

Minutes from the workshop ‘Sustainable urban development and EU structural funds after 2014’

Opening the panel, Green MEP Gisela Kallenbach highlighted the scale of structural funds as a proportion of the EU budget and the importance of creating synergies between the local and EU level to ensure that urban development is sustainable. With 3/4s of Europeans living in cities, the urban dimension must be of crucial importance to structural funds. No policies or goals can be implemented without the involvement of cities.

Naturally, the challenges have changed since the EU has enlarged from 15 to 27 members. It will be important to ensure the next EU financial perspectives (from 2014 on) take into account these challenges. Ensuring sustainable development must be a top priority, as was set out by the Leipzig Charter on sustainable cities, which was endorsed by EU member states in 2007. Achieving this will require an integrated approach for local and urban development.

The EU’s structural and cohesion funds need to be made more flexible, a fact acknowledged by Johan Magnusson of the European Commission. There is also a need to strengthen the role of partnership, so strategies and policies are not top down. Simplifying the procedures involved with EU funds must also be a priority for the future programmes.

For Peter Pluschke of Eurocities, integrated urban development also has to be a top priority. There is a need to support cooperation and networking among European cities to ensure that sustainable urban development is a reality.

Over 1/3 of the EU budget, or around €50 billion per year, goes towards structural and cohesion funds, according to Wolfgang Pelull. Given the scale, it is natural that there is ongoing debate (even within the Commission) on the relevance, effectiveness, impact and leveraging effect of the funds. The forthcoming review of the EU budget will have to touch on all aspects. However, there is a need to get involved in the process of review already in order to ensure that the input is taken into account before the Commission publishes its recommendations.

Sustainability and sustainable development should be a compulsory criterion guiding all structural funds. This is not the case at present. At present, competitiveness and the goals of the Lisbon strategy are the only referenced guidelines. Adopting a thematic approach to funds would help ensure sustainability. However, this thematic approach should be concrete and prioritise those areas that can be most effective and can be realistically delivered (whether energy efficiency or public urban transport).

Gisela Kallenbach pointed out that there is no clear or single definition or understanding of sustainability or sustainable development. There seems to be a consensus on the need to ensure that sustainability is a guiding principle behind EU funds. A number of speakers

expressed the belief that attaching binding conditions to EU funds to ensure sustainable development is the best way to ensure that sustainability is prioritised and actually delivered. Clearly, the stakeholders, like cities need to be involved in this process. Top-down approaches can't work because the situation varies so much at local level.