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Urban regeneration in the EU

Sonia De Gregorio Hurtado coordinated this issue with the editorial board

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25 years of urban regeneration in the EU

Sonia De Gregorio Hurtado

During the last three decades, the European Union (EU) has paid growing attention to the key role that cities play in the development of the European territory and their potential contribution to tackling the economic, climate, environmental, demographic and social challenges that it continues to face. On the basis of this awareness, a complex policy-building process has taken place within EU institutions since the late 80s, a development that has led to the definition of a field of public policy that is referred to as the urban policy of the EU or the urban dimension of EU policy. As the EU formally does not have responsibility for urban as opposed to regional affairs (Parkinson, 2005) this policy field has been formalized through the launch and implementation of a number of non-compulsory tools of different types particularly aimed to support Member States (MS), regions, cities, and other stakeholders to face the decline of their urban neighborhoods¹ (De Gregorio, 2017). The most important and influential instruments have been the following:

- a) the specific initiatives for the implementation of urban regeneration programmes launched by the European Commission and co-funded by the Structural Funds from 1989 (the Urban Pilot Projects –UPP- and the two rounds of the URBAN Community Initiative: URBAN -1994-1999- and URBAN II -2000-2006-);
- b) other programmes aimed to construct capacity, interchange knowledge, and introduce innovation in urban policies at local level (e.g. URBACT, the Urban Innovative Actions –UIA-);
- c) the policy documents published by the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions –COR-, the Meetings of EU Ministers for urban development, and other actors. These documents have taken the form of communications, policy papers, and charters, policy guidelines, compendiums of good practices, etc. It is relevant noting that external actors, such as Eurocities, have also been able to impact this policy field by producing and disseminating their own documents in this regard.

It can be considered that the European Commission launched the first instrument particularly aimed to the regeneration of deprived neighborhoods co-funded by the Euro-

pean Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 1989 when the processes of deindustrialisation and economic restructuring were multiplying the drivers of decline affecting urban neighborhoods. It was the mentioned *Urban Pilot Programme*, launched with the specific interest of introducing innovation in urban regeneration in the MS. From then, along 25 years of policy building, “*periods of advance have often been followed by periods of retrenchment*” (Parkinson, 2005: 9) and there has been relevant debate over whether or not the EU should develop its own urban policy (Atkinson, 2007). As Van de Berg et al. (2007) mention, despite the awareness of the fact that the development of an urban policy at an EU level was considered necessary from the last 90s², most MS have never fully supported the urban strategy of the EC because they were of the opinion that this policy field is a national issue. In the scenario described the development of the EU urban policy has been characterized by the lack of a common consensus among MS on the development of an EU urban agenda (ibid.). This fact has given place to periods in which this policy building process has advanced slowly and has lost visibility. In those timeframes, the “informal” character of this policy has played a positive role, as it has allowed the EC continuing implementing the mentioned “non-compulsory” instruments without the opposition of the MS (De Gregorio, 2012).

Most of these instruments have been launched by the EC, and particularly by the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG Regio)³, under a multi-level vision that aims to introduce innovation in the urban policies of the Member States and specifically in their local governance systems (Reiter, 2008). They also aim to promote a collaborative and participative approach to the implementation of sustainable urban development strategies. This policy action has led to global results at EU level and specific contributions in the different national, regional and local frameworks. Its capacity to introduce innovation in the urban policy of the MS has led to the recognition that it has exerted a relevant influence. This influence has been particularly important in those MS where a specific national-level policy did not previously exist (Carpenter, 2013). The knowledge gained by national institutions, regions, and cities through the implementation of this policy has had effects such as the improvement of the technical capacity of municipalities and other relevant stakeholders to design and implement integrated urban regeneration strategies, the growing interest showed by cities to get involved in urban regeneration initiatives co-funded by the ERDF, the development of specific instruments of urban regeneration based on the “URBAN method” (the participative, collaborative, area-based and strategic of the URBAN Community Initiative) in different national and regional contexts⁴, and many others. It can be also said that they have contributed to start a process of transformation of local governance in many EU cities and to create a kind of “direct linkage” between cities and EU institutions. Along with the relevant outcomes achieved it is also possible to identify pitfalls in the implementation and performance of the different instruments, as the literature has been pointing out from the second half of the 90s.

The knowledge that the different levels of government have gained through the experience mentioned is the base of the so-called EU *Urban Acquis*: a collection of documents

agreed by the EU Ministers for urban development that is considered the common ground of the urban policy of the EU⁵. The adoption of the “sustainable integrated urban development” and “integrated urban regeneration”⁶ concepts in the Urban Acquis, particularly reinforced from 2007, and their integration in the policy discourse of the EU are giving place to interesting experiences and results in the MS that sometimes are being developed also at regional level. In some cases, this is taking place in the framework of initiatives of urban regeneration co-funded by the EDRF (e.g. the *Iniciativa Urbana* launched in Spain in 2007 and developed until 2013). All this experience is setting a Europeanization scenario in which a critical review on how MS are understanding and implementing the EU approach to urban development in their national frameworks could provide a relevant basis on which set a part of the reflection oriented to the construction of the policy framework for the period 2020-2027. This policy and its financial framework is being negotiated between the European Commission and the MS at the moment.

During the last two programming periods of the Cohesion Policy, the urban policy of the EU has been subject to relevant changes. In the period 2007-2013 it was “mainstreamed” within the Structural Funds. This was called “URBAN mainstreaming” and was highlighted by the European Commission as one of the most important changes in the Cohesion Policy in recent years (European Commission, 2008: 9). As a consequence the URBAN Community Initiative, that had been largely recognized as the most influential tool so far, was not launched again. As Atkinson mentioned in 2007, the “urban mainstreaming” led different actors “to express concern over the potential loss of a small (in terms of funds) initiative that had the advantage of explicitly concerning itself with urban areas and their problems” in this scenario many feared that the “urban mainstreaming” could lead to URBAN’s distinct focus being lost in the wider Structural Funds (Atkinson, 2007: 4). An important element of the policy vision for 2007-2013 was that “the content of the URBAN Community Initiative was included in the regulatory framework for the new generation of “mainstream” Operational Programmes” (European Commission, 2008: 12) developed by the Member States. This was possible through the incorporation of the “URBAN method” in the Regulation of the ERDF that defined the scope and strategies of intervention in distressed urban areas. Again it was included as a non-mandatory provision, so that Member States could implement it on a voluntary basis. Few MS made use of this possibility. In 2008, in the framework of an analysis of the Operational Programmes of the MS, the European Commission highlighted as relevant only the initiatives developed by the Czech Republic and Spain (European Commission, 2008).

In the current programming period (2014-2020) the urban dimension has been reinforced (De Luca, 2016). In this framework, MS are obliged to earmark at least 5% of their allocations of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to support *integrated sustainable urban development strategies* (ISUDS). In addition, new tools have been introduced to foster innovative and integrated urban action (the Urban Innovative Actions, the Urban Development Network). These and other policy instruments,

along with the continuation of existing initiatives such as URBACT, have the objective of fostering the EU support to urban regeneration with an integrated approach. It is also important to mention that at the moment the EU is facing the construction of its urban agenda (the *Urban Agenda for the EU*) following the path set by the *Pact of Amsterdam* that was agreed and signed in May 2016. The Urban Agenda for the EU is a crucial milestone that reveals the growing level of commitment of the relevant actors to this policy field in the framework of an increasing international awareness on the importance of addressing urban issues to face the main regional and global challenges of the societies of the XXI century. The New Urban Agenda and the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations reveal the growing attention that urban matters are receiving⁷.

This issue of TRIA focuses on **urban regeneration in the EU** aiming to address the policy action summarized and reflect on its outcomes and limitations. The objective is contributing to a better understanding of the general scenario and to bring the attention of the scientific community, policy-makers and other relevant stakeholders to the relevance of undertaking a critical analysis. It is considered crucial to making informed decisions on how the EU urban policy should evolve in the next programming period of the Cohesion Policy that is starting to be negotiated by the EC and the MS at the moment.

ENDNOTES

1 There are several policies and instruments in the EU that impact cities. We here focus only on those specifically launched by the EC with a specific urban approach.

2 See for example the Communication by the EC *Towards an Urban Agenda in the EU* (1997).

3 It is worth noting that the increasing relevance that urban issues are achieving within the Cohesion Policy Framework has resulted in the DG Regio changing its name from Directorate General for Regional Policy to Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policies in the previous programming period. This change reveals the visibility that the issue is gaining within the EC framework.

4 For example, Portugal launched in 2000 the *POLIS* programme and the initiative *Zonas Urbanas Críticas -ZUC-* in 2005; the *Neighbourhoods Law (Ley de Barrios)* passed in 2004 in Catalonia and the *Izartu* Programme was launched in 2001 in the Vasque Country.

5 It is integrated by the *Lille Action Programme* (2000), the *Rotterdam Acquis on Urban Policy* (2004), the *Bristol Accord* (2005), the *Leipzig Charter* (2007), the *Marseille Final Statement* (2008), the *Toledo Declaration* (2010) and the *Riga Declaration* (2015).

6 See for example the part entitled “Making greater use of urban integrated policy approaches” of the Leipzig Charter (Informal meeting of EU Ministers on urban development, 2007: 2)

7 It is worth mentioning that the EU has been an active stakeholder in the process of construction of these instruments and has committed to take into account in the development of its urban policy. For example, the 12 Partnerships that are working in the construction of the Urban Agenda for the EU are taking the New Urban Agenda and the SDG into account in the work they are developing.

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