

The future of cities—opportunities, challenges and the way forward

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A new report by the JRC identifies the trends, raises questions and provokes discussions on what the future of cities can, and should be. Credit: European Union, 2019—graphic elaboration from olly AdobeStock, 2019

While urban population is expected to continue growing around most of the globe, this is less so in Europe.

Europe is unique in that it will have both cities that will grow and others that will shrink over its territory. Watch Brussels, Luxembourg and Stockholm—they may grow by over 50 percent by 2050, according to a new report by the JRC.

With 75 percent of the [global population](#) living in the urban areas, and 72 percent of Europeans, the future of cities will to a large extent determine the future of mankind.

A new report by the JRC, presented during the European Week of Regions and Cities, identifies the trends, raises questions and provokes discussions on what the future of cities can, and should be.

Europe vs the world in urban development

While [urban population](#) will continue growing across most of the globe, Europe also has to cope with new challenges related to a declining and aging population in many cities. On the one hand, high population growth (between 25-50 percent by 2050) will occur mostly in medium size capitals, such as Vienna, Budapest, Prague, or large regional cities in France as well as in Munich or Bologna.

Some cities, such as Brussels, Luxembourg and Stockholm could expect even higher growth.

On the other hand, population loss exceeding 25 percent will occur mainly in small and less populated cities in Eastern Germany, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria.

Other noteworthy trends include:

- Most European cities are expected to grow geographically, and cities will have to increasingly recognize the importance of optimizing how their [public space](#) is designed and used.
- An aging EU population will require further adaptation of infrastructure and services.
- Cities will increasingly apply new technologies and innovation across a wide range of sectors, from transport and mobility to citizen engagement. These technologies will need to work together seamlessly, and be inclusive to benefit all citizens.
- The dominance of personal cars could be drastically reduced in favor of more efficient public transport, shared and active mobility. Demand for transport could also be reduced through new working patterns.
- Cities will need to cope with existing issues such as providing affordable housing to an increasingly varied population, ensuring inclusiveness and integration among its communities, and reducing environmental impacts.
- While cities are frontrunners in fighting climate change, they are also where the effects of energy poverty and water scarcity, to mention but a few, will be particularly evident.
- Citizen engagement in policy making is growing and should become more prevalent in the future. New forms of urban governance are already being tested in many cities, and the importance of networks bringing cities together is expected to increase.

Finding solutions

It is not all doom and gloom, on the contrary.

Cities are uniquely equipped to tackle challenges—the availability of

highly educated workforce, a large and diverse population, a certain level of autonomy and financial means, and openness to technological advancements and innovation, to name but a few, may offer ways to relieve the pressures cities face.

Space and the city

Public spaces make up between 2 and 15 percent of land in city centers in Europe.

The greenness of European cities has increased by 38 percent over the last 25 years, with 44 percent of Europe's urban population currently living within 300 meters of a public park.

Well-designed public and green spaces can have a multitude of benefits: improving air quality, providing microclimate regulation, and enhancing safety, social integration and public health.

The citizen's city

The co-creation of strategies to tackle urban challenges is vital for their success—citizens can play a crucial role, often providing new perspectives and solutions.

Novel technologies can significantly improve citizen participation, but there is a need to better understand and systematize current and emerging practices.

Cities as innovation hubs

Cities play a central role in innovation dynamics: geographical proximity of stakeholders and multidisciplinary interaction enable innovation.

The variety of approaches to innovation enhances the identity of cities, their traditions and their cultural heritage.

Although capital cities and metropolitan areas remain major drivers of creativity and innovation, favorable conditions can also be found in smaller cities.

The resilient city

A resilient city assesses, plans and acts to prepare for and respond to all hazards—sudden and slow onset, expected and unexpected.

These include uncontrolled urbanization, climate change and political instability, among others.

Understanding social and economic vulnerabilities is essential to formulate actions for resilience adapted to local needs, with local communities playing a central role.

Cities have an important role to play in pushing forward societal change

Cities are increasingly embracing innovation and novel technologies and, thanks to the concentration of people, ideas and resources, they are leading the way towards solutions to global challenges beyond their own boundaries.

Global Covenant of Mayors includes over 9 200 cities, 8 800 of which are in Europe.

In the EU, the cities part of the Covenant signed an overall commitment to reducing emissions of 27 percent by 2020, well above the minimum

requested EU target of 20 percent.

From progress reported on the implementation of EU cities' climate action plans, almost 23 percent of overall emission reductions were achieved by 2018 compared to their baseline years.

Strengthening urban areas through cohesion policy

Many of the big challenges of the decade to come—fighting exclusion, climate change or integrating migrants—will have to be tackled in Europe's cities and metropolitan areas.

This is why the Commission proposes to strengthen even more the urban dimension of its cohesion policy beyond 2020.

Six percent of the European Regional Development Fund envelope is earmarked for investments in sustainable [urban development](#) at national level.

The 2021-2027 cohesion policy framework also creates the European Urban Initiative, a new instrument for city-to-city cooperation, innovation and capacity-building across all the thematic priorities of the Urban Agenda for the EU: integrating migrants, housing, air quality, tackling urban poverty and energy transition, among others.

Moreover, in line with one of the key objectives of cohesion policy, "A Europe closer to citizens," the Commission will further support locally-led development strategies at the level closest to the citizens.

These local strategies, in the form of the existing integrated territorial investments and community-led local development tools, should be further developed and endorsed by local authorities, which should be more involved in selecting EU-funded projects.

A simplified access to and use of EU funds beyond 2020 will make life easier for program managers and beneficiaries.

Fewer, shorter, and clearer rules in one single rulebook for seven EU funds will facilitate synergies, for example between the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund+ in the context of integrated city development plans, for the regeneration of deprived [urban areas](#).

European response

The above-mentioned urban agenda for the EU was launched in May 2016 with the Pact of Amsterdam.

It represents a new multi-level working method promoting cooperation between Member States, cities, the European Commission and other stakeholders in order to stimulate growth, livability and innovation in the cities of Europe and to identify and successfully tackle social challenges.

Europe can therefore further enhance its role as a key player in worldwide [city](#) development discussions both through its extensive policy experience and with regard to science and knowledge production.

Provided by CORDIS

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