Conclusions: The Urban Dimension of Cohesion Policy

The case studies that were categorised according to the three EU2020 aims of “smart, sustainable and inclusive” growth present inspiring examples of the developments facilitated by Cohesion Policy which are realised at the local level. Besides illustrating practices at the local level, the project managers recorded that the different Funds (ERDF, ESF and the Cohesion Fund) are crucial in setting the projects and programmes in motion.

The added value of the various sources of funding is diverse. A recurring element was that the possibilities for financing projects that Cohesion Policy presents local governments with are very important. In the crudest sense, projects could not have progressed from plan to practice without the involvement of Cohesion Policy. A second important element that often featured in the views of those working at the local level is that Cohesion Policy enables cities to develop a project of a higher quality than would have been possible otherwise. Furthermore, the combination of Funds facilitated the development of a truly integrated approach, as opposed to cities being able to implement parts of the intended project only. Finally, the funds also cultivated commitment in local governments as well as private investors which permitted the co-funding that is in most cases a necessary precondition to cohesion funding. In short, there are four aspects to the added value of Cohesion Policy:

- Financial leeway;
- Higher quality projects;
- Integrated approaches to policy challenges;
- Commitment from public as well as private investors.

These four aspects all serve to increase the ways in which local governments can take up the urban dimension in the challenges of the 21st century. The draft Cohesion Policy regulations have proposed a focus on eleven challenges, most of which have a clear urban dimension, such as the shift towards a low-carbon economy, promoting sustainable transport and promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. Stimulating the urban dimension is thus not only in the interests of the locality at hand, but in those of the Member States and Europe as a whole as well.

The interrelation of these two interests advocates the further development of the Urban Dimension: the local level contributes in a meaningful way to a Smart, Sustainable and Cohesive Europe. City organisations argue that a way of achieving this would be to create a greater role for cities in developing and implementing programmes funded within the context of Cohesion Policy. Local and, in a growing number of cases, national authorities seem to agree that cities should be involved in deciding on priorities and developing programmes of action to maximise their effectiveness on the ground. This should also involve possibilities for the delegation of funding to them, for instance in the form of urban operational programmes (OPs) or sub-OPs supported through global grants or similar funding instruments.

The Commission also emphasises the importance of the role cities play in the economic and social development of Europe. Challenges should be met at the lowest possible democratic level, bringing
Cohesion Policy to the doorsteps of the citizens of Europe. In this light, Mr Berkowitz stressed that multilevel urban governance and partnerships need to be improved in the next programming period.

This idea coincides with one of the conclusions of the Belgian Presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2010. The publication “Multilevel Urban Governance or the Art of Working Together” concludes by suggesting a policy cycle that takes into account precisely these aspects of multilevel governance. Key elements in a coordinated multilevel approach that would improve the effects of Cohesion Policy are:

1. Relevant actors need to agree upon common objectives;
2. These objectives must be turned into coordinated strategies and action plans which facilitate multilevel cooperation;
3. The fulfilment of actions and objectives must be monitored and evaluated;
4. Mutual learning must be encouraged through the pooling of knowledge and the exchange of best practices.

This inclusive policy cycle should support better policies, improve coordination and produce better urban practices. Fostering the urban dimension through this multilevel urban governance approach is an important issue in the next programming period.

The final form of the regulations for the 2014-2020 Cohesion programming period is not yet clear – nevertheless, the current outlines clearly emphasise the importance of urban themes and urban governance in the eleven funding priorities. This publication is intended to support and further develop the debate on the future of Cohesion Policy, in which the urban dimension cannot be overlooked if the grand challenges of the 21st century are to be faced successfully.