Looking back at 2020

Looking back at 2020, certainly from the perspective of mid-2021, does not go without mixed feelings. While the EUKN’s 2020 Activity Report is not the place for extensive reflection about the (lasting) impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no way around it if one wants to understand the network’s activities and services during this exceptional year.

The year 2020 will be remembered as the historic moment when a pandemic spread across the world and severely impeded personal liberties as well as the functioning of entire economies. Our life as we knew it came to a standstill, determined largely by the infection statistics and related containment measures.

Working from home became the new norm for everyone who was able to, which also applied – and still applies – to the EUKN Secretariat in The Hague as well as the EUKN Members in their respective capitals. In-person exchange moments and meetings, big or smaller-scale, were moved to online environments. In itself, this provided a fantastic and collective learning opportunity, which has made meetings cheaper, more flexible, and more accessible. At the same time, personal encounters are being sorely missed by many and in all spheres of life.

Despite the disruptive character of the year, the EUKN has continued fostering integrated and multi-scalar work, meaningful exchange, and strategic knowledge creation. True to the motto ‘Thinking beyond the crisis’, the EUKN Secretariat is proud to have managed to continue delivering high-quality services to its Members and third parties.

A few activities stand out:

- The support to the German Presidency was successfully finalised, with the key moment being the endorsement of the New Leipzig Charter by the Ministers responsible for urban matters on 30 November 2020. The final meetings within this project, all moved to online environments, were delivered successfully.

- To capitalise on the New Leipzig Charter’s momentum, Germany tasked the EUKN with an additional project to support the Germany-Portugal-Slovenia Trio. This project, too, has been finalised in the meantime (February 2021), and was continued during the Portuguese Presidency.

- 2020 has also been the year in which the Horizon2020-funded CONEXUS project started. Between September 2020 and August 2024, EUKN team members will exchange knowledge allowing partners in the EU and in Latin American countries to set up projects that will benefit from the latest insights in nature-based solutions.

- Lastly, an array of highly interesting – albeit all online – Policy Labs for EUKN Members could be realised throughout 2020. They are all described in detail in this Activity Report.

The EUKN, represented by its Secretariat, has been continuing its strategic (re-)positioning in view of the post-2020 Cohesion Policy and the proposal for the new European Urban Initiative (EUI). The four interlinked strategic blocks outlined in 2019’s Activity Report (Post-2020 Policy Objectives, A stronger urban network, Urban Agenda for the EU, New Leipzig Charter) still constitute the solid core of the network, which is continuously being adapted, built upon, and expanded responding to changing circumstances and policy priorities.

2020 was supposed to mark the kick-starting of the Decade of Action to achieve global sustainability goals and other commitments. This has come true, albeit differently than expected. Hereby, the EUKN feels an unabated responsibility to contribute to Europe’s (and the world’s) transition towards a just, green, and productive urban future.
Looking forward, the EUKN Secretariat is slowly but steadily preparing for times in which personal encounters, including work-related meetings, will be possible again.

The joining of Portugal and Belgium as new EUKN Members, both announced in 2020 and to be formalised in 2021, is a powerful manifestation of the network’s added value and important function at the interface between urban policy and research.

The EUKN in 2020

The EUKN is the only independent Member State driven network in the field of urban policy, research and practice. Knowledge co-creation and dissemination are two key elements of the support to members of the network. Understanding the production and promulgation of strategic urban knowledge as a process that adapts and responds to the changing political, socio-economic and environmental context of the urban realm, the EUKN offers a variety of activities responding to Members’ different needs. The EUKN delivers strategic knowledge to its beneficiaries through tailor-made activities (Policy Labs and on-demand support), network-wide activities (knowledge dissemination and communication) and external activities (specific projects for members or non-members).

At the end of 2020, the network was composed of:

- **EUKN Members**: eight national ministries responsible for urban matters in Czechia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal (as candidate-member), Slovenia, and Spain constitute the beneficiary group of the network. Belgium announced that it will formally join the network in 2021. The EUKN contributes to their thematic priorities and strategies in the field of urban development.

- **EUKN Secretariat**: acting as the mediator between the network Members and other stakeholders and partners. The Secretariat’s main tasks cover the administrative and content-related planning, coordination and delivery of all EUKN activities. At the same time, it continuously works towards fulfilling strategic goals and the network’s growth.

The Secretariat is composed of a Director and a dedicated team of Policy and Project Officers, regularly supported by interns. In 2020, the team comprised 6 members of staff, including two part-time interns and two part-time Policy and Project Officers. In total, the team spent 74% of its 7,627 workable hours on membership activities (5,627 hours) and 26% on externally funded projects (2,000 hours), including the support to the German Presidency and its Trio partners. Based on 1,577 workable hours per full-time equivalent (FTE), the Secretariat comprised in total 4.84 FTE: 3.57 FTE working on membership activities and 1.27 FTE on externally funded projects.

- **Supporting Group**: it is made up of key urban policy actors that the EUKN has been cooperating with or is planning to do so in the future. The key partners for 2020 were the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission, JPI Urban Europe, the Urban Intergroup of the European Parliament, the Union for the Mediterranean, UN-Habitat, Eutropian, the University of Sheffield, Living Cities and ICLEI and other CONEXUS consortium partners.
1. Thinking Beyond the Crisis

The initiative explored the urban impacts of and responses to the coronavirus outbreak in EUKN member countries. This Policy Lab series served as a platform to discuss solutions at the local and the national level. It specifically addresses two interconnected questions:

1. To what extent could innovative short-term solutions at the city-level inspire changes in national urban policies?
2. How can national strategies and structures support local capacities and (new and existing) pathways towards more just, green and productive cities in a post-COVID-19 Europe?

Policy Labs
- Smart Czechia: an Integrated Approach Towards Smart Cities (28 July 2020)
- Facing & Learning from COVID-19: European and Spanish Urban Strategies for a Resilient Future (14 January 2021)
- Port Cities and Mega Trends: Glocal Approaches to Sustainable Transitions (26 January 2021)

Related Newsletters
- Urban Resilience in the face of pandemics
- Urban design and pandemics
- Rebuilding local economies in the wake of pandemics
- Urban Mobility in the wake of pandemics
- Urban Tourism in an era of pandemics

2. The Urban Agenda for the EU

After its launch with the Pact of Amsterdam in 2016, the UAEU will be further advanced throughout 2021, towards a new Working Programme to be concluded during the Informal Ministerial Meeting under the Slovenian Presidency. The EUKN Secretariat contributed to the discussion on the future UAEU via a series of Policy Labs, activities, and especially through the support to the current Council Presidency Trio, composed by the EUKN Members Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia.

Policy Labs
- Consolidating and Delivering the UAEU, Policy Lab for Germany (15 June 2020)
- Unravelling the ‘Green’ Actions of the UAEU, Two Policy Labs for Slovenia (9 June 2020 and 3 November 2020)
- UAEU Partnerships in the Spotlight, Policy Lab for the Netherlands (13 October 2020)

Related Newsletter
Facing the future together through Urban Partnerships

3. The New Leipzig Charter

The New Leipzig Charter was endorsed at the informal meeting of the Ministers responsible for urban matters on 30 November 2020. To enhance the impact of the new Charter, the EUKN organised several Policy Labs and activities, and strengthened ties with other key actors of the urban-research interface, including the webinar for the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission.

Policy Lab and webinar
- The NLC and JRC Urban Activities, webinar for the JRC (26 November 2020)
- Urban Transition for a More Sustainable Europe, Policy Lab for Poland (16 December 2020)

Related Newsletter:

4. Nature-based solutions

EU policy discourses reiterate that nature-based solutions are key to the sustainable transition of society. Through the H2020 CONEXUS project, the EUKN is working with partners from EU and Latin American cities to co-create, value and upscale solutions inspired by nature. The project’s ambition is to restore urban ecosystems, while fighting climate change and contributing to healthier, more inclusive environments.

Related Newsletter
Nature-Based Solutions: A Potential Golden Bullet?
Smart Czechia: and Integrated Approach Towards Smart Cities
28 July 2020, Policy Lab for Czechia

The Policy Lab was organised in cooperation with the Czech Ministry of Regional Development and it launched the EUKN ‘Thinking beyond the crisis’ series. The focus of the event was the ‘SMART Czechia’ concept: a strategy drafted by the Czech Ministry for Regional Development promoting the use of innovative solutions to improve the well-being of Czech citizens and their economic prosperity going forward and in response to the pandemic.

The main cross-cutting area of this concept is the idea of resilience at the level of municipalities, cities and regions, which lies in the integrated use of technological tools and innovative solutions. The concept is further based on three pillars, which represent the three pillars of sustainable development. These are: (1) people and communities, (2) local economy, and (3) environment for life.

The event featured a balanced composition of European and Czech experts who shared their experiences on smart cities and commented upon the ‘SMART Czechia’ concept. Building upon the experts’ contributions, the EUKN Secretariat has formulated seven recommendations for the Czech Ministry of Regional Development on how to support cities in designing and implementing smart solutions.

Facing & Learning from COVID-19: European and Spanish Urban Strategies for a Resilient Future - 14 January 2021, Policy Lab for Spain

The Policy Lab, jointly organised with the Spanish Ministry of Transport, Mobility, and Urban Agenda (MITMA), offered a platform to reflect on cities’ opportunities to rethink their approach to the urban space in light of the COVID-19 outbreak, focusing on urban health as a holistic concept which encompasses different dimensions of everyday life.

After an informative overview of city actions and policy responses presented by EUROCITIES, the urban strategies put in place by the provincial deputation of Barcelona, the municipality of Torrent, the city of Paris and the city of Milan were presented. In the second part of the event, the participants were divided into four breakout rooms structured along four key themes related to urban health: sustainable mobility and transport; health and urban planning; inequality and the social dimension; national urban policies.

The main reflections and recommendations co-produced during the event informed a report extrapolating practical lessons for Spanish municipalities to adapt their action plans towards resilience, within the framework of the Spanish Urban Agenda (AUE).
The event was jointly organised with the French National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT) in partnership with the Interministerial Delegation for the Development of the Seine Valley (DIDVS), the city of Le Havre, and its Urban Planning Agency (AURH). Gathering more than 70 participants from port cities all over the globe, it offered a platform to reflect on the global impact and local effects of mega-trends on port cities in Europe and beyond.

Experts from France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and South Korea explored different dimensions of port cities’ sustainable transitions, providing insights on how global mega-trends are affecting peoples and their territories. The dynamic make-up of the webinar allowed to problematise different aspects of the transition: from collaborative versus competitive value chains to carbon-neutrality and its trade-offs; jobs and skills in the new economy; inclusive waterfront redevelopment and land-use; and the contested urbanisation of the sea. The main reflections and learnings from the webinar will inform a final report, published by the EUKN and ANCT in English and French, and to be made available soon.

More on the EUKN contribution to ‘think beyond the crisis’...

Urban Thinkers Campus - COVID-19: A Catalyst for More Sustainable Urban Mobility?
On 17 July 2020, the EUKN secretariat hosted a webinar on the future of urban mobility in the wake of COVID-19 as part of the UN-Habitat World Urban Forum Urban Thinkers Campus initiative. Global experts came together for a highly dynamic discussion covering multiple dimensions of the future of urban transport - from how to facilitate more pandemic-friendly modes of transport, to the intersection of the Black Lives Matter movement with mobility inequities in the United States, to how to create more sustainable, efficient ways for logistics vehicles to move around the city. Watch the webinar here.

Non-Architecture - Pandemic Society Research Ecosystem
The EUKN is a project partner of Non-Architecture and contributed to their research ecosystem, launched in April 2020, entitled ‘Theme 0: Pandemic Society’. This theme was the centre of three Non-Architecture competitions that were launched to find unconventional and unexplored design and architecture solutions to the pandemic: 1) 48H Floor Plan Battle - Covid-19 Supermarket; 2) HEALING - Alternative Designs for Quarantine Cities; and 3) SOCIAL DISTANCING – Housing Block.

Eutropian Webinar Series - Episode #14: Planning the New Cooperative City after COVID-19
On 19 June 2020, the EUKN Director spoke about planning the post-COVID-19 city and presented the EUKN’s initiative ‘Thinking Beyond the Crisis’ at the final Cooperative City in Quarantine episode. The panel built on existing efforts to create more social economies and identified some guidelines for Planning post-COVID-19 cooperative cities. Watch the webinar here.

Urban Voices Blog & Newsletters
In March 2021, the EUKN Secretariat set up the new Urban Voices Blog to put a spotlight on a diverse range of ‘urban voices’ from across Europe. In 2020, the articles mostly focused on ‘Thinking Beyond the Crisis’, ranging from urban design and mental health during virus-stricken times, crisis response through a circular urban economy lens, and much more. Read Urban Voices here.
Consolidating and Delivering the Urban Agenda for the EU
15 June 2020, Policy Lab for Germany

The webinar for Germany was organised in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community and it was held on 15 June 2020. The audience was composed of German participants in the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) Partnerships.

The event involved two discussion rounds, one on the current status of Partnerships with German participation and one on the political and strategic context, i.e. the German Council Presidency of 2020. During an informal exchange, participants provided recommendations on the design and implementation of Partnership Actions, as well as offering ideas for the further development of the Partnerships and the UAEU as a whole.

Unraveling the ‘Green’ Actions of the Urban Agenda for the EU – Part I, II
9 June 2020 & 3 November 2020, Policy Labs for Slovenia

The EUKN Policy Labs for Slovenia were informed by the upcoming Slovene EU Council Presidency in the second half of 2021. They specifically investigated in what way the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU) process can be harvested with a view to the theme of environmental sustainability and better regulation.

To do so, the EUKN Secretariat developed an approach for the analysis of the ‘green’ actions of the UAEU that call for the involvement of Member States and the EU level. The approach is based, inter alia, on the clustering exercise performed by the 2019 Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU and DG REGIO. The first results of applying the methodology to three actions were showcased and discussed in a webinar on 9 June 2020 (Part I). For the webinar on 3 November (Part II), two new actions were selected, analysed and presented.

The ultimate goal of the EUKN’s activities for Slovenia is to translate the findings into useful information for ministers responsible for environmental affairs. This information should entail possible directions on how to follow up on those actions that deal with regulatory obstacles faced by cities when trying to reach environmental goals.
The event was organised by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and the EUKN in cooperation with the URBAN Intergroup in the European Parliament.

Being an official side event of the 2020 European Week of Regions and Cities, it contributed to all its three thematic priorities: Empowering Citizens, Cohesion and Cooperation, and Green Europe. The key objective was to promote the UAEU Partnerships’ achievements among a broader audience, and to foster an action-oriented exchange with relevant institutions and stakeholders.

The panel discussion allowed key stakeholders and Partnerships’ representatives to exchange ideas especially around three topics: Achieving Better Regulation; Actions for the European Green Deal; The value and the future of the multi-level Partnership approach.

The EUKN Secretariat produced a comprehensive report condensing the key statements from the Policy Lab and presenting its key findings, with the aim of informally contributing to the discussion on the future UAEU.

Urban Transformation for a More Sustainable Europe
16 December 2020, Policy Lab for Poland

The Policy Lab for Poland was held jointly with the Polish Ministry for Development Funds and Regional Policy on 16 December 2020. The event was part of Poland’s 2020-21 presidency of the Visegrád Group and contributed to the Ministry’s preparations for the 11th World Urban Forum (WUF11), taking place in Katowice, Poland in 2022.

In light of the increasing need for cities to unlock their transformative power in order to become more sustainable, as highlighted by the New Leipzig Charter, this interactive Policy Lab focused on sustainable urban transitions, with speakers from across Europe offering insights about the lessons learnt in their cities.

The main reflections and recommendations co-produced during the webinar informed a report extrapolating practical tips for Polish municipalities to develop and implement their own sustainable transition strategies; it will also inform the Ministry’s development of the World Urban Forum (WUF) Action Plan over the course of the next year. The Polish version of the report will be made available soon.
Organised in cooperation with the Territorial Development Unit of the Joint Research Centre (JRC.B.3), this webinar provided a space to discuss the findings of the EUKN study ‘The New Leipzig Charter and the JRC’s Urban Activities’, broadening the reflection to role of science for policy post 2020. It involved an interactive session, where participants were invited to share their thoughts on how to address identified gaps and capitalise on opportunities. This webinar was the first in a series of events linked to JRC’s CoP on CITIES platform.

The EUKN study investigated the role that the JRC, the Commission’s science and knowledge service, can play in supporting urban policymaking within the framework for sustainable urban development proposed by the New Leipzig Charter (NLC) for the next ten years to come. By analysing how the core ‘urban’ activities of the JRC.B.3 align with the NLC framework, the study reflected on how this role could be strengthened beyond 2020. The reflection was then expanded to consider both gaps and opportunities within the wider EU urban science-policy interface, considering the ongoing development of urban matters in the EU and the urban dimension of its policies.

Nature-Based Solutions – CONEXUS
September 2020, Horizon2020 Project

CONEXUS (CO-producing Nature-based solutions and restored Ecosystems: transdisciplinary neXus for Urban Sustainability) is a 4-year Horizon2020 project which started in September 2020. It aims to strengthen international cooperation on nature-based solutions (NBS) and ecosystem restoration in cities. Specifically, CONEXUS exists to identify, co-create, value and embed NBS into urban places.

CONEXUS establishes seven urban Life Labs which connect researchers, policy makers, NGOs, local communities and the private sector in seven cities in the EU and Latin America: Bogotá (Colombia), São Paulo (Brazil), Santiago (Chile), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Lisbon (Portugal), Barcelona (Spain) and Turin (Italy).

By co-creating and evidencing solutions that are inspired and supported by nature, CONEXUS’ transnational partnerships are informing changes in urban policy and practice, supporting the wider uptake of NBS.

The EUKN leads the ‘Hubbing’ Work Package of the project, which aims to build the collective capacity of European and Latin American partners to exchange, learn and co-produce NBS knowledge, practices, and business plans.

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 867564.
**Calendar of Activities**

**Activities for Members**

Policy Lab for Slovenia - Part I
9 June 2020

Policy Lab for Germany
15 June 2020

Policy Lab for Czechia
28 July 2020

Policy Lab for The Netherlands
13 October 2020

Policy Lab for Slovenia - Part II
3 November 2020

Policy Lab for Poland
16 December 2020

Policy Lab for Spain
14 January 2021

Policy Lab for France
26 January 2021

Assembly Meetings
23 April 2020 and 17 November 2020

**Support to the Trio Council Presidency**

DE2020 5th European Meeting
2 April 2020

DE2020 6th European Meeting
26 May 2020

UDG Meeting Croatian Presidency
2 July 2020

1st Trio+ Meeting
4 September 2020

2nd Trio+ Meeting
15 October 2020

DGUM Meeting German Presidency
21 October 2020

Leipzig Ministerial Meeting on Urban Matters
30 November 2020

3rd Trio+ Meeting
3 December 2020

UATPG Meeting German Presidency
14 December 2020

**CONEXUS**

Project Kick-off Meeting
22-23 September 2020

**External Activities**

Cities Forum (Porto, Portugal)
30-31 January 2020

UDG Meeting Croatian Presidency
26 February 2020 (Zagreb, Croatia)

JPI Urban Europe AGORA Workshop - Driving Urban Transitions
5-6 May 2020

JPI Urban Europe Webinar - Driving Urban Transitions to a Sustainable Future: State of Play
18 June 2020

Eutropian Cooperative Cities in Quarantine Episode #14: Planning the New Cooperative City after COVID-19
19 June 2020 (Panel)

Urban Thinkers Campus - COVID-19: A Catalyst for More Sustainable Urban Mobility?
17 July 2020 (Organisation and Moderation)

Europe’s Cities Fit for Future - Empowering Cities to Act, What EU Policies are needed
18 September 2020 (Moderation)

European Week of Regions and Cities 2020
5-22 October 2020

Final Partnership Meeting UAEU Partnership on Urban Mobility
6 October 2020 (Moderation)

Just Peace Month Open House
7 October 2020 (Presentation of the EUKN)

JPI Urban Europe 5th Policy Conference
12 November 2020

Political Meeting UAEU Partnership Culture and Cultural Heritage
24-25 November 2020 (Moderation)

Seminar for the JRC/CoP on CITIES
26 November 2020 (Organisation and Moderation)

National Urban Policy Programme OECD/UN-Habitat
17 December 2020

* Since mid-March 2020 all meetings were exclusively virtual