towards EU funding and regulations that by definition cannot be solved by Member States alone.

The fourth condition entails that the UAEU must be of added value in an EU approach. Here the support for the Urban Agenda by many actors indicates perception of added value. However, the full potential of the approach has not yet been reached. The added value of the UAEU could be improved by addressing the points of critique raised above: more major actions that result in significant impact and a stronger focus on matters that can only be addressed at the European level.

5.4. Cross-cutting Issues of the Pact of Amsterdam

The Pact of Amsterdam defines eleven cross-cutting issues (Box 1), which the partnerships ought to take into consideration in their action plans for their priority themes. A monitoring table shows that only two partnerships (Digital Transition and Urban Mobility) address all cross-cutting issues, and that the other partnerships address at least seven of the eleven cross-cutting issues (UAEU, 2019).

The cross-cutting issues that are least addressed are '*Adaptation to demographic change and in- and out migration*' (addressed by seven of twelve partnerships), '*Challenges and opportunities of small- and medium-sized Urban Areas and polycentric development*' (addressed by eight partnerships) and '*Provision of adequate public services of general interest*' (addressed by eight partnerships) (UAEU, 2019). The least-addressed issues are typically issues that are of relevance for small- and medium-sized towns that face urban decline affecting service levels.

It is unclear why certain issues have not been addressed. The action plans only indicate reasoning as to why they address certain cross-cutting issues but there is no justification as to why other issues were not addressed. A list of the cross-cutting issues that were not addressed in the context of the priority themes may be read as a potential future UAEU:

- air quality and innovative approaches, including smart cities;
- circular economy and challenges and opportunities of small- and medium-sized Urban Areas and polycentric development;
- climate adaptation and demographic change;

- energy transition: demographic change, challenges and opportunities of small- and medium-sized Urban Areas and polycentric development;
- housing: governance across administrative boundaries and inter-municipal cooperation: urban-rural, urban-urban;
- inclusion of migrants and refugees in relation to governance across administrative boundaries, sound and strategic urban planning, innovative approaches, including Smart Cities, and urban regeneration;
- public procurement and integrated and participatory approaches;
- sustainable land use and nature-based solutions: the provision of adequate public services of general interest; and
- urban poverty: challenges and opportunities of small- and medium-sized Urban Areas and demographic change.

The fact that certain promising matters have not been addressed fits the nature of a partnership approach. Certain stakeholders cooperate and discuss their own concerns and issues. The partnership approach is not exhaustive as not all potential actions are taken up by a partnership network. Two partnerships on the same theme may come up with different action plans addressing different issues. Little duplication may take place, if two partnerships work on the same priority theme, as there are large differences between the local contexts of urban authorities. The partners in a partnership (types of player, regional context, and specific background) are highly important in determining its outcomes. After all, the Urban Agenda is based on informal, multi-level cooperation of relevant actors (IMEUMRUM, 2016; Purkarthofer, 2019), and informal cooperation of yet other actors may result in other issues for an urban agenda.

5.5. UAEU and Post-2020 Cohesion Programme

It has been indicated that the post-2020 cohesion policy reform will largely define the impact of the UAEU (Scheurer and Haase, 2018). The development of the multi-annual financial framework for 2021-2027 provides a window of opportunity to incorporate policy change. The Commission has therefore put pressure on the partnerships to meet an ambitious timeline (Potjer et al., 2018). The question is whether the action plans have produced sufficient output to be taken on board in the new post-2020 cohesion policy and, subsequently, whether cohesion policy-makers will make use of the actions developed in the framework of the UAEU and transfer them to the policy level. Only a few actions in the action plans of all UAEU partnerships address cohesion policies directly:

- The Circular Economy partnership proposes in one action to make projects in the area of circular economy eligible for ESIF funding. This action appears to be superfluous. The European Parliament (EP, 2015a) has adopted a resolution on “*Resource efficiency: moving towards a circular economy*” in which it stresses that “*all EU funding, including [...] cohesion funds*” (paragraph 70) must be used to promote the circular economy, the European Commission has adopted a circular economy action plan in December 2015 (EC, 2019c), and has proposed to make circular economy as one of the policy objectives in the post 2020 ESIF funding (EC, 2018b), and the Informal Meeting of Environment/Climate Ministers (EU2019FI, 2019) also aims to speed up the implementation of the circular economy.
- The Housing Partnership (see Chapter 4) suggested delivering recommendations to access EU funding for affordable housing. Although this action does not address cohesion policies

directly it may indirectly affect policies to accommodate the provision of cohesion funding to cities and affordable housing providers.

- In the Jobs and Skills in the Local Economy Partnership (2018), there is action to simplify EU cohesion policy programmes. The idea is that less red tape, especially for smaller investments, would make cohesion programmes more effective. One of the sections on the post-2020 cohesion policies by the European Commission (EC, 2018b) is on simplification, as part of a general ambition towards the improvement of EU governance.
- The Urban Poverty Partnership (2018) defined three actions to be delivered by the post-2020 cohesion policies. The first action proposes to introduce a block grant for urban authorities to fight poverty. Another action defines a new 'Urban Territorial Objective' to address deprived urban neighbourhoods and vulnerable social groups. Thirdly, the partnership proposed to introduce a multi-fund *Local Pact* to help urban authorities with the regeneration of deprived urban areas using a mix of place-based and people-based approaches. In the EC's (2018) proposal for the post-2020 cohesion programme '*a more social Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights*' (p.16) is one of the objectives. Addressing urban poverty would fit this objective. However, the current proposals do not use the specific instrumental forms, such as block grants and a local pact, as proposed by the action plan.

Generally, most actions of the UAEU are not directed at the post-2020 cohesion programme. Thus, as the UAEU aims at a broader set of practices, the success of the UAEU should not be assessed in terms of the post-2020 cohesion programme. The few actions in the plan directed at post-2020 cohesion policy propose changes that align with the foreseeable developments of the programme. It is unclear, therefore, what the contribution of the UAEU to post-2020 cohesion policy will be. Both the UAEU and the proposal of the post-2020 cohesion policies follow the overall trend of more multi-level governance in the EU. Recommendations for both the future of the UAEU and the post 2020 cohesion policies will be made in Chapter 6.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY FINDINGS

The UAEU provides a valuable addition to multi-level governance of urban topics in the EU. The first round of partnerships has not yet resulted in harvesting the full potential of this approach.

In order to strengthen the approach, more expertise in urban matters, including on small and medium-sized urban areas, is needed to formulate better actions. In turn, these actions must result in the improvement of specific EU regulations and funding measures in order to facilitate the implementation of actions.

Linking these two requirements necessitates the restructuring of the approach beyond formulating topics. For new partnerships, the gaps between cross-cutting issues and partnerships should be addressed.

Partnerships are a way forward to increasingly involve urban authorities in EU policy development.

6.1. Main Conclusions

This study's conclusions focus on the lessons learned and challenges encountered and are organized according to its aims:

- to provide a brief summary of the process towards the UAEU and its implementation;
- to assess the roles played by actors of different government levels, in particular the cities and the EP;
- to briefly summarize relationships between the UAEU, cohesion policy and broader policy processes;
- to provide a critical assessment of the Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions Partnership and the Housing Partnership; and
- to provide recommendations for the future development of the Urban Agenda and the EP's involvement in the process.

Launching the UAEU in 2016 with the Pact of Amsterdam was the result of an extensive process lasting 20 years. The following conclusions can be drawn from this process and the implementation of the UAEU:

- EU policy indirectly affects urban areas in various ways. Its ability to directly deal with urban issues, however, is constrained by the fact that there is no EU competence for urban issues;
- the UAEU-partnership approach aims to overcome the shortcomings of previous attempts by establishing partnerships with clear rules for participation, working methods and expected outcomes;
- taking into account the rules on subsidiarity and the EU's limited legal competences in the field of urban policy, partnerships have addressed Europe 2020 targets that may be solved by better regulation, better funding and better knowledge;

- actions in the UAEU partnerships' action plans provide an agenda for change, but are not always precise as to the technical details on funding and regulations nor the specificities whether knowledge must be developed, disseminated or used;
- reviews by the Commission and by others are positive about the UAEU's approach;
- partnerships in the Urban Agenda are short-term partnerships, with short-term action plans; this does not align with the long-term issues and the long-term commitment needed in developing better knowledge, better funding and better regulation for urban areas; and
- although the partnerships addressed many cross-cutting issues defined in the Pact of Amsterdam, there is still potential to address more of these issues in the context of the partnership themes.

The **European Parliament** has supported the establishment of an urban agenda in the context of the EU 2020 objectives of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth. The EP has supported this process by a series of resolutions that have called for such a multi-level policy agenda. The EP aims to use the UAEU to build EU policies on local know-how and understanding from the bottom up. This includes the participation of towns and cities outside national capital regions. The UAEU is not urban as opposed to rural, but local as opposed to national or European. Both rural and urban areas can benefit from an approach in which local actors have an impact on European policies.

The EP (2015) developed four conditions for an urban agenda. Reviewing the UAEU using these conditions reveals the following:

1. The partnership approach is in line with a shared conceptual framework (Pact of Amsterdam) which is regularly updated by meetings of ministers and directors generally responsible for urban matters.
2. Concerning the impact and 'major' character of the agenda, questions may be raised, whether these ambitions will be fully met by the first round of action plans developed.
3. Not all of the proposed actions align with the condition of actions requiring multi-country solutions; placing greater emphasis on the EU dimension of better regulation and better funding, and to a lesser extent on better knowledge, could overcome this issue.
4. The large-scale support for the Urban-Agenda in the design of actions seems to indicate added value; however, the possible added value has not been entirely captured by the implementation of the UAEU.

The UAEU aims to involve **urban authorities** in achieving better regulation, better funding and better knowledge. The following observations apply:

- reviews by the Commission and by others are positive about the direct involvement of towns and cities;
- on the one hand, Member States' participation in the partnership provides the link to national context. On the other hand, this may result in partnerships not benefiting from the full potential of providing a perspective drawn from outside national capitals;
- as active participation in a partnership is time-consuming and therefore difficult to fit in with other commitments, smaller and medium-sized towns are less involved in the partnership approach; and
- given that the UAEU aims at a wider set of issues, most UAEU actions are not directed towards the post-2020 cohesion programme although there are a few which are, and they align with the development of the programme. Both the UAEU and the post-2020 cohesion policy proposal, are geared towards multi-level governance. Three proposals from the Urban Poverty

Partnership deviate from current cohesion policy proposals: (1) to introduce a block grant for urban authorities to fight poverty; (2) to introduce a new 'Urban Territorial Objective' to address deprived urban neighbourhoods and vulnerable social groups and (3) to introduce a Local Pact as a new multi-fund instrument to provide urban authorities with a leading role in the regeneration of deprived urban areas using a mix of place-based and people-based approaches.

The **Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions Partnership** aims, firstly, to promote the liveable compact city model. It aims at using land efficiently and avoiding overcrowding and urban sprawl. It does so by providing urban public and green spaces, affordable housing and good living conditions. Furthermore, the partnership aims to promote nature-based solutions, that is, to address societal challenges by solutions inspired and supported by nature. The main conclusions are as follows:

- the focus is on better knowledge, e.g. on the development of green areas to become part of the built-up environment, land take and awareness raising on the liveable compact city model and nature-based solutions. Less emphasis is placed on specific proposals for better funding and better regulation;
- one specific action includes information on differences in land take in the requirements for impact assessment Directives 2001/42/EC (on Strategic impact assessment) and 2014/52/EU (on Environmental impact assessment); and
- further actions are needed to go beyond awareness-raising.

The **Housing Partnership** aims to contribute to better policies and frameworks creating access to adequate and affordable housing by promoting affordable housing supply. The main conclusions are as follows:

- the partnership has fulfilled a core role in analysing the bottlenecks which hamper the establishment of affordable housing in urban housing markets;
- based on ten actual policy themes, the partnership developed twelve actions aiming for better regulation, better knowledge/governance and better funding, as well as a number of recommendations for future good policies, governance and practices;
- strengthening the role of cities, as well as improving housing affordability, remains a top priority of the partnership, not only on local and national levels, but also at the EU level; and
- the partnership regards taking advantage of long-term investment in social infrastructure (as proposed by the *High-Level Task Force on Investing in Social Infrastructure in Europe* (Fransen et al., 2018)), as a promising avenue for future development.

6.2. Recommendations

The UAEU would benefit from a number of adaptations concerning the format, the relationship with cohesion policies and the formulation of new priority themes and cross-cutting issues.

The specific **format of partnerships**, which involves multiple international meetings in a relatively short period, brings together organisations, which can attract people who feel at home in such an environment, including international organisations, Member States and larger cities. This results in the current structure being unable to sufficiently facilitate the involvement of small and medium-sized towns. Changing these features would involve the restructuring of the co-operation processes by which action plans are created. This may help involve people who are active on the ground and have first-hand knowledge and experience, including with funding practices and regulation. This in turn

would lead to more contributions resulting in more specific and better-implementable action. Here it is relevant to follow “*a new multi-level governance method*” using methodologies that “*correspond to the new realities of the digitalised ‘network’ society*” (EP, 2015b, paragraph 20); which includes involvement not only by physical meetings, but also other methods to allow people to bring their experiences to the partnership without travelling every few months.

Partnerships have resulted in **relatively few proposals for improving cohesion policy**. More effective cooperation could improve the connection between local practices and EU policy-making. This requires a working method which explicitly bridges the gap between local agenda and specific EU policies. The use of different modules in which professionals work on the impact of the EU on local practices and other experts work on addressing specific changes in EU directives, regulations and practices would facilitate this. Adequate funding will also be necessary. The partnerships’ proposals for better regulation and better funding offer a way forward.

The EP has made a plea to consider urban and rural development as two sides of the same coin. This offers the possibility to address **new topics** including the issue of urban areas in declining regions. These new topics may address the cross-cutting issues defined in the Pact of Amsterdam that have not been dealt with by many of the current action plans. This provides a potential agenda for new partnerships. The examples of potential new themes are:

- Air quality and innovative approaches, including smart cities;
- Circular economy - challenges and opportunities of small- and medium-sized urban areas and polycentric development;
- Climate adaptation and demographic change;
- Housing;
- Governance across administrative boundaries and inter-municipal cooperation: urban-rural, urban-urban;
- Urban poverty;
- Challenges and opportunities of small- and medium-sized Urban Areas.

New partnerships will offer a new impetus as their content will reflect the profiles of their new partners. It is relevant to the further development of the Urban Agenda to consider the bottlenecks that partnerships have defined as well as actions which may be further developed. A new working methodology, allowing partners to participate without turning their backs on local daily activities, would increase involvement, not only from small and medium-sized towns, but also from other urban authorities which face a shortage of professional personnel.

It is essential to consider:

1. that there are not only differences between regions, but also within functional urban areas that challenge the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU.
2. It should be noted that the EU has an impact on the way urban authorities address this challenge. The partnership approach developed in the UAEU is a way forward to involve urban authorities in EU policy development. It is however necessary to take further steps to ensure a continuation of the involvement of urban authorities in the UAEU, and to ensure that the outcomes of this involvement are linked to in EU policy development and implementation. In addition to formulating new partnerships, the European Parliament can play a role by inviting partnerships to discuss with members of parliament. The subject of the discussion could be proposed action for the future and those underlying issues which could be addressed by better knowledge, better regulation and better funding.

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ANNEX

This report is the result of a short study, primarily based on the analysis of documents, websites and other written material.

Primary sources were Urban Agenda documents as presented on the Futurium website, including the reports and actions published there, the website of the European Parliament reporting on activities of the parliament, websites of the European Commission and EUR-LEX to study policy reports by the Commission and scientific literature which were discovered using the abstract database Scopus.

The researchers consulted their networks to receive some background information, helping to interpret the written sources.

The project's aims were formulated as follows:

- to provide a brief summary of the process leading to the creation of the UAEU and the main steps of implementation taken so far;
- to deliver a clear summary about lessons learned and challenges encountered during the process so far;
- to provide a critical assessment of the role played by the actors of different governance levels, in particular the EP (...);
- to provide a critical assessment of the implementation of some of the Partnerships. The Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-Based Solutions Partnership shall be one of the cases analysed;
- to briefly summarise (...) the relations between the Urban Agenda and European cohesion policy as well as broader policy processes such as the upcoming review of the Leipzig Charter; and
- to provide recommendations with regard to the future developments of the Urban Agenda and the EP's involvement in the process.

In the report these have been redrafted as follows:

- to provide a brief summary of the process towards the UAEU and its implementation;
- to assess the roles played by actors of different levels of government, in particular cities and the EP;
- to briefly summarize the relations between the UAEU and cohesion policy and broader policy processes;
- to provide a critical assessment of the Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based solutions Partnership and the Housing Partnership; and
- to provide recommendations for future development of the Urban Agenda and the EP's involvement in the process.

The 2016 Pact of Amsterdam launched the Urban Agenda for the European Union. Within its framework, partnerships of urban authorities, Member States and other stakeholders have developed action plans to achieve better funding, better knowledge and better regulation for the priority theme of their partnership. This study provides an overview and critical assessment of the current state of play including the position of the European Parliament. Two partnerships, (1) Sustainable Use of Land and Nature-based Solutions and (2) Housing, are studied in more detail.

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