



EUROPEAN
GLOBAL
COMPACT
LOCAL
NETWORKS
MEETING

European Global Compact Local Networks Meeting

Public-Private Joint Efforts Towards Rio+20

Sustainable Cities

- THEMATIC DISCUSSION BRIEFING NOTE -

Introduction

With the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Union has agreed on a common line to move towards a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. This strategy is both an operational answer to the global crisis and a vision of a better Europe.

At the basis of Europe's governance structure, directly influencing all aspects of the lives of over 70% of its population that lives on them, we find the traditional engines of innovation, change and growth in the European continent – but also the spreaders of pollution and magnets for all the poor and excluded – now, once again, called into challenge: the European cities.

From the European Commission's point of view, the role of cities in delivering the strategy's priorities is therefore undisputable. Cities are considered, indeed, the place where some of the world's most pressing challenges are concentrated but, at the same time, they are the place where the hope for a more sustainable world resides.

The traditional structure of European cities - compact, diverse and complex - has contributed to their economic efficiency, environmental quality and social cohesion, and also to the creation of a landscape and an urban, architectural and cultural heritage of great richness, variety and beauty, which has been functional and creative at the same time. Changing economic, social, environmental and climate conditions worldwide are nevertheless creating pressures and opportunities to plan, design and manage towns and cities more sustainably also in Europe.

The case for sustainable cities can be made in terms of inter-linked economic, social, and environmental benefits.

Economically, cities have to be considered as extremely important sites for the emerging green economy. This is for three main reasons. First, the proximity, density and variety intrinsic to cities deliver productivity benefits for firms and help stimulate innovation. Second, green industries are dominated by service activity – such as public transport, energy provision, installation and repair – which tend to be concentrated in urban areas where consumer markets are largest. Third, some cities will also develop high-tech green manufacturing clusters in or close to urban cores, drawing on knowledge spillovers from universities and research labs.

With reference to the environmental dimension, it has to be considered that if urban areas are now home to 50 per cent of the world's population but they account for 60-80 per cent of energy consumption and 75 per cent of carbon emissions. The same way they represent genuine opportunities to reduce carbon emissions and pollution, enhance ecosystems, and minimise environmental risks: compact, relatively densely populated cities with mixed-use urban form are, indeed, more resource-efficient than any other settlement pattern with similar levels of economic output.

Cities are places where problems of social exclusion and poverty accumulate, but also offer vast possibilities for integration, education and cultural dialogue. European societies are facing social and demographic challenges relating to a very diverse range of phenomena, such as population decline or stagnation, immigration, population ageing, unbalanced distribution and flows of people, increasing diversity and complexity of households and family patterns, etc. These challenges affect cities in different ways, producing a diverse range of urban processes, such as city shrinkage, suburbanisation, urbanisation, etc. Innovative sustainable approaches to urban planning and management can, nevertheless, make urbanisation more inclusive, pro-poor and responsive to threats posed by poverty and social exclusion. It has to be done without eliminating the cultural diversity that has often not only enhanced creativity within communities, but also strengthened social cohesion and contributed to cross-cultural relations and international peace and security.

Cities play, therefore, a vital role in the social and economic development of countries. Dynamically efficient and productive cities are essential for national economic growth and strong urban economies are essential for generating the resources needed for public and private investments in infrastructure, education and health, improved living conditions, and poverty alleviation. However, especially, urban social and environmental problems related to city growth are, if not adequately faced, serious threats to the full realisation of the socio-economic contribution, which cities can make.

Key Challenges

Rising awareness. Cities will need to become more aware of the impact that their consumption patterns have on other regions and ecosystems. Cities will also need to acquire accountability and responsibility for increasing consumption patterns. Existing tools developed in relation to environmental action need to be extended to address the economic and social dimensions of sustainability.

Promoting an integrated approach. Ecosystems thinking emphasizes the city as a complex system which is characterised by flows as continuous processes of change and development. It regards aspects such as energy, natural resources and waste production as chains of activities that require maintenance, restoration, stimulation and closure in order to contribute to sustainable development. Ecosystems thinking also includes a social dimension, which considers each city as a social ecosystem.

Promoting collective actions. The most important foundational enabling condition is a coalition of actors from the national and local state, civil society, the private sector and universities who are committed to advancing the green economy and its urban prerequisites, placing it centrally within the top strategic priorities for the city. The coalition required can be cohered and focussed to promote the idea of a long-term strategic plan for the city or urban territory.

Investing in innovation. There is no single model of sustainable urban development and no single path to the target, but there is a need for continued investment in new ideas and effective approaches to create more successful – more sustainable – cities and local authorities.

Engaging citizens. Assuring citizens' quality of life and welfare in all the existing communities and neighbourhoods of the city, stressing the need of their involvement in urban development through citizen participation, and also acknowledging the importance of the alliance and implication of all other stakeholders (private sector, civil society, etc.) as a crucial tool for an integrated approach

Discussion Question

What steps can the private sector take – independently and in collaboration with the public sector – to contribute to create more sustainable cities?