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The urban dimension of the EU cohesion policy and its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals

Cities are at the centre of efforts when it comes to tackling the major challenges our planet will be facing over the next decades. Our partners at the United Nations have developed scenarios, according to which we will require the resource equivalence of two earth planets if the current population and consumption trends continue. Consequently, we need to stand up for a change so that cities can become as wealthy, viable, safe and economically strong as possible despite limited resources.

The urban dimension

Europe is an “urban continent“. Apart from the fact that three quarters of Europeans live in urban areas, cities also play an important role in our history and our models of society. It is quite logical that we are counting on our cities and their regions today as leading actors in realising an intelligent, sustainable and integrative growth.

Cities play a central role in realising the strategic goals of the EU. The challenges and potentials of Europe, such as in the field of research and development, but also energy revolution, climate change or integration, need to be first and foremost addressed in cities.

It is in cities where growth exceeds that of the rest of the EU by 50%, where jobs are created and the centres for innovation and education are located. Cities, however, are also facing challenges, such as expensive and insufficient living space, traffic jams and air pollution. However, cities are the place where many problems concentrate, whether it is in the social sphere or in the environmental sector!!

The EU dimension of the SDG with a focus on cohesion policy

In order to meet these manifold challenges, the EU has decided to implement the Agenda 2030 as well as the New Urban Agenda. Since the adoption of the Agenda 2030, the EU has played an important role in shaping this global process. Many of the goals of the Agenda 2030 are already closely linked to EU policies, which provides the framework for the current programme period for the implementation of our policies.

Indeed, the focus of the EU cohesion policy is on the overriding principle of sustainable urban development. It is the very EU policy which contributes most to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals and will provide around EUR 650 billion for the purpose in the period between 2014 and 2020. Of all areas of EU policies, the cohesion policy contributes most to achieving the SDGs – not only financially but also thanks to its concentration on the three dimensions of sustainable development. The objective to reduce inequalities within and between countries corresponds significantly to Sustainable Development Goal 10 (“Reduction of inequalities“).

In the current programming period, 94 % of the planned investments¹ are provided for the implementation of 11 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are of big importance for the social, economic and ecological development. The 6 most important SDGs that are currently being supported are the following:

- SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, infrastructure) with planned EU contributions to the amount of EUR 112 bn,
- SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth for all) with EUR 85 bn, SDG 4 (Education for all) with EUR 34 bn,
- SDG 7 (Sustainable and modern energy for all) with EUR 27 bn,
- SDG 1 (End poverty) with EUR 23 bn, and
- SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation for all) with EUR 15 bn.

The EU Urban Agenda and its links to the UN New Urban Agenda and the Agenda 2030

Given the necessity to react to these challenges, the **EU Urban Agenda** was worked out and passed by the EU member states under the Amsterdam Treaty in 2016.

The Agenda includes 12 main topics, such as the adaptation to climate change, digital transition or urban poverty with the objective to propose concrete solutions on a community level in order to achieve improvements in legislation, financing and the level of knowledge.

From this year on, all member states (except Malta) and 86 cities have been participating in the process; furthermore, there are 12 ongoing partnerships, with 2 more coming soon (culture and cultural heritage, public security).

Consequently, the Czech Republic coordinates the partnership Urban Mobility, while Poland (Gdansk) coordinates the partnership Energy Revolution; furthermore, Vienna as a city and Slovakia as a country are in charge of coordinating the Partnership in the field of Housing, together with Poznań and Slovenia, just to name a few examples.

One of the key aspects that will be a decisive factor for the success of the “New Urban Agenda“ is a good urban policy, since a better governance should lead to a better utilisation of the urban potential when it comes to meeting the challenges of sustainable development. A responsible governance in the city requires a legal and political framework which puts local authorities in the position to effectively implement national urban policies and at the same time give them enough flexibility as political decision-makers.

For this purpose, local authorities should be involved and consulted in all phases of the policy cycle from planning to implementation. Their commitment is necessary on all levels: on a local level, urban authorities need to be empowered and authorised to take over their role as key actors in designing and implementing a sustainable urban development.

¹ From EFRE, KF and ESF

Localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN (SDGs)

As far as the localisation of the SDGs is concerned, we believe that the cohesion policy represents the necessary strategic, integrated and place-based approach for an effective local implementation. The cohesion policy is the most people-oriented policy of the EU, since it promotes indeed integrated territorial solutions, which cover different sectoral politics and meet local needs. Through our initiatives, we are encouraging cities to present good examples for the implementation of the SDGs on a local level.

Nevertheless, we firmly believe that the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Europe is not only a question of financial support but also that the right policy instruments, knowledge and control mechanisms play an important role.

In the current programme planning period, many sustainability goals have been implemented also locally through integrated strategies for local development, which provide support for several areas of politics. EUR 100 bn from the Regional Development Fund have been spent in cities, with a total amount of EUR 15 bn being administered by the cities directly. ⁴

Support of cities/financing options within the framework of different EU programmes

The initiative for **Urban Innovative Actions** for pilot projects in the field of sustainable urban development provides subsidies from the Regional Development Funds to urban areas in the field of sustainable urban development across Europe for testing new solutions for urban problems. Thanks to this initiative, cities can work out and test new concepts for addressing their specific problems.

Furthermore, cities also receive support from the **European Investment Bank**, which has invested EUR 95 bn in urban development of the EU in the period 2011-2015 and has granted loans to more than 150 communities with more than 75.000 inhabitants, thereby having made possible a variety of sustainable projects and solutions.

Furthermore, a new advice platform for cities was established in 2017 within the framework of the European Platform for Investment Advice called **URBIS**. URBIS supports urban authorities in implementing projects, programmes and platforms for urban investment projects.

In addition to these initiatives, there are a number of other EU policies and programmes for specific topics, such as research and innovation, mobility or adaptation to climate change, as well as climate protection. As a result, a total amount of EUR 430 mn has been provided, for example, for lighthouse projects within the framework of the call for "Smart Cities and Communities" launched under the name "Horizon 2020".

Support for cities after 2020

With our proposals made in May this year for the programming period for the time after 2020, the European Commission reaffirms its commitment to promote sustainable urban development and gives cities the possibility to have their say as well.

6 % of the whole financial framework of the European Funds for Regional Development are provided for investments into a **sustainable urban development** on a national level, implemented via local development strategies. The existence of a strategy is essential for the programming in order to increase the efficiency of the planned measures, while participation of urban authorities will strengthen the individual responsibility ("ownership") of cities.

As a political reinforcement of the territorial, local and urban component, a specific political goal – “a Europe which is close to citizens has been introduced through the promotion of a sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives” (by the way, one out of five and not 11 as in the current funding period) – closing the circle to what I said at the beginning – that is, the economic and social development of cities is a central priority of the new cohesion policy proposed by us along with its funding and cooperation options, and also from the governance model which I have briefly mentioned.

Furthermore, the Commission – building on the already mentioned **"Urban Innovative Actions"** – has proposed a European Urban Initiative for the period 2021-2027, a new instrument for the cooperation between cities, for innovations and capacity building with regard to all thematic priorities of the EU Urban Agenda (such as, the integration of migrants, living space, air quality, urban poverty and energy revolution).

Conclusion

We hope that these strategies and programmes will encourage cities to work towards reaching the sustainable development goals on a local level. We would also like to encourage you to get actively involved and to inform your regional and national governments on how important a strong involvement into the next programming period, into the EU Urban Agenda and the localisation of the SDGs is.