Smart cities: Cooperation at all levels of governance needed

Written by Ramón Luis Valcárcel Siso on 14 October 2015 in Opinion
Opinion

Cities are the main actors when it comes to turning words into action, but the EU also has a key role to play, writes Ramon Luis Valcarcel Siso.

Cities currently have a very important role in Europe. Over 70 per cent of the EU population lives in cities, generating approximately 85 per cent of the EU GDP. There are three basic pillars on which cities must focus to succeed in becoming more intelligent, better connected and more open.

While cities and local authorities are the main actors in developing policies to make this happen, the European institutions and national authorities perform an essential role, providing, promoting and supporting tools to help achieve these objectives.

It is essential to promote and implement ICT, as well as smart technologies. Using these tools in cities can help improve citizens' quality of life, lowering CO_2 emissions, increasing energy efficiency, reducing bureaucracy and producing more competitive cities.

This can be achieved through the development of applications in key sectors such as education, health, assistance to disabled people, mobility, electricity, water management, electric mobility and eGovernment.

This is why it is essential to set up business incubators focusing on the development of these technologies.

Cities need to create the appropriate environment that will promote these incubators, and driving forward projects. This should to help create the jobs that make Europe more competitive, more sustainable and less energy-dependent.

Energy is another key area. Smart networks must be used and applied via smart grids, providing an opportunity to improve the integration of renewable energies, encourage the use of electric vehicles and supply energy through controlled consumption technologies.

The transport sector is also very important. Transport has a major impact on the urban environment and on people's quality of life. With the help of European and national institutions, local authorities must promote clean, sustainable, safe, effective and energy efficient transport.

They should focus on pushing alternative means of transport to vehicles, as well as interconnections in urban and peri-urban areas.

These measures are all part of the European Commission's objectives. Cohesion policy, together with the EU's research and technological development, transport and energy policies, are key tools to help achieve these goals. Programmes such as Horizon 2020 and the European fund for strategic investments - the so-called 'Juncker plan' - are also valuable.

The European institutions already have several initiatives and programmes intended to promote the development of cities. Community institutions need to create a strong bond between all of these, for example, the smart cities initiative, the covenant of mayors, the Civitas 2020 initiative, the Urban and Urbact programmes and others.

Similarly, the EU institutions must encourage member states to create networks of excellence in these areas.

Multilevel governance should be encouraged, in order to foster cooperation between regional, national and European authorities in the development of policies and the exchange of best practice. This will help spread the most innovative solutions so that the EU can achieve its objectives.

The Committee of the Regions can fulfil a vital role in driving forward cooperation between regions and EU policymakers.

European cities have responsibility for putting policies into practice that will make them more intelligent, connected and open. The European institutions can help guide them and drive forward plans and tools to help them achieve their objectives.

About the author

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