

## EU urban agenda is about working together for stronger cities

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Opinion

The goal of the EU urban agenda is not to impose further red tape on towns and cities - quite the contrary, writes Kerstin Westphal.



Over 70 per cent of the EU's population live in towns. Urban areas are drivers for innovation, as well as cultural and social developments. At the same time, they are also where some of modern societies' biggest challenges are found - demographic change, environment and climate change, poverty and social issues.

In recent years, there have been increasing calls for concrete action at EU level, resulting in the idea of an 'urban agenda'. This is an agenda which could lead to greater coherence in policies that affect urban areas, and give city authorities greater input in decision-making processes.

As I have said on several occasions, a lot of EU legislation needs to be carried out at local and city level. Therefore, this level should be involved when implementing new legislation.

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There is no legal basis for urban policy in the European treaties. As such, EU discussions on the urban agenda took place in rather informal meetings of ministers, where a common idea started to take shape between member states of what Europe could do for urban areas.

As Parliament's rapporteur on the urban dimension of EU policies, I attended many meetings and discussions on a European urban agenda.

After hearing from member states and some of my MEP colleagues, I am under the impression that we still need to fight for this idea, and that it still requires further explanation.

Many people are concerned and feel that any additional European focus on towns and cities would mean less attention paid to rural areas. Others are worried this will lead to more bureaucracy. Whenever the EU plans 'new' things, people seem to be afraid of new burdens.

The goal of the urban agenda - and of my report - is not to suggest new legislation and impose additional bureaucracy on cities. Nor is it our aim to become lobbyists for Paris, London, Berlin and other big capitals. It is not for us in Brussels to decide what constitutes a 'city', or how many people must live in a town for it to qualify as such.

We also care about smaller and medium-sized urban areas. I also want to stress that those working to support cities and urban areas do not intend to weaken to the role of rural areas. I believe urban and rural areas should work together - they can only get stronger if they can rely on each other.

What we want is better and earlier involvement of urban areas in European decision making, and better coordination within the Commission.

Let me give an example: the Commission launched an initiative on 'smart cities'. This is a good idea, but DG REGIO - the DG responsible for urban policy - has taken a backseat on the project. Instead, the initiative is being led by the DGs for energy and transport, along with DG CONNECT. In this particular case, it might just be an internal question of competences within the Commission.

Nevertheless, Parliament's report suggests appointing some kind of 'political lead' within the Commission to oversee all urban-related issues.

This would prevent different DGs from working on different - or even contradicting - legislation, leading to more coherent policy.

The report also calls for a 'one stop shop' within DG REGIO, a taskforce serving as a contact point for urban authorities. This could be an opportunity for cities to have their voices heard in the European decision-making process. It could also be helpful for those who aren't quite sure who to address in the 'jungle' of EU decision-makers.

Another important idea I would like to continue working on is the reduction of 'red tape' when it comes to the implementation of EU legislation. If the Commission introduced improved impact assessments of urban-related issues, it could make sure new initiatives are smoothly incorporated on the ground, without leading to more bureaucracy.

All of this can only be successful if we create a bottom-up approach. I am certain a 'top-down' process on urban issues would never work and would have no impact. We should support knowledge sharing, exchange of best practices and networking.

The so-called partnerships suggested by the Dutch EU Council presidency in its 'pact of Amsterdam' can be of real added value, as long as they deliver - in a transparent way and with a multi-level approach - an output of concrete proposals for better regulation and better funding.

Keeping up the momentum is crucial. Not only do we have a strong parliamentary report, we also have a Council presidency that is pushing urban policy. The planned 'pact of Amsterdam', to be adopted on 30 May by the ministers, should become a strong signal for cities and urban areas.

But once this is done, we must work for a stronger role for urban areas in Europe. Everyone knows how important cities are for growth and jobs and as motors for innovation, so let's be on their side.

## About the author

Kerstin Westphal (S&D, DE) is Parliament's rapporteur on the urban dimension of EU policies

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