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

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The European Parliament adopted by 524 votes to 33, with 143 abstentions, a resolution on the challenges for urban areas in the post-COVID-19 era.

Members recalled that **72% of people in the EU live in cities and towns** and that these must be directly involved in the post-COVID-19 recovery. Efforts should not only focus on the health consequences of COVID-19, but also address persistent inequalities in access to essential resources such as healthcare, education and digitalisation, increased risks of gender-based violence, job losses that are greater in large cities than elsewhere, as well as the lack of green areas and transport infrastructure.

To the list of existing challenges, we can add the climate emergency and demographic challenges. The world's urban population is expected to grow to three billion people by 2050. Two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities, consuming 75% of the world's natural resources, producing 50% of the world's waste and more than 60% of greenhouse gas emissions.

Inclusive cities

Recognising the social, economic, territorial, cultural and historical diversity of urban areas across the EU, Parliament stressed the need to address challenges such as segregation and poverty.

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.

Parliament 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 and the Member States are called on to further increase investment in social, public, energy-efficient, adequate and affordable housing, and in tackling homelessness and housing exclusion in the EU.

Members encourage EU cities to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive approaches to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and gender-based violence in public spaces. They also called on the Member States to actively involve urban authorities in devising programmes that meet the needs of young people in cities.

Sustainable cities

Parliament 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. It called for the prioritisation and support of circular economy frameworks, investments in renewable energy, sustainable and affordable urban and suburban mobility (in particular cycle path networks), alternative transport infrastructure in and around urban areas, proper maintenance of existing infrastructure and rapid investment in green infrastructure, parks, outdoor green and recreational facilities.

The resolution stressed the need to promote and develop sustainable public transport systems in urban areas and to prioritise digital infrastructure that benefits all passengers, including people with reduced mobility.

The Commission should ensure that access to EU funding programmes for urban mobility, in particular under the ERDF, the Cohesion Fund and the Connecting Europe Facility, is conditional on the existence or development of **sustainable urban mobility plans** (SUMPs).

Members 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. They also 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.

Parliament called on the Commission to use its anticipated recommendation on speed to make **30 km/h** the maximum default speed in residential areas and areas with a high number of pedestrians and cyclists, with the possibility for higher limits on main arterial roads and appropriate protection for vulnerable road users.

Innovative and learning cities

The pandemic has accelerated digitisation, with technology becoming imperative for teleworking, home-schooling, e-commerce, e-health, digital democracy and online entertainment.

While recalling that **digitisation and digital connectivity** must be a priority for local communities in their recovery efforts, Members called on the Commission to monitor these developments and ensure full compliance with the EU acquis, in particular as regards workers' and social rights. They also highlighted the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and stressed the need to **ensure inclusion and access to education** and to support the cultural and sports sectors.

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 resolution 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.