



# OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

## Thematic partnerships under the Ljubljana Agreement

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Thematic partnerships under the Ljubljana Agreement  
[exploratory opinion]

**ECO/588**

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| Referral                                     | Council – Czech presidency, 26/1/2022                              |
| Legal basis                                  | Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union |
| Section responsible                          | Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion       |
| Adopted in section                           | 09/09/2022   |
| Adopted at plenary                           | 21/09/2022   |
| Plenary session No                           | 572  |
| Outcome of vote<br>(for/against/abstentions) | 190/1/4  |

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC strongly supports the statements presented in the Ljubljana Agreement concerning the Urban Agenda for the EU (UAEU), and particularly welcomes the strong focus on partnership and multilevel and multi-stakeholder approaches in sustainable urban development.
- 1.2 Thematic partnerships should deliver tangible and sustainable actions and results that last longer than the partnerships themselves. Transferring results to other Member States, regions, cities or sectors should be a continuous consideration. The territorial distribution and geographical balance of these opportunities should be monitored so that they may benefit vulnerable regions and cities.
- 1.3 The link between the UAEU and Cohesion Policy could be strengthened. Despite being two distinct policies and initiatives with different objectives embedded in different frameworks, synergies should exist. Interconnected tools and instruments for a more coherent support to cities under Cohesion Policy are needed, as well as intersectoral and interinstitutional cooperation and integration at strategic and operational level. Thematic partnerships should be given more legitimacy in the future.
- 1.4 Predictable and financially supported implementing mechanisms that translate European strategic goals into concrete actions, and proper funding at local level are crucial for small and medium-sized urban authorities and for their continued participation in the UAEU processes.
- 1.5 The EESC believes that the criteria used for selecting partners for thematic partnerships needs to be more specific, open and inclusive. The selection process should not neglect the social partners and civil society organisations' opportunity to participate in this process alongside urban authorities. It is important to take into account the ex-ante assessment made for greening cities and sustainable tourism.
- 1.6 Working conditions, career predictability, and access to high-quality jobs, equal opportunities and adequate wages should be approached in an transversal way. Ensuring all kinds of dialogues and consultations with stakeholders such as social dialogue, civic dialogue and consultations with citizens should be taken into account.
- 1.7 The EESC suggests that the bottom-up approach, thematic clusters, thematic networks and networks for developing tailored and place-based solutions be taken into account, alongside the ability to use existing thematic and city networks, especially for small and medium-sized cities.
- 1.8 The EESC's role in the governance of the UAEU and of the Ljubljana Agreement could be strengthened. The EESC should also become part of both the Urban Development Group and the Urban Agenda Technical Preparatory Group, and involved in the Directors General meeting on urban matters.
- 1.9 Participatory democracy, the economy of wellbeing in cities and urban-rural connections could be additional themes approached by the thematic partnerships, with a special attention on youth.

1.10 The EESC reiterates its suggestion to establish a dedicated secretariat for improving the thematic partnerships' efficiency and effectiveness, in order to ensure a link with urban policies at local level, to ensure technical assistance and to facilitate the creation of thematic communities and the exchange of thematic best practices. This should be done in close cooperation with European Committee of the Regions.

## 2. **Background**

2.1 On 26 November 2021, EU ministers responsible for urban matters adopted the Ljubljana Agreement and its multiannual working programme, which starts a new phase of the urban agenda for the EU. This document provides for concrete steps to renew the EU urban agenda, with the common goal to make it more impactful and efficient. The multiannual working programme complements the political declaration, and sets out the operational parameters, work method and steps for implementing the next phase of this multilevel governance and multi-stakeholder initiative.

2.2 The 14 UAEU priority themes<sup>1</sup> are still valid: inclusion of migrants and refugees; air quality; urban poverty; housing; circular economy; jobs and skills in the local economy; climate adaptation (including green infrastructure solutions); the energy transition; sustainable use of land and nature-based solutions; urban mobility; the digital transition; innovative and responsible public procurement; culture and cultural heritage; and security in public spaces.

2.3 The Ljubljana Agreement adds the following four themes to this list of priority themes: cities of equality, food, greening cities, and sustainable tourism. These were added on the basis of co-creative processes, and linked to the New Leipzig Charter, EU policies, other emerging urban development trends, and the needs of cities.

2.4 The forthcoming Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union has asked the EESC to explore how the changes from the new Ljubljana Agreement could impact the creation of new thematic partnerships. Two of the four themes agreed upon in Ljubljana will be further developed during the Czech EU Presidency: greening cities, and sustainable tourism.

## 3. **General comments**

3.1 The EESC strongly supports statements presented in the Ljubljana Agreement concerning the Urban Agenda for the EU, and particularly welcomes the strong focus on partnership and multilevel and multi-stakeholder approaches in urban development.

3.2 At the same time, the EESC supports continuing and further developing the Urban Agenda for the EU, in full respect of the principles of proportionality. Also, the principle of additionality should be carefully managed at the local level.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda)

- 3.3 The EESC welcomes the fact that the Ljubljana Agreement recognises the EESC's importance and role in supporting the Urban Agenda for the EU. As mentioned in the EU Urban Agenda multiannual working programme, the EESC is capable and willing to provide input and support regarding the territoriality of the development, partnerships, and economic and social aspects of urban development, and regarding the dissemination of EU urban policies.
- 3.4 The diversity, complexity, and sustainability challenges of urban development policies require multilevel and multi-stakeholder approaches that prioritise partnerships. The Ljubljana Agreement recognises the importance of partnership on improving knowledge. Thematic partnerships should deliver tangible and sustainable actions and results that last longer than the partnerships themselves. Transferring results to other regions, cities or sectors should be a continuous consideration. The territorial distribution of these opportunities should be monitored. Cities should be motivated and incentivised to use European development opportunities and to be active at EU level.
- 3.5 The diversity of cities and their development policies is difficult to navigate, and an issue for which there is currently no general solution in EU urban development policies. A customised approach that values partnership, civil society and social partners is needed. Solutions for the future of development strategies should include different perspectives, expertise and disciplines. The EESC opinion *Revision of the Territorial Agenda of the EU, the Leipzig Charter and the Urban Agenda for the EU*<sup>2</sup>, recommends using the most appropriate support instruments for each type of territory while respecting subsidiarity, which will alleviate symptoms of deprivation, backwardness and isolation in the case of at-risk regions.
- 3.6 Fair competition across all kinds of cities should be ensured when financing their sustainable development, meaning equal access to funds for small and medium cities. The competition principle should also be adapted to this situation and should always be taken into account.
- 3.7 A new element included in the Ljubljana Agreement is the ex-ante assessment of themes. These assessments aim to deploy a pragmatic, effective and result-oriented approach, with the goal of increasing the impact of future UAEU deliverables. They will also allow to tailor the selection criteria for partners. The EESC recommends that the exchange of best practices, including partnership and cooperation models, be a constant consideration for urban policy stakeholders and future thematic partnerships.
- 3.8 Customising instruments financed by EU funds and public money should be established in order to implement the thematic partnership action plans. Adapted support (financial instruments, grants and funds) should be established to ensure that the thematic partnership implementation process runs in an efficient way, especially with regard to help for small and medium cities and organisations. Access to this support should also be fair, making sure that small organisations and cities are not left behind.
- 3.9 Instruments such as Integrated Territorial Investments and Community-Led Local Development have been widely successful and should be continued and strengthened based on stable and

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<sup>2</sup> [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 145.](#)

predictable implementing mechanisms. The EESC believes that there is also scope for an integrated approach<sup>3</sup> in terms of the possibility of linking public and private financial resources in order to increase capacity and share risk, for the benefit of both territorial and urban development subject to democratic control, transparent governance and accountability.

- 3.10 Innovation should always be considered when dealing with sustainable urban development challenges. It is recommended that access to innovation, as well as innovation idea sharing and scaling up, be transversely inserted into Cohesion Policy for 2021-2027, and into partnership agreements at Member State level. Testing new relevant and innovative solutions should not be neglected, especially in domains such as Technologies 4.0, Industry 5.0, or in Web3 technologies, as well as in social innovation. There is an important role for the European Urban Initiative in capacity building and innovative action support.
- 3.11 Marginalised regions and cities and their vulnerable populations should be a continuous concern in development policies, with the aim to improve quality of life for all citizens. Reducing poverty should also be a main priority. Access to quality inclusive education, social services, healthcare and other public services is crucial for ensuring a fair post-pandemic recovery for cities. When developing and implementing thematic partnerships, special consideration should be given to vulnerable groups of city residents, in particular to older people, people with disabilities, minorities, immigrants, refugees, and the socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged, among others. Their involvement should be ensured through capacity building within the process. The EESC strongly recommends that reducing new forms of social, economic, environmental and territorial inequalities be made a priority, and for this, the fair and diverse involvement of the different stakeholders should be guaranteed.
- 3.12 The Ljubljana Agreement identifies organisational and expertise support needs, as well as some support needs for smaller cities. As the UAEU remains an informal and voluntary initiative, members should also contribute to supporting the partnerships and implementing the actions. The EESC believes that the technical support required under the partnerships should take into account the sustainability of the partnerships' end results. A strengthened, integrated and participatory approach should also be continuously taken into consideration, alongside data gathering and usage for evidence-based investments.
- 3.13 Nevertheless, predictable and financially-supported implementing mechanisms that translate European strategies into concrete actions, and proper funding at local level are crucial for small and medium-sized urban authorities and for their continued participation in the UAEU processes. Additionally, this principle should be carefully managed in the implementation of thematic partnerships.
- 3.14 Cohesion Policy offers a variety of tools and instruments for sustainable urban development in the 2021-2027 programming period. The new policy objective 5, 'A Europe closer to citizens', aims to develop specific tools for implementing local development strategies in cities and towns of all sizes. The minimum urban earmarking of the ERDF in each Member State directed

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<sup>3</sup> See EESC opinion on *Revision of the Territorial Agenda of the EU, the Leipzig Charter and the Urban Agenda for the EU*, [OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 145](#).

towards priorities and projects selected by cities based on these strategies has been increased from 5% to 8%. Moreover, the European Urban Initiative was created to offer more coherent support to cities. The EESC recommends that thematic partnership opportunities be continuously disseminated at local level, and involve all the relevant stakeholders, including the EESC. In the future, urban earmarking could be higher.

- 3.15 Due to the increased volatility and the diverse number of risks, thematic partnerships need to contribute to strengthening resilience and responsiveness to asymmetric shocks, such as COVID-19 and other similar situations. The condemnable war in Ukraine is influencing urban development in the boarder countries. Thematic partnerships should be adapted to deal with short-term crises, and be coupled with strategic long-term approaches.

#### 4. **Specific comments**

- 4.1 The EESC believes that the criteria used for selecting partners in the thematic partnerships needs to be more specific. The selection process should not neglect the social partners and civil society organisations' opportunity to participate in this process alongside urban authorities, including those representing vulnerable groups such as older people, people with disabilities, minorities, immigrants, refugees, and the socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged, among others. These organisations should be encouraged and motivated to become involved in partnerships under the UAEU.
- 4.2 As per the Pact of Amsterdam (PoA) the EESC is invited to contribute, within its competence, to the further development of the UAEU, and is one of the PoA stakeholders. The PoA's validity was reiterated in the New Leipzig Charter Implementing Document and the Ljubljana Agreement. The EESC's role in the UAEU and the Ljubljana Agreement should be strengthened. The EESC is a major European stakeholder responsible for the economic and social variables of development policies, and has the capacity, expertise and legitimacy to contribute to the three pillars of the Ljubljana Agreement: better funding, better regulation, and better knowledge. The EESC should be formally recognised and should play a role in the Ljubljana Agreement's main governance bodies, and become part of both the Urban Development Group, and the Urban Agenda Technical Preparatory Group, and involved in the Directors General meeting on urban matters.
- 4.3 The EESC believes that future thematic partnerships should include themes such as participatory democracy, the economy of wellbeing in cities and urban-rural connections<sup>4</sup>, these being in line with the territorial development concept used in the European strategic framework. The EESC recommends that a clear link between the partner selection process, themes selection and the SDGs, and the partnership contributions in implementing the SDGs should be protected.
- 4.4 In the future, thematic partnerships could be organised in thematic clusters, existing thematic networks, and networks for developing tailored and place-based solutions for cities. Increasing access to the networks, especially for small and medium-sized cities, should be kept in

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<sup>4</sup> See the EESC own-initiative opinion on *Towards a holistic strategy on sustainable rural/urban development*, [OJ C 105, 4.3.2022, p. 49](#).

consideration. Cities should be at the heart of the thematic partnerships' bottom-up approach to ensure a synergy between local situations and the thematic partnerships which are in place.

- 4.5 The consultation process used by the thematic partnerships should include all forms of dialogue and consultations such as social dialogue, dialogue with citizens and civic dialogue, and include all types of civic stakeholders, such as social partners, NGOs and citizens.
- 4.6 The EESC suggests establishing a secretariat for thematic partnerships with the Commission and other relevant stakeholders to support thematic partnerships, ensure the link with urban policies at local level, ensure technical assistance, and facilitate the creation of thematic communities and the exchange of thematic best practices. Enough resources should be allocated to ensure an efficient administration and effective thematic partnerships, especially to implement the action plans.
- 4.7 The EESC recommends that the link between the UAEU and cohesion policy be strengthened. Despite being two distinct policies and initiatives with different objectives embedded in different frameworks, synergies should exist, most notably in the scope of the Knowledge Sharing Platform<sup>5</sup> and capitalisation activities to be developed under the European Urban Initiative. Existing action for the implementation of the thematic partnerships could be mentioned in the operational programmes, in the different calls for proposals, or in the criteria of project evaluations. The results of the thematic partnership's work should feed into the planning of the new Cohesion operational programmes.
- 4.8 There needs to be more coherence and a stronger link between locally implemented urban policies and EU policies, in particular Cohesion Policy. Interconnected tools and instruments for a more coherent support to cities under cohesion policy are needed, as well as intersectoral and interinstitutional cooperation and integration at strategic and operational level. Also, regional competitiveness must be completed through complementarity between urban and rural areas, and with strong social cohesion under the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy.
- 4.9 Working conditions, career predictability, and access to high-quality jobs, opportunities and adequate wages are important variables for the fairness and equity of urban development processes, and should be approached in a transversal way in matters of city greening, food supply chain sustainability, the circular economy and sustainable tourism. Investment in people should remain one of the development strategies' top priorities. Fair access and equal opportunities, and the capacity to exercise fundamental rights are crucial for the success of thematic partnerships.
- 4.10 Due to the concentration of resources and needs in urban areas, the European Semester should take a more individual approach to the effectiveness of urban development policies so that no one and nowhere is left behind. Coherence with other European instruments such as the European Pillar of Social Rights should be a constant consideration.

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[https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/era/knowledge-exchange-platform-kep\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/era/knowledge-exchange-platform-kep_en).

4.11 Development strategies and projects that are highly complex in nature are in increased demand. The EESC suggests that for these types of investments, local and regional authorities strengthen capacity in the areas of citizen participation, strategic foresight and diverse scenarios preparation, strategic planning and implementing public investments. This is crucial for the successful sustainable development of European cities, and for reorienting cities to people. Data convergence from different partnerships and access to data using open data platforms, along with digital justice and digital democracy, should be taken into account.

Brussels, 21 September 2022

Christa SCHWENG

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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