

HOUSING EUROPE

Position

Public consultation - "The urban dimension of EU policies – key features of an EU Urban Agenda"

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CONSULTATION RESPONSE http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/consultation/urb_agenda/index_en.cfm

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Making a city successful means ensuring that all the residents equally share the benefits of city life and urban growth.

Affordable housing is a key to this success!

1. What are the main rationales for an EU urban agenda? Where can EU action bring most added value? What elements of urban development would benefit from a more concerted approach between different sectors and levels of governance?

Although there is no single approach to urban challenges and solutions are to be deeply rooted in and supported by local community, local economic and institutional stakeholders, the EU should encourage national and local policy makers to do the right long-term investments in housing and cities that benefit the national economies and thus EU as a whole.

The EU urban agenda should contribute to creating a stable environment and recognition where housing is key to growth and equal societies.

In particular:

- The EU can help to shape the conditions that will allow affordable housing and sustainable communities to thrive. The EU energy efficiency policy, the cohesion policy (i.e. the European Structural and Investment Funds), the initiatives on sustainable construction, waste, water, mobility...etc. all this has an impact on the funding of urban policy, on the legislation related to some aspects of urban policy, as well as on the capacity of cities to exchange their practices.

- The success of any European strategy to overcome the current economic and social situation in the EU depends upon how well urban areas and affordable housing will be socially and economically empowered (not constrained) by the EU policies. If people do not have a degree of certainty about their future, of having a roof over their head, an income, assurance of safety in their neighbourhood there is no confidence and no sustainable growth. Therefore the EU agenda can help strengthen the very foundations upon which the EU can recover from the Great Recession.

- Despite the differences in terms of collective preferences at the local level, there is a convergence of view among EU city dwellers about the kind of city they want to live in (regardless the size or economic power of the city) ; a compact city, whereby all functions (services, homes, hospitals, schools...) can be easily accessible and affordable, a city with low air pollution and many green spaces, sport facilities, but also a safe city where relationships between people are based upon mutual respect. A city which does not foster spatial and social segregation and benefits from mixed neighbourhoods. Those elements of urban development are part of the European way of life.

Affordable housing plays a key part to sustainable urban development. The presence of quality affordable housing helps create and maintain communities which are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and where all are enabled to reach their full potential.

The EU urban agenda should help to address the common challenges for affordable housing providers:

- The financing challenge: The lack of long term financing instruments, not contingent with the economic situation (on the contrary there is a need for contra cyclical instruments) but rather contingent with the housing needs (number of households and demography are not related with economic situation);

- The double integration challenge: The difficulty to house increasingly heterogeneous households (in terms of income, employment status, ethnic background, age...) in places that are often deprived neighbourhoods that need reconnection with mainstream urban fabric. Those situations often generate crime, vandalism, poor quality of life and a sense of marginalization;

- The climate and social justice challenge: EU and national rules will impose nearly zero energy standards for any new building from 2018. Already now new build and renovation are carried out at a high level of energy performance. While this is an imperative linked to the reduction of the carbon footprint of the building sector and can in theory improve the living conditions of the inhabitants, there are increasing doubts about the possibility to

combine this imperative with the necessity to build new housing at low cost and great quantity in order to meet the current and future housing needs

- The housing exclusion challenge: In most Member States for which recent data are available, homelessness seems to be on the rise. According to national experts, homelessness increased over the past five years up to mid-2011 in fifteen Member States (AT, CZ, DE, EL, ES, FR, HU, IE, IT, LT, PL, PT, SI, SW, UK), it decreased in two (FI, NL) and it remained stable in one (DK). In this context, some local experience show that providing homeless people in particular the ones with addiction and mental health problems with permanent housing without preconditions is the best remedy for keeping people off the streets and curing them of their health issues and thus one of the most cost effective ways to combat housing exclusion. In this context housing policy makers will assign housing providers new tasks that will require new skills and new resource. In a time where the demand for affordable housing is growing from many segments of the society, this represents a new challenge;

- The declining city challenge: The “abandonment” of other cities, very often former industrial centres: unemployment and economic difficulties are accompanied by a demographic decline. These cities no longer have the means to provide a good level of service to their current residents, who are often vulnerable, public services close down...What can be done to help these cities to maintain a good quality of life and services and to find appropriate solutions to their problems, at a time when, as a reaction to demographic decline, public policies are reducing their housing efforts?;

- The sectorial fragmentation challenge: the absence of sectorial actors (in that case social housing organizations be they public, cooperative, private non for profit) managing a critical mass of the housing stock makes housing policy virtually impossible (for instance in terms of mass scale renovation measures that would require the agreement of thousands of small homeowners or landlords). This situation is a characteristic of all countries with an extremely high share of homeownership (around 90%) and a residual conception of the role of social housing. A great part of Eastern and Southern Europe is in this situation. At a time where housing markets need to be carefully monitored and regulated to avoid further housing led crises, this sectorial fragmentation is an obstacle to optimal housing policies.

2. Should an EU urban agenda focus on a limited number of urban challenges? Or, should an EU urban agenda provide a general framework to focus attention on the urban dimension of EU policies across the board, strengthening coordination between sectorial policies, city, national and EU actors?

In order to be effective, an EU urban agenda should do both. On the one hand, it should provide an incentive to coordinate sectorial policies that might have an impact on cities. On the other hand, it should also include specific programs and action plans to tackle the main urban challenges (including affordable housing), to be implemented in cooperation with local actors.

The urban agenda must avoid the pitfall of promoting a single "model" of urban development, for instance promoting competitive and smart cities, while shrinking cities are also a stern reality in the EU. It should rather act as a reminder of the diversity of situations and aspirations, while ensuring the capacity of cities to follow their own path and set their own priorities.

Affordable housing plays a key part to sustainable urban development. The presence of quality affordable housing helps create and maintain communities which are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and where all are enabled to reach their full potential. An EU urban agenda should provide some conditions for affordable housing to continue to play this role. In particular it should promote:

- Cities' response to the lack of affordable housing, related to the lack of available land;
- Building and renovating more efficient housing in terms of energy and fight against fuel poverty;
- A better understanding of the dynamics of urban societies and social changes and of the nexus of energy, environment, transport and land-use including the interplay with surrounding rural areas
- Understanding the links between labour market and societal mobility: how best to integrate urban core and rural hinterland
- An improved understanding of design and use of public space within cities also in the context of migration to improve social inclusion and development and reduce urban risks and crime
- Adapting housing and services to the increasing diverse needs (ageing of the population, importance of young households, decline in average size and increasing of the number of households);
- Adapt housing policies to situations of cities in economic and demographic decline;

- Liveability: how do we ensure that urban areas with increased housing density do continue to provide a high quality liveable urban environment?
- Support for rental housing sector through cooperative housing and social housing supply (e.g. incentives for scientific research to evaluate its significance for crisis prevention and its effects)

3. Is the European model of urban development as expressed in "Cities of Tomorrow" a sufficient basis to take the work on the EU urban agenda further?

The Cities of Tomorrow report states the following: "The European Cities of tomorrow are places of advanced social progress; they are platforms for democracy, cultural dialogue and diversity; they are places of green, ecological or environmental regeneration; and they are places of attraction and engines of economic growth".

While, as we already stressed above, studies and surveys show that there is a convergence of view among EU city dwellers about the kind of city they want to live in in broad terms, there are some compromise to be made between the different objectives (for instance, more green spaces vs. more affordable housing), which indicates that the European Cities of Tomorrow will still be very diverse and not all can become for instance "engines of economic growth".

The Cities of Tomorrow report makes a good diagnosis of the challenges facing cities (in particular the growing social and spatial segregation) but do not provide realistic solutions to it. The role of the EU urban agenda is to understand how best help cities to cope with those challenges. This should be the case when the European Commission prepares its Country Specific Recommendations. Still too often recommendations at macro-level do not take into account reality in the cities. At times this means not intervening, especially when national and local authorities use their competencies to organize Services of General Economic Interest according to the local needs and democratic choices.

4. How can urban stakeholders better contribute to the policy development and implementation processes at EU level? Do cities need to be more involved in policymaking at regional, national and EU level? How?

EU urban policies should always arise from the needs identified at the local level. That is why cities and local stakeholders should participate in the definition of the policy goals, as well as in the implementation of the concrete policies developed at the European level. In a sense, local stakeholders (both public and private) should be both the origin and the recipient of EU policies in order to guarantee their efficient design and implementation. The role of cities should be enhanced by virtue of the principle of subsidiarity.

Urban policies, and particularly housing policies, are highly complex since their implementation requires the contribution of a large number of actors: planners, financing bodies, housing operators, associations, residents. A provision of housing that is of a high standard, well-distributed and accessible, living-together and attractiveness are not things that can be brought about by decree, rather they are dependent upon the capacity and the will of a whole range of actors to act in synergy with one another in order to implement political decisions effectively. It is therefore essential that these actors mobilize their efforts and in order for this to happen, then they must be involved in the preparation of the decisions at the appropriate time.

In this area, too many political authorities take decisions that have not been well prepared, that have not been subject to consultation and that are therefore implemented badly. The correct involvement of all of the stakeholders is a fundamental element in the efforts made to ensure the quality and attractiveness of the city of tomorrow.

Whilst it is true that consultation of the actors is important, it is equally important that the actors be allowed to do their work. From this point of view, the EU must take care not to hamper the actions undertaken by the actors, rather it should endeavour to support:

- The social housing operators who benefit from specific legislation and financing
- The associations, who play a vital role in working alongside vulnerable members of the population, in providing social links, etc., and who require stable public support, even though they are currently paying the price for the financial difficulties encountered by the public authorities.
- The residents, who are both beneficiaries and actors in the creation of a peaceful environment

5. What are the best ways to support a stronger urban and territorial knowledge base and exchange of experience? What specific elements of the knowledge base need to be strengthened in order to better support policymaking?

The basic principle should be that all stakeholders involved in urban policies, regardless of the level, should pull together to achieve the same goals. To that end, all stakeholders to take part in the definition and implementation of an EU urban agenda should be included from the beginning and should have their role well defined in order to improve efficiency. In terms of the knowledge base needed to support stronger urban policies, it would be interesting to set networks that connected practitioners, local authorities and educative institutions such as universities and research centres in order to draw a connection between policy design and implementation.

In concrete terms, it means:

- promoting the creation of urban networks that include a wide range of stakeholders (URBACT III, Urban Development Network, Urban Innovative Actions)
- ensuring funding (in particular through the European Structural and Investment Funds) goes to housing-led approaches to urban development
- Involved practitioners in the research on urban dynamics and models of urban welfare

6. What should be the roles of the local, regional, national and EU levels in the definition, development and implementation of an EU urban agenda?

A bottom-up approach should be taken, so that all initiatives and ideas arise from the local needs and are enriched with the contributions of regional and national entities. Once at the EU level, national proposals should be combined in order to come up with a comprehensive definition of an EU urban policy. Its development and implementation should, once more, rely on the national, regional and local governments, while being monitored at the EU level.

Housing Europe 'The Federation of public, cooperative and social housing', is a network of national and regional social housing federations gathering 4.500 public, voluntary housing organizations and 28.000 cooperatives housing. Together the 45 members in 18 EU Members States and 3 non-EU countries manage 25 million dwellings. CECODHAS Housing Europe members work together for a Europe that provides access to decent and affordable housing for all in communities which are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and where all are enabled to reach their full potential.

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