

Land use management for sustainable European cities

>> Interview with Dirk Ahner, Director General DG Regional Policy

Interview



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Dear Mr. Ahner, what are in your opinion the great challenges of integrated urban development in Europe?

Integrated urban development is, almost in itself, a challenge. Around 70% of all our citizens in the EU live in cities or their agglomerations. Cities and towns clearly play a wider role in the development of European regions. They are often hubs of education, culture and creativity. They are crucial to improve the EU's competitiveness and, thereby, serve as motors for growth. If these motors would not work anymore, the whole economy would be stuck. This is why we have a strong interest to prevent this from happening, and this even more so, as there are indeed a number of risks and challenges our cities and towns need to

address. Think for example of the growing social tensions through social exclusion and polarization. Think of the risks of insecurity or, more in the environmental field, think of problems of congestion and pollution. Think of the impacts of climate change and of demographic developments, which both will have quite asymmetric effects across Europe.

Another challenge suggested by your question is to make sure that urban development takes place in an integrated way, and not through the simple - and often ineffective - juxtaposition of different sector policies. Urban development is place-based and has to rely on an integrated development strategy. Such a strategy has to be multi-disciplinary in its conception and to include a multiplicity of relevant sectors in its implementation. It has to take into account from the very beginning the economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions of urban life.

In the field of Cohesion Policy, we have tried to promote such an integrated approach during the last programming periods through the « URBAN » Community Initiative. Such Community Initiatives are pilots to test new methodologies or to apply existing methodologies to new policy fields. Urban development was such a field, and according to our evaluations and the many feedbacks we have received, the Community Initiative was quite successful. Through a combination, of investments in buildings and equipments and investments in human and social capital (e.g. through social services, cultural actions, local capacity building or support to micro and small enterprises), it has been possible to generate a sort of a virtuous cycle of urban regeneration and development, with a special accent on deprived neighborhoods.

In the current 2007-2013 programming period, integrated urban development is no longer treated as an experiment with limited resources, but has been included in the big regional development programmes. It has been « mainstreamed ». This has led to an increase of the funds planned for urban development. However, in a number of cases it has also led to the abandonment of the integrated approach. To get this again right, will be one of our challenges for the future.





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Let me make one last point concerning future policy challenges with respect to urban development. Urban development strategies have to take account of the dynamics on the ground. They have to be place-based and bottom-up. Cohesion Policy is a place-based development policy. It is therefore well suited to address the challenges of integrated urban development. However, we have to ensure within the framework of our policy that there is sufficient flexibility and room for the local actors to develop tailor-made responses to the challenges their city or town faces.

Related to this, a second question: What is in your opinion the role of land use management in this context of integrated urban development?

First of all, to avoid a misunderstanding, the EU does not have any formal competence to act in the domains of land use and spatial planning. However, these are issues which are discussed between Member States, and the Commission participates in these discussions. In May 2007, Ministers responsible for urban planning adopted the „Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities“. This Charter pleads in favour of compact settlement structures in order to foster the efficient and sustainable use of resources.

The European Commission is a partner in this process, and we very much support the approach sketched out in the Leipzig Charter. We have recently launched a project called „The Urban Atlas“, which provides key information for a number of cities on land use planning. It delivers standardized, high resolution land use/ land cover maps of European cities and their wider hinterlands. Of course, these city-hinterland relationships can well go beyond the boundaries of political and administrative regions, and sometimes even beyond national boundaries. The Atlas is not only meant to improve our knowledge about cities and their relation with the hinterland, it is also expected to provide a strategic tool for planners and other practitioners involved in the integrated spatial assessment of urban areas and their neighbouring zones.

How far is metropolitan governance necessary for sustainable urban development?

Metropolis or not metropolis, whatever the definition is, the development challenges for urban areas very often go beyond the administrative boundaries of a city or a town. Our mindset is still influenced by a traditional configuration of the city as a well-defined environment. However, the reality of today is made up of complex urban systems and sub-systems, the fabric of which is partly the result of people's mobility, their means of transport, as well as the locations of their jobs and residences, the places where they work and the places where they live.

Most of today's cities and towns are sprawling into neighbourhoods which are neither really urban nor really rural, but something in between. Tackling the challenges urban areas face therefore requires a sustained coordination and cooperation between the different administrative entities concerned. This is why there is a need for appropriate systems of governance, call it metropolitan governance or urban governance or local governance. People at the local level know in many cases best how certain problems in their place may be addressed effectively. However, the coherence with what happens in the surrounding areas as well as at higher levels of government must be ensured to avoid a patchwork of development initiatives with frictions between them and a sub-optimal overall development. For instance, it does simply not make sense, at least not from a broader economic perspective, that every bigger city in Europe has its own airport. I believe we need a balanced combination of a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach. Through the top-down approach we have to define common objectives and priorities and to set framework of rules to be respected by all. However, this must leave sufficient flexibility for bottom-up approaches to develop, to mobilise local knowledge and initiative. To strike an effective balance between the two is one of the key policy challenges with respect to sustainable development.



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What would be the role of Cohesion Policy in this governance approach?

The partnership and close cooperation between different layers of government is one of the core principles of Cohesion Policy. An effective policy implementation requires that this cooperation works. In this sense, it stimulates multi-level governance through learning by doing, including the partnership between public authorities and other stakeholders. Moreover, the Policy can promote multi-level governance through the dissemination of good practices. It can also offer financial support to build up the human and social capacities needed to work successfully within multi-level governance partnerships.

Until now, multi-level governance was mainly focused on the relationship between the EU, the national and the regional level. However, in the context of the Lisbon Treaty with its particular accent on subsidiarity and the explicit mentioning of territorial cohesion as one of the objectives of Cohesion Policy, the question arises how the local level can in the future be more involved; It would appear, indeed, that territorial cohesion is quite often an issue at a sub-regional and a cross-regional level. From this point of view, problem solutions at the local level and the cooperation between local levels in different regions may play a more prominent role in the future than today.

Cohesion Policy is about multi-level governance and partnership. However, these are not seen as an end in themselves, but as an effective means to translate the objectives and principles of sustainable development into concrete actions or operations on the ground. Sustainable urban development is therefore a key element of the Policy, seeking to exploit the existing economic potential, but to do this in way which is socially inclusive and respects the natural environment. Sustainable cities not only attract people, they also attract businesses. They can generate a climate that stimulates creativity, favours research and innovation, and, through all this, strengthens the economy. And with that, we are in the heart of the EU's new blue print for smart, green and inclusive growth – „Europe 2020“.

How can the URBACT II programme help cities in an integrated sustainable development?

URBACT is an urban development network programme. It supports the exchange of know how and experience between cities and urban experts across Europe. It currently supports 44 projects involving 255 cities in all 27 EU Member States as well as in Norway and Switzerland. These projects focus on learning how to deal with some of the major economic, social and environmental challenges facing Europe's citizens today. They are about the discussion and dissemination of good practice and new ideas.

For me, URBACT is a very positive experience. It is a way to inter-link bottom-up approaches -and the ideas or concepts behind them- across Europe and to make them a source of inspiration for all. I see the preparedness of urban authorities to learn from each other, to share ideas and to develop common projects. All this is very valuable and could never be re-placed by a top-down approach from Brussels. Our task is in my view to make this exchange of ideas, this mutual learning process happen, and, where it leads to interesting new approaches and projects, to promote their dissemination and to help transform them into development on the ground, in particular through the establishment of links to the operational programmes.

Related to that, there is also the option to develop financial instruments like JESSICA; where could be the link between JESSICA as a top-down instrument and URBACT as a bottom-up approach?

JESSICA is a joint initiative we are undertaking with the European Investment Bank (EIB) to put in place a new financing instrument for integrated urban development. It allows money from the EU's Structural Funds to be used for the establishment of urban development funds, in which this money can be brought together with money from other public and private sources. We are still in a development phase, but the first „prototypes“ work and the interest of using EU money for such funds increases. All this is quite encouraging and looks promising for the future. During the next few months, we shall have to sit down and learn the lessons from our experience so far in order to improve the instrument, where possible, for the programming period post 2013.

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JESSICA is a financial instrument, whilst URBACT is a networking instrument to promote cooperation between cities on issues of common interest, to share experience and good practice and, most importantly, to develop new ideas, new methods, new concepts for urban development. The work in the framework of URBACT often ends with the elaboration of an action plan or a development concept, and the question arises how these can be translated into real development on the ground and how to finance such a development.

In most cases, this requires building a bridge between the URBACT networks and the regional development programmes, which are co-financed in the framework of Cohesion Policy by the Structural Funds. We try to achieve this systematically for the so called „Fast Track Networks“ in the context of our „Regions for Economic Change“ initiative. URBACT is part of this initiative. The idea is that the programme managers participate in the work of the URBACT networks and implement the new ideas, concepts or actions then through their operational programmes. In order to finance the implementation, they can then use programme money directly as grants (investment aids) or for the establishment of an integrated urban development under JESSICA. Where the JESSICA solution is possible, it should normally be the preferred one, as it allows a broader mobilization of funds of which at least parts can be of a revolving nature.

Dear Mr Ahner, thank you very much for this interview.

Interview by Didier Vancutsem, Lead Expert of the LUMASEC project, on 3. May 2010



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