

Launch of the JPI Urban Europe Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda

On the 29th to 30th September 2015 more than 250 urban stakeholders, urban policy makers and representatives from European institutions and beyond joined the conference 'Transition towards Sustainable and Liveable Urban Futures' marking the launch of the JPI Urban Europe Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) for European urban areas and cities.

Two intensive days of presentations and discussions were jointly organized by the European Parliament (the Science and Technology Options Assessment STOA and the URBAN Intergroup), the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions and the Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) Urban Europe. The conference started with an afternoon seminar in the European Parliament with the aim to present the SRIA and to discuss how research and science can contribute to real change in cities. One important feature in the program was a panel discussion with mayors from the four cities Bristol, Udine, Trikala and Delft sharing their thoughts about the future and experiences of implementing new solutions in their cities. In the evening a networking event, hosted by the Norway house, celebrated the achievements of the JPI Urban Europe so far and presenting the projects that have been funded in the first pilot calls. On the second day a broad range of stakeholders met up in the Committee of the Regions to take part in panel discussions and thematic parallel sessions with the aim to prepare the first steps of implementing the SRIA.

– We are the missing link that can make a difference, bridging silos with an integrated approach, linking national and European funding and linking science and policy, said Ingolf Schädler, Chair of the JPI Urban Europe Governing Board. Margit Noll, Chair of JPI Urban Europe Management Board, elaborated and emphasized in her introduction that the SRIA introduces a new paradigm of how urban research is done, involving cities as partners in inter- and transdisciplinary research and innovation with the cities' challenges in focus.

Throughout the conference a lot of support was expressed in relation to the ambitions of the SRIA and the JPI Urban Europe initiative. It was concluded that the SRIA is timely in relation to other important urban initiatives and agendas on a European and global level, for example the EU Urban Agenda the UN-Habitat's Global Urban Agenda and the recent initiative of President Juncker 'Smart Cities/Cities of the Future'. The action oriented research approach that JPI Urban Europe aims for, that acknowledges cities as key actors of research and innovation and puts emphasis on the need for research to bring about concrete solutions to urban challenges, was supported and found to resonate well with the ambitions and strategies of many other actors and programmes, among others the European Research Framework Programme Horizon 2020

Cities as key actors of innovation and laboratories for experiments

The role of cities as key actors and partners of research and innovation was mentioned throughout the conference. Lambert van Nistelrooij, Vice-President of the URBAN Intergroup, Member of the European Parliament, suggested that cities should let go of the controlling government approach and instead apply an invitational approach opening up for better research and closer cooperation with citizens, NGOs and activists to work with action driven policies at the local level.

There is also a shared understanding that European policies and research need to address concrete challenges taking place in cities. – *The integrated approach to urban development is urgent, important and necessary... and the agenda of the JPI Urban Europe is concrete, clear, transparent and useful for cities*, said Jan Olbrycht, President of the URBAN Intergroup. – *The agenda of the JPI Urban Europe aims to radically improve our understanding of urban areas...and I would like to like to see Urban Europe becoming internationally strong in this field of action*, said Peter Dröll, Director of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. – *Policy initiatives on a European level can be very slow and therefore we need the pull factor from business and local stakeholders to speed up the process*, said Bas Verkerk, Mayor of Delft and President of the ALDE group in the Committee of the Regions.

The notion that cities can be used as laboratories for jointly developing and testing new solutions is supported by European policymakers and by decision makers in cities. The four mayors – George Ferguson (Bristol, the UK), Furio Honsell. (Udine, Italy), Dimitris Papastergiou, (Trikala, Greece) and Bas Verkerk (Mayor of Delft, the Netherlands) – all showcased examples of how they use their cities as laboratories for experiments. – *I wanted to turn my city into a real laboratory. People always ask you for solutions but usually there are no solutions, there are only processes that you can try to manage*, said Furio Honsell.

Kurt Vandenberghe, Director of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation announced a new initiative and related Horizon 2020 'Smart and Sustainable Cities' Call for Proposal from the European Commission aiming to finance urban living labs to test new concepts and solutions for nature based solutions in real-life settings in cities in order to create a global market for cost efficient solutions to combat local heat island effects, extreme weather events etc.

Another reoccurring theme was the potential of open and big data that is shared freely among universities, business, city administrations and citizens. A caution about how smart cities concepts can increase the divide among citizens, and also unsolved issues related to ownership of data and integrity as well as the challenges brought by the refugee crisis were raised by Mayors in the cities' panel.

Lambert van Nistelrooij, Vice-President of the URBAN Intergroup, in his conclusions underlined that the event was a very important initiative especially in the context of the ongoing works on the EU Urban Agenda. He invited JPI Urban Europe to organise in the future at the European Parliament another meeting to show concrete effects of the implementation of the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda.

The role of JPI Urban Europe

In the panel discussion, aiming to explore possibilities of future joint actions, the representatives from important city and business networking organisations and from other stakeholder associations again concluded that the SRIA indeed is timely and shares common grounds with other agendas and strategic frameworks. Opportunities for future cooperation were envisioned. Frédéric Saliez, Deputy Director, UN-Habitat, commented that even though the SRIA is focused on European cities and does not explicitly relate to the international context it resonates well with UN-Habitat's Urban Agenda on a global scale as well with its sustainable developments goals linking the international, national and local politics. Anna Lisa Boni, Secretary-General, Eurocities, saw common grounds with their strategic framework and Wolfgang Teubner, Regional Director Europe, ICLEI, appreciated that JPI Urban Europe aims to work with cities rather than do research about cities.

How can JPI Urban Europe help cities? – *Research can help cities understand their challenges*, said Mike Pitts, Innovate UK. Anna Lisa Boni described how research can help policy makers to identify trends and innovative solutions, deliver data to the ESPON and the OECD, and perform case studies and cities diagnoses. Several speakers in different panels during the two days emphasized the necessity that innovation and social equality and inclusion in cities go together. One important challenge to JPI Urban Europe is to prove how innovation leads to social benefits and cohesion in cities. – *Research can provide the data and help evaluate the social benefits of innovation so that city leaders are armed with the arguments for change since citizens do not see these benefits before they happen*, said George Ferguson.

Inger Gustafsson, Vice-chair of the JPI Urban Europe, concluded on behalf of JPI Urban Europe that innovation and urban transformations can be high risk projects but that we need to be brave and have sharp demands that all projects financed by JPI Urban Europe shall be relevant to city actors. Moderator Amy Rader Olsson concluded in her final words that JPI Urban Europe needs to be loud, translate, communicate and build relationships. A worthy ambition to follow up on in the up-coming work with the implementation of the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda after the promising start in Brussels.