Developing healthy and prosperous urban eco-systems

A Policy Learning Platform event

26 November 2019, Brussels

Summary: This thematic workshop explored the challenges and opportunities for boosting the social, economic and environmental benefits of developing urban and peri-urban eco-systems. The workshop attracted 37 participants and high-level speakers from the European Commission (DG ENV, DG R&I), the H2020 project 'Clever Cities' and the ESPON project 'Greta' as well as many good practices from across Europe allowing intense networking and knowledge exchange.
https://www.interregeurope.eu/urbanecosystems/conclusions/

Highlights

The past 50 years have seen a rapid increase in rates of urbanisation across the world with more than half of the world's population living in urban areas. This trend is adversely affecting cities and adopting sustainable urbanisation approaches is thus essential for creating healthy and prosperous urban ecosystems.

The workshop addressed urban and peri-urban eco-systems and in particular the potential social, environmental and economic benefits that stem from their development. Speakers from the European Commission (EC) placed **urban eco-systems in the context of the global biodiversity crisis and degradation of eco-systems service and emphasised the urgency to act**. Urban eco-systems and their services are high on the European policy agenda and the EU has set out a policy framework to address the importance of green infrastructure and urban challenges: European Green Infrastructure Strategy (2013), the Review of the European Green Infrastructure Strategy (2019), the Urban Agenda for the EU (2017) and the Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (to be adopted in early 2020). Moreover, the European Commission also presented the Final Report of the Horizon 2020 Expert Group on 'Nature-Based Solutions and Re-Naturing Cities' and highlighted the report on Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystems and their Services (MAES). Two new EC guidance documents complete the framework:

- Integrating ecosystems and their services in decision-making (part 1, part 2, part 3);
- Strategic framework for further supporting the deployment of EU-level green and blue infrastructure.

Funding mechanisms

There is a wide range of funding mechanisms available for urban eco-systems. This includes the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) including INTERREG, the Cohesion Fund as well as HORIZON 2020 and HORIZON Europe. Moreover, the following funding mechanisms can be specifically used for the implementation of ecosystems investments:

- LIFE Programme for Environment and Climate Action
- Natural Capital Financing Facility (NCFF) – European Investment Bank (EIB) facility providing loans and equity for nature and biodiversity and ecosystem-based adaptation;
- Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) - Green and blue infrastructure could support the implementation of Projects of Common Interest in preparatory phases as part of their design.

Intensive exchange of the participants during the World Café sessions revealed the following **main challenges** to be addressed at urban level:

- The national plans on green infrastructure are to**o generic and often not embedded into masterplans** at city level;
- Spatial planning laws **do not contain obligations** to implement green infrastructure measures and are often limited to 'can do' measures i.e. you can install a green roof, you don't have to;
- A **lack of more strategic approaches**, target setting and long-term scenario planning;
- An **information overload**; too many access points and funding schemes; too many tools available which are not further used or developed after projects are ending;
- Lack of an EU mechanism and of funding to follow-up on projects;
- Missing integration of green infrastructure strategy into climate strategy.

Good practices

Urban spaces and landscapes

- Several European cities collaborate in the HORIZON 2020 project Clever Cities to achieve **nature-based urban transformation**. The urban regeneration is driven by societal challenges and uses citizen-centered, co-design approaches to implement test-beds based on nature-based solutions. The project specifically addresses social inclusion and citizen safety as well as digitalisation and the use of urban data.

- The **Green Belt** in Frankfurt (CityZen) provides numerous social and environmental benefits comprising outdoor recreation and education, clean air, higher water quality as well as the conservation of species, habitats and landscapes. As these **eco-systems services** are difficult to quantify, the preservation of the Green Belt requires constant political work to withstand the pressure of the real estate market for economic valorisation.

- Reggio Emilia (PROSPERA) was confronted with the urgent need to address land consumption and adopted a multi-actor regional strategy involving land-owners, builders, farmers and citizens. The Italian city pro-actively promotes the return to peri-urban agriculture by **reconverting land to rural use** and by refocussing construction companies on building renovation instead of land speculation.

- The Portuguese Municipality of Beja explored the possibilities of **urban farming** (CityZen) to engage it citizens in participatory processes and to create a sense of community and belonging. The municipality provides continuous monitoring and maintenance of the urban farm through the creation of a dedicated support structure. Today, Beja can count on more than 60 horticulturists who are collaborating in the urban farms.

Sustainable peri-urban areas

- The ESPON Greta project focused on enhancing **biodiversity and ecosystem services** for territorial development. The project highlighted the key benefits of green infrastructure offering connectivity of geographical areas, the provision of multiple functions such as food production, water retention and recreation as well as the integration of spatial planning across urban, peri-urban and rural settings. Main challenges, results and financing options for green infrastructure projects were illustrated with examples from Malta, Spain and Sweden.

- The Rainham Marshes (PERFECT) are the largest area of **wetland** in the Thames Estuary, close to the centre of London. After long years of neglect, the former firing range was reopened to the public in 2006 featuring a visitor centre and a café in a sustainable building. Today, biodiversity levels in the marshes have increased significantly and over 40,000 mainly local visitors are benefitting from the bird's paradise every year.

- The Rotterdam Metropolitan area is rediscovering the benefits of its delta and together with its citizens **the New Meuse river** is co-designed into a metropolitan tidal park (SWARE). The banks of the river, harbours and neighbourhoods are rehabilitated and turned into attractive public spaces. The rehabilitation activities are creating a wealth of knowledge about delta and river dynamics and contribute to increased biodiversity and a better quality of life of Rotterdam's citizens.

- The **Green Blue Axis** initiative focuses on the restoration and environmental enhancement of the Jamor river from Sintra to Cascais, at the city fringes of Lisbon. The scope of the investment (own funding, ERDF) includes landscaping, solidarity gardens, cultural monuments, green bridge, parks and forest areas. A key factor for the success of the initiative was the integrated approach in pursuing urban policy and environmental policy objectives.

Reviving Urban Areas – Joint Session with Low Carbon Economy

- **Mulhouse Alsace Agglomeration**'s case study showed, in the context of urban revival, how its integrated long-term strategy comprising of a large number of individual measures from various disciplines (mobility, housing, cultural and natural heritage, start-up support etc.), implemented across municipal boundaries over two decades, have had a positive transformative impact in terms of economic activity and quality of life.
- The **Helsinki Metropolitan Region** has implemented an Integrated planning process of land use, housing strategy and transport (SMART-MR), combining the regional land use plan, the housing strategy and the transport system plan for the first time. The plan runs from 2015 to 2050 and covers 14 municipalities, requiring not only the co-operation between different services and departments, but also between different municipalities. This integrated planning process itself is the good practice.
- The **local action plan of the city of Pecs** (SHARE) is a holistic strategy for the economic turnaround of a region having experienced industrial decline. It focuses on cultural heritage sites and green infrastructure planning embedded in a 'smart shrinking' approach that re-centres Pecs around its most important cultural, natural and knowledge assets. The role of the universities in this process of "smart transition" was also highlighted.
- **The city of Baia Mare** (Romania) has pedestrianised and renewed its historic centre (TRAM), to both encourage more walking, reduce car traffic and strengthen the city's cultural heritage. The plan focused on a main city square, which was completely pedestrianised, as were roads leading into that square. Accompanying this, historic monuments and buildings were restored, to increase the attractiveness of active transport, linked up by pedestrian zones. The pedestrianisation policy has been integrated into the city's SUMP.
- **Graz** has managed to integrate green infrastructure into strategic spatial planning (PERFECT) at all levels. Benefiting from a spatial planning law, many spaces, public and private, have been designated as green spaces making other uses illegal. Thus, the city has ensured the preservation of its natural assets to the benefit of its citizens.

Conclusions of the Joint Session

- **Political commitment** from top level to lower level, across election cycles, is essential;
- **Long-term strategies and perspectives** for deep transformative impacts are encouraged, as shown in Mulhouse's twenty-year transformation and Helsinki's thirty-five-year plan;
- **Integrated planning** is complex, but has proven very successful, with different services – transport, land-use, housing, economic development, eco-systems, etc., being integrated (Mulhouse, Helsinki, Pecs) or with the systematic integration of one strategy in all other policies (Graz);
- **Holistic approaches** are needed, with vision, one broad objective and many measures from different disciplines to achieve it. Single measures might be a waste of resources as they don't create sufficient critical mass to reach a tipping point, and can even be counterproductive as they induce a change in one area which may create accidental impacts in another;
- **Cross-municipality strategies** are emerging. They don't stop at administrative borders but instead take the territory and its real-life dynamics as boundary for mobility strategies, including the city centre and the outskirts or even the adjacent cities if linked by regular commuter flows.

Next steps

Thematic recommendations for participants

The joint work of the participants and the Policy Learning Platform thematic experts resulted into the following main proposals for the types of projects that should be supported in the current and future funding programmes:

- Evaluation and monitoring (long-term evaluation; integrated monitoring tools)
- Data (on hot spots and heat islands; connection of climate data; repositories i.e. on types of trees to plants; …)
- Green infrastructure projects (green offices and airports; vertical greening in cities; development of green areas in built environment; urban gardening/farming; …)
- Knowledge exchange, communication, education (awareness-raising of social and environmental benefits towards citizens; knowledge transfer between regions; good practice exchange; network of green infrastructure / climate change advisors like energy advisors; …)
- Maintenance (solving the issue of maintenance of green and blue infrastructure; business models)
- Connectivity (of urban and peri-urban green areas; between existing different green areas and green points; better cross-department policy collaboration)

Additional support

Additional support is already available for project partners, and external authorities:

- The Policy Learning Platform has produced a number of policy briefs, highlighting policy frameworks and good practices in protection of biodiversity and natural heritage, eco-systems services and green infrastructure;
- The webinar on 'Eco-tourism in riverside territories' can be accessed here;
- The conclusions of the workshop on 'Natural heritage' is available here;
- Regions and municipalities looking to improve their eco-systems framework can consider applying for a Peer Review from the Policy Learning Platform.

In the following months, the Policy Learning Platform will publish more information of interest:

- Policy brief on urban ecosystems
- Policy brief on built cultural heritage

For more information on the workshop on urban ecosystems, visit the event's conclusions page, where you can access the presentation, attendee list and event photos.

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