Challenges for urban areas in the post-COVID-19 era

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Katalin CSEH (Renew Europe, HU) on the challenges for urban areas in the post-COVID-19 era.

The report stated that 72 % of people in the EU live in cities and towns. Cities continue to be on the front line of the COVID-19 crisis, with dwindling economic activity, high rates of infection, low rates of vaccination and often inadequate resources.

Members stressed the crucial and unique role of local and regional authorities in tackling issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges

Cities and towns must be directly involved in the recovery from COVID-19. Recovery efforts must strive to address long-standing vulnerabilities and go beyond addressing the health impacts of COVID-19 to tackle the persistent inequalities. The pandemic has had gendered impacts that cities, towns and functional urban areas will need to take into account. Quarantines and social distancing requirements have put women at an increased risk of gender-based violence, while at the same time, women's access to support networks, social services and sexual and reproductive health facilities has been curtailed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the culture and sport sectors as well as the transport of food and medicines and the provision of health services.

Inclusive cities

The report underlined that the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the trend of depopulation in underdeveloped urban areas, which often lack sufficient own revenues to provide residents with quality public services. In this regard, Member States are called on to develop positive action measures that promote the inclusion of marginalised communities such as people with disabilities, more isolated older people, homeless people, migrants and refugees and ethnic minorities such as Roma. Members called for funding needs to be directed at a local level, including those of urban areas, especially metropolitan areas, as well as at a regional, national and EU level.

For urban economies to recover without leaving anyone behind, investments and reforms should lead to stable and high-quality jobs, reinforced public infrastructure and services, enhanced social dialogue and support for inclusion and integration of disadvantaged groups, including by strengthening social protection and welfare systems.

EU support framework

Members emphasised the need for an EU framework to support local and national strategies to fight homelessness and ensure equal access to decent housing for all by promoting an integrated approach combining housing support with social care, health services and active inclusion. The Commission, the Member States and local and regional authorities are called on to establish specific strategies and appropriate measures to overcome obstacles to the right to housing such as discrimination, financialisation, speculation, touristification, abusive lending practices and forced evictions. Increased

investment is called for in social, public, energy-efficient, adequate and affordable housing, and in tackling homelessness and housing exclusion in the EU. The Commission should urgently ensure that EU funding and EIB financing become more accessible to local and regional social and public affordable housing providers.

Sustainable cities

Members considered that the COVID-19 crisis has shown the need for new urban planning and mobility solutions in order to make urban areas more resilient and adaptable to mobility demand and that the crisis should be taken as an opportunity to reduce transport congestion and greenhouse emissions. They stressed the importance of sustainable urban development, including sustainable and affordable public transport, for the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the Union and the quality of life of its population and for reaching its climate neutrality goals by 2050 at the latest.

The Commission's intention to engage with cities and the Member States to ensure that all large cities and urban nodes in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) draw up sustainable urban mobility plans (SUMPs) by 2030 was welcomed by Members.

The report noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the expansion of the home delivery sector, which has led to the emergence of new types of platform work and business models in urban areas. Members recognised the need for recommendations on the safety of delivery personnel and on training in the digital tools they use, such as applications and interactive platforms.

Innovative cities

The report emphasised that digitalisation has helped to address some of the immediate challenges arising from the pandemic, particularly during lockdown periods, and that among the many inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital divide is a serious one. Whilst recalling that digitalisation and digital connectivity must be a priority for local communities in their recovery, Members called on the Commission to ensure full compliance with the Union acquis, in particular as regards workers and social rights.

Tailor-made policy initiatives

Members underlined the need to adapt to the new reality in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and to reflect on a new model for the EU's urban areas. They insisted that regional and local authorities have a key role to play in all stages of EU decision-making: planning, preparation and implementation. It called for more direct EU funding to be made available to local and regional authorities in order to improve efficiency, ensure consistency and reduce administrative burdens.

The report called for the **European Urban Initiative** to be given a greater budget and scope, while ensuring that cities in the outermost regions have effective and facilitated access to it. It called on the Council and Member States to allocate up to 15 % for urban areas to address post-COVID challenges.