

OPINIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

514TH EESC PLENARY SESSION OF 17 AND 18 FEBRUARY 2016

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘The future of the EU Urban Agenda seen from the perspective of civil society’**(exploratory opinion requested by the Dutch presidency of the EU)**

(2016/C 133/02)

Rapporteur: Mr Roman HAKEN

On 28 August 2015, Mr R.H.A. Plasterk, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations of the Netherlands, acting on behalf of the Dutch Presidency of the Council of the European Union, asked the European Economic and Social Committee to draw up an exploratory opinion on

The future of the EU Urban Agenda seen from the perspective of civil society.

(exploratory opinion requested by the Dutch presidency of the EU)

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 26 January 2016.

At its 514th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 February 2016 (meeting of 17 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 214 votes to 1.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EU Urban Agenda (EU UA) ⁽¹⁾ will directly influence the lives of the 80 % of EU citizens who will be living in towns and cities by 2050. To formulate the most effective provisions and ensure public acceptance of those provisions it is important to ensure that civil society organisations (CSOs) will be an equal partner in discussions and implementation of the UA. The Dutch Presidency’s initiative brings cities to the centre of development discussions for the first time in EU history. The EESC calls on the Council to acknowledge the municipal level in all its diversity as a valuable partner in the European integration process.

⁽¹⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index.cfm/en/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda

1.2. The EESC sees working in partnerships as an effective way of approaching these extensive and complicated issues. The EESC therefore values the partnership principle, which is finally being applied in the course of developing and implementing the 2014-2020 programming period ⁽²⁾.

1.3. Partnership is a principle for modern public services — both vertical and horizontal. As another example of such cooperation, the EESC suggests looking at public-private partnerships (PPPs) as a model for financing urban projects, various social enterprises, and also European partnership-based programmes such as Equal ⁽³⁾. It is up to public administration at various levels, notably in cities, to bring the relevant partners together in joint projects and to use financing effectively.

1.4. One of the challenges that the UA will face is how to implement strategies developed by thematic partnerships. It is crucial to use the bottom-up approach in creating partnerships, and in developing and implementing strategies. Therefore the EESC supports the bottom-up approach which is not the same as an approach based on expert groups. It is important to clarify how CSOs will work with their stakeholders — how they will report back, consult, etc.

1.5. When developing the new EU UA, horizontal partnerships are just as important as vertical (thematic) partnerships. These will operate mainly at local level in cities. They are important not only for strategic thinking but especially for ensuring implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Local strategies developed by local partnerships with knowledge of the local situation are the best way of incorporating recommendations from the EU level and implementing these effectively. One of the tools the EESC recommends for this purpose is the CLLD ⁽⁴⁾.

1.6. To ensure effective implementation of the new EU UA it is necessary:

- (a) to consider the basic needs of the partners involved and pay attention to capacity-building (mainly for horizontal municipal partnerships). For this the EESC recommends using the 'technical assistance' resources of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF);
- (b) to prepare methodological recommendations on principles of responsible urban partnerships. It is important to have a methodology for monitoring and evaluating the UA, including indicators that will be able to measure changes achieved. It is necessary for partners, including CSOs, to be involved in evaluation and monitoring.

1.7. The EESC would like to see clarification of how the thematic partnerships will deal with the issues and challenges of urban development. Horizontal partnerships should be those that implement specific measures in specific urban areas. It is therefore necessary to ensure that good practices are shared through specific events. It is essential that all regions of the EU are equally included (especially in southern and eastern Europe). The UA will have to recognise the relationships between cities and towns and the adjacent/surrounding peri-urban areas which contribute to urban quality of life. The UA should not be in conflict with or limit the development of rural areas.

⁽²⁾ See relevant work of the EESC, the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions:

How to foster efficient partnership in the management of cohesion policy programmes, based on good practices from the 2007-2013 cycle (OJ C 44, 11.2.2011, p. 1).

The partnership principle in the implementation of the Common Strategic Framework Funds — elements for a European Code of Conduct on Partnership (OJ C 44, 15.2.2013, p. 23).

Community Led Local Development (CLLD) as a tool of Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 for local, rural, urban and peri-urban development (OJ C 230, 14.7.2015, p. 1).

Strengthening the participatory processes and the involvement of local authorities, NGOs and the social partners in the implementation of Europe 2020 (OJ C 299, 4.10.2012, p. 1).

Evaluation of European Commission stakeholder consultations (OJ C 383, 17.11.2015, p. 57).

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A8-2015-0218+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52013IR6902>

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:c10237>

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32013R1303> Article 5(3) on a European code of conduct on partnership.

⁽³⁾ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:c10237>

⁽⁴⁾ *Community Led Local Development (CLLD) as a tool of Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 for local, rural, urban and peri-urban development* (OJ C 230, 14.7.2015, p. 1).

1.8. A number of themes are interconnected and to some extent overlapping. The implementation of measures dealing with one theme will influence one or a number of other themes. It is necessary to ensure that measures to improve the situation in one area do not have an adverse effect on another area. This concerns not only the EU but also the national level.

1.9. The EESC suggests including Urban Communities and Citizens Participation as a new theme in the UA. Cities need a functioning mechanism for strengthening citizens and groups of citizens so that they can be real and solid partners in discussions and implementation of development priorities for their cities and in implementing the UA. Only a self-confident and strong community with high social capital will be able to deal with the challenges that are emerging. The EESC is prepared to work on fleshing out this idea.

1.10. Elements such as the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and in particular Goal 11 ('Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable') should also be included. The EESC adopted a position on this topic in September 2015 ⁽⁵⁾. The EU does not have equal competencies in all policy areas, and its powers in relation to social matters in particular do not seem to be strong enough. It is questionable whether the EU can influence urban development in the social domain or adequately assess the social impact of measures implemented in other policy areas. Although environmental impacts can be identified through the EIA procedure, social impact assessment is still lacking.

1.11. The EESC is interested in becoming a fully-fledged member of the EU UA steering group and in participating in UA partnerships. The EESC represents CSOs from all the Member States, organisations which are respected and have expertise, and which can contribute to urban development.

2. Partnership as a principle in the EU's Urban Agenda and EESC involvement in the UA

2.1. The UA suggests creating partnerships of around 15 members, of which 11 will be representatives of public administrations (cities, Member States, Commission representatives). Other members could come from the managing authorities of the ESIF, experts and NGOs. The EESC regrets that it was invited to comment on this topic only after some of the partnerships were already established.

2.2. The EESC suggests adopting more balanced representation in partnerships. A good example of fair representation is provided by the LEADER programme, where a maximum of 50 % of partnership members may come from public administration. The EESC recommends much greater involvement of target groups (urban residents). It is important that residents themselves have a greater say in the future of cities. Most of the themes identified cannot be addressed without the commitment of NGOs, social partners and business. All successful examples in Europe have proven to be due largely to the engagement of non-governmental forces and to effective public-private cooperation.

2.3. While all the priority themes in the UA are relevant to CSOs, they go beyond the traditional roles associated with civil society. NGOs, social enterprises, and cooperatives are increasingly developing their capacity or establishing new economic or organisational models to provide public-interest services. It is necessary for public authorities to be able to see themselves from the point of view of groups and organisations working in urban areas. The EESC suggests that involving national or regional networks or local organisations with a lot of experience on a given issue would be just as useful as having European networks.

2.4. The EESC does not have information about the ways in which relevant CSOs will be identified and/or selected. The EESC offers its capacity and knowledge of organised civil society in choosing representatives of NGOs and social partners for thematic partnerships.

⁽⁵⁾ <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.press-releases.37475>

3. Recommendations for the work of UA partnerships and the participation process

3.1. It is the right of every EU citizen to know, understand and also influence EU policies. The EESC points out that a partnership should not become a closed shop. The way that partnerships communicate with the outside world is very important. Open public administration communicating with the general public and organisations representing citizens' interests should be a key element of urban development. As it is not possible to achieve strategic goals without the support of local citizens and CSOs, and it is important to ensure transparency and effective involvement of stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of the UA. Involving people who want to be involved is the best way to win their support for outcomes. The EESC suggests opening an invitation to organisations that might want to share their experiences and ideas on UA themes and could join some of the partnership meetings.

3.2. Partnerships need to use a number of communication and participation tools for sharing, communicating and consulting. Involving and consulting citizens cannot be effectively achieved with just one tool. A combination of methods is needed that is able to address different types of stakeholders, provide different types of input, and allow different levels of involvement. Partnerships should utilise up-to-date techniques such as social media, as well as surveys, workshops, focus groups, etc. so as to receive feedback on their work. The EESC recommends that additional (wider) public involvement be organised on specific issues where there is clear need for wider public discussion as well as feedback to citizens.

3.3. Partnerships should organise site visits and meetings with various stakeholders beyond the limited circle of the partnership. Encountering on-the-ground civil initiatives and learning about their limitations and their cooperation with public administrations can significantly influence the partnership discussion. If the UA is not based on existing practices, the resulting policies risk overlooking available knowledge.

3.4. Action plans should be the subject of open online consultation. This would ensure that all the relevant stakeholders can contribute to their content and that all interests are covered.

4. Priority pillars for thematic partnerships

4.1. *Inclusive cities*

4.1.1. **Jobs and skills in the local economy** — CSOs fulfil a number of roles — e.g. as employers, educators or trainers — that are relevant to creating new jobs. The EESC recommends consulting organisations like Eurochambres representing SMEs, job centres, and education and training establishments. The UA must address the issue of how cities will carry out a survey of expertise needs in their area; CSOs must be informed about these needs and there must be cooperation to promote the education, life-long learning and training that will provide the skills missing in the labour market.

4.1.2. **Urban Poverty** — CSOs are delivering the majority of programmes aimed at preventing and fighting urban poverty in cities. The EESC suggests involving organisations such as the European Anti-Poverty Network. We are also aware of the importance in relation to this theme of: a) suburbs and marginalisation, b) ghettos, c) deprived neighbourhoods, d) children in institutional care and the transition from institutional to family and community-based services, and e) ageing and vulnerability among the elderly.

4.1.3. **Housing** — To ensure good-quality, sustainable housing as defined in the UN Charter on Sustainable Housing, CSOs play an important role in representing and working with both sides — owners and users. The EESC recommends addressing organisations such as the International Union of Tenants, associations of flat and house owners, cooperative building societies, architects or city planners. This theme raises important issues of: a) urban planning, b) social housing, and c) moving of citizens to peri-urban areas to find better-quality housing.

4.1.4. **Inclusion of migrants and refugees** — It is necessary to address not just the short-term issues (providing for basic needs), but also — once migrants are settled — their integration into EU society: helping with education, getting jobs, etc., sharing EU values and traditions with them, and incorporating those values and traditions into their lives while respecting their culture of origin. CSOs such as churches, social organisations, education and training organisations, children's and parents' groups, etc. play a crucial role alongside the state. The EESC recommends consulting Solidar or Lumos, among others. Issues such as unaccompanied minors — a particularly vulnerable group requiring special attention — should be addressed.

4.1.5. **Sustainable use of land and nature-based solutions** — The objective of the UA is closely related to changing people's attitudes and lifestyles. Making sure that changes in cities respect the environment is an area where the involvement of CSOs such as representatives of land-owners, associations of SMEs, and community organisations which are behind movements for improving neighbourhoods is crucial. The EESC recommends involving for example Friends of the Earth Europe or ELARD. The EESC regards the following as important: a) spatial (vertical) planning, and b) problems of suburban areas that supply products (food, clean water), but also essential ecosystem services, which improve urban citizens' quality of life.

4.2. Urban economy

4.2.1. **Circular economy** — For an effective circular economy it is important to change the way people see waste and to present it as a potential resource. The education and information activities of environmental organisations and education establishments are important. Research and innovation centres, together with specialised companies and associations of SMEs, focusing on this area will be key players in exploring and implementing new approaches in cities. The EESC recommends inviting for example REVES to hold discussions.

4.3. Green cities

4.3.1. **Climate adaptation** — High-tech companies, research institutes and universities are crucial. It is also necessary to educate and inform ordinary people to facilitate their involvement in and acceptance of relevant provisions. The EESC suggests consulting Green 10, for example.

4.3.2. **Energy transition** — Structural changes in energy systems, such as a substantial shift towards renewable energy and increased energy efficiency, can be achieved only with the full involvement of partners from relevant businesses and the support of citizens. Greenpeace, for example, is active in this area.

4.3.3. **Urban mobility** — Sustainable urban mobility is a sphere where little can be done unless people themselves are willing to change their mobility habits. The EESC therefore suggests involving organisations such as CEEP (the European Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public Services), BusinessEurope, ETF (the European Transport Workers' Federation), Polis (network of European cities and regions developing innovative technologies and policies for local transport), the European Cyclists' Federation and IPR Prague (the Prague Institute of Planning and Development). We also understand this theme to include the importance of integrated approaches such as Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs), and we thus see urban mobility as an enabler for economic development, for improving environmental conditions, and for the energy transition in cities. The EESC emphasises the importance of specific EU financing instruments for urban mobility, which is an area in need of capital-intensive investment.

4.3.4. **Air quality** — The cooperation of businesses, healthcare organisations, environmental NGOs, universities and research institutions and others is essential. Partnerships should involve organisations such as CAN (Climate Action Network Europe).

4.4. *Smart cities*

4.4.1. **Digital transition** — The digitalisation of society represents a paradigm shift. The objective is to provide better services to citizens and create business opportunities. A case in point in smart cities is the triple helix and the quadruple helix, which bring stakeholders in city management, higher education, business and civil society together in joint projects. This model should be disseminated in Europe. Under this heading we consider the issues of: a) predictable urban planning in any municipality, and b) use of social networks and the internet for communication between municipalities and citizens. Partnerships should also involve organisations such as Transparency International.

4.5. *Innovative and responsible public procurement*

4.5.1. The potential for cities to implement innovative approaches is significant: they can act as forerunners, and not only in the area of public procurement. However it is important to cooperate with business innovation and support centres and EU CSOs such as CEE Bankwatch Network. The EESC highlights the importance here of: a) using public procurement to contribute to the local social economy, and b) specific methods of motivating cities to opt for innovative public procurement instead of the cheapest solutions.

4.6. Cities are part of complex systems, where a wider peri-urban area provides essential support and resources which enable cities to function and succeed. It is necessary to involve partners from areas surrounding cities, including Local Action Groups, so as to provide a valuable link between urban and rural areas, particularly in relation to desirable rural/urban partnerships. When planning their development, cities must take into account existing strategies such as macro-regional strategies and relevant micro-regional development strategies.

Brussels, 17 February 2016.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Georges DASSIS
