



The OP-ACT Declaration

A call for equivalent living conditions in small and medium sized European cities in view of demographic change

In the majority of European countries population numbers are declining. At the same time the proportion of senior citizens is continuing to increase. In particular smaller and medium-sized cities are already being affected by this development. Added difficulties arise for these cities because, due to economic structural change, their vulnerability is far greater than that of more major cities. Many small and medium-sized cities have already lost up to one-third of their population. Associated with this is reduction in local authority financing and thus also municipalities' opportunities to take action in order to respond to these economic and demographic developments.

Municipalities do nevertheless have numerous ways to respond to demographic challenges. As part of the OP-ACT project within URBACT II 'Options of actions for the strategic positioning of small and medium sized cities', ten partner cities have developed strategies, policies and instruments for this purpose. However, unless there is structural support provided by higher level authorities, there is a danger that the downward spiral which is being addressed may perhaps be turning more slowly, but cannot be halted entirely. Regional disparities will then increase, equivalent living conditions throughout the whole of the European Union will diminish.

The cities brought together in OP-ACT are therefore calling upon higher-level authorities - regional and national governments and the European Commission – to give them support in their efforts to respond to the challenges of demographic change. Primary features involved in this include:

- **Furthering regional cooperation:** cities with demographic and economic problems often find themselves in competition with one another and / or with a prospering population centre in the vicinity. This can only be overcome by means of regional, in some instances also cross-border, cooperation arrangements. Furthering cooperation of this kind is a task not only for the cities concerned, but is also a central task within regional policies. We



therefore wish to see regional and national authorities taking steps to organise towns, cities and regions in a better way, in order to make them more resilient.

- **Adjusting finance allocations to problem situations:** in many EU member states, local authority financial allocations are factored on inhabitant numbers. In shrinking cities the consequence of this is that revenues fall much more rapidly than is possible in the case of expenditure – for example, for welfare / social security payments and on infrastructure outgoings. We call for financing structures to be adjusted to problems, not only related to population numbers.
- **Modifying and flexibilising support and funding programmes:** the majority of policies and projects aimed at tackling demographic change require integrated and participatory approaches. National and European funding arrangements are, however, frequently limited to rigid, complicated and rather inflexible conditions, which then hinder a process-based and inevitably flexible development of integrated projects. The situation for small and medium-sized cities is further complicated by the fact that, due to their limited resources, they are at a disadvantage compared to larger cities when it comes to applying for funding support. Future funding and support policies need to take both into account.
- **Avoid devolving welfare and social support costs on to cities:** Welfare and social support payments are in many EU member states to a large extent the responsibility of the local authorities. It is precisely small and medium-sized cities which already have exceeded the limits of their capacities – particularly if their population is falling. The discrepancy between municipal capacities and obligatory expenses will increase in future – amongst other reasons due to an ageing population. In many EU member states it is necessary to reform financing provisions for welfare and social support payments.
- **Do not cut back on social facilities or on infrastructure arrangements:** in a number of EU member states there have been and continue to be reductions in the number of educational, health and social or welfare institutions, and also in transport provision arrangements in shrinking regions, towns and cities, directed by regional and / or national governments. This is a slap in the face to all municipal efforts to stabilise the situation, and leads to further migration. We call for a regional policy which does not destabilise affected municipalities.

- **Education and professional training as key components:** education and further training have a vital part to play in overcoming problems of demographic and economic change. Several municipalities, for example, are successfully offering, in conjunction with schools or universities, further and professional training services for school pupils and students which are adapted to requirements in the local economy. However, the majority of cities have no influence on curriculum development. We call upon decision makers responsible for curriculum developments to take into account to a greater degree than at present economic and labour market issues – for example, entrepreneurship training aspects – at school and university level.
- **Targeted migration and family policies:** Europe will only be in a position to maintain its global competitiveness if it succeeds in keeping the demographic decline within limits. In view of generative behaviour patterns in most EU member states this will in the short and medium term only be able to be achieved by means of targeted immigration policies. In the longer term changes in family and labour market policy may also play a part – for example, by harmonising labour legislation with the needs of families, with the life-cycles of people. Shrinking cities can also profit from this – if these policy fields are supported through additional targeted measures. We call upon national governments and the European Commission to act accordingly.
- **Award for innovative small and medium sized cities:** One targeted measure could be an annual European award for innovation and sustainable approaches in the field of demographic change in small and medium-sized cities. This would enable branding and marketing for the award winning city.
- **Not merely participation, but also involvement:** many national legislative elements and European directives which affect cities stipulate public participation. Simple participation seems to those municipalities which have signed below no longer to be an adequate instrument in order to overcome their demographic and economic problems. Participation needs to be supplemented by empowerment and by encouraging civic involvement and responsibility. This means not only reducing legal restrictions (for example in insurance and liability questions), but also that aspects of this kind are taken into account in drafting future legislation or when legislation is being amended.

The signatories call upon other small and medium-sized cities in Europe to join them in endorsing the OP-ACT declaration.

(signed at) Leoben on 7 November 2012



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