



Ignacio Socias Piarnau
International Federation for Family Development

Urbanization trends & good practices in Europe

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“If we expect cities to be part of the answer to the problem of climate change, the financial unsustainability of sprawl, or anything else, then it has to be a place where children can be raised to thrive in the world ... This doesn’t mean necessarily junking the urbanist agenda, but it does mean building a bigger tent and not overly obsessing the needs of niche market segments.”

(Aaron Renn)

Urbanization trends in Europe

Today, 72% of the EU27+UK population lives in cities and urban areas, but this average conceals pronounced differences between countries. Urbanization rates vary from about 50% (Luxembourg, Romania, Croatia) to beyond 80% (Italy, Netherlands, UK). A closer examination also reveals that Europe’s urban system consists of a mixture of small, medium, and large cities, which can be seen to play distinctive roles and be at different points in their life cycles.

By most definitions, Europe has no megacity. Cities with a population of below 250,000 account for 28% of city residents, lower than in Africa (33%), but higher than in North America (17%). Around 26% of residents live in cities with populations between 1 million and 5 million, and around 14% of Europeans live in cities with populations of over 5 million.

But Europe has not always been so urban. Indeed, the past fifty years have seen far-reaching changes to the way the European urban system is organized. During these five recent decades,

Europe has effectively shifted from being an industrial and primarily rural continent to one that is urban and metropolitan in nature.

Besides this process, the main present trends regarding European cities are:

Immigration

Over the past few decades, the most significant source of population growth in European cities has been migration – from other parts of the same country, other European countries, or outside Europe. Migration into European cities has become more important over time. By the late 1990s, these east-west flows had started to ease, as the new states of Eastern Europe had begun to enjoy the benefits of economic growth, new job creation and higher living standards. But while a market economy and democratized forms of political governance developed in Eastern and Central Europe, economic and political integration intensified in Western Europe, and migration continued apace.

Increase in life expectancy

Another key trend that has affected the population structures of European cities in the past few decades is the increase in life expectancy. Since the end of the Second World War, improvements in healthcare have been considerable across Europe. But the European life expectancy map has changed profoundly in recent decades, with very different rates of progress across countries. Indeed, the steady overall increase in life expectancy conceals sharp divergences between regions in Europe.

Population ageing

This increase in life expectancy has in turn led to population ageing, which has been further accelerated by falling fertility. With a decline in mortality, the elderly population has undergone a twofold change in recent decades. Not only are more and more people living to retirement age, but retirement is lasting longer.

Widespread use of technology

Europeans are becoming increasingly connected – 19% use online shopping, 64% use online devices to access live public transport schedule information, and 77% of the EU population use mobile mapping and navigation services. A growing number of people living in cities (14% in the EU27+UK, reaching as high as 32% in Denmark) are also using digital technologies to telework and are abandoning the daily commute. Big data and global monitoring are part of daily lives. Sensor networks and new systems of data collection can now provide a real-time, constant stream

of information that has a huge potential to improve city planning and tailor solutions to local conditions.

New forms of family union

From the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, traditional family models were challenged, and a new model emerged, as the combined recognition of conjugal relationships and parenthood outside traditional marriage. Marriage has become later and rarer, and, at the same time, the increase in divorce over the past fifty years is common to the whole continent. This, together with increased opportunities for women in the workplace, has further depressed fertility rates across the continent.

The way forward

To turn all these challenges into opportunities, it becomes essential to rethink the city starting from family and housing needs. Decent housing and living mean guaranteeing adequate spaces, sanitary facilities, drinking water, electricity, connection to telematic networks as well as the series of general services that the neighborhood must ensure. All the best practices that could improve the system of services should be identified.

Possible solutions should adopt a new perspective; now that the old world has to be overcome. Identifying and selecting best practices is already a fundamental task. But it is also essential to identify possible ways to meet the needs of families, homes, neighborhoods, with the circular economy. It means recovering, reusing, recycling, reducing the waste of irreproducible resources and extending the life of products or the possibility of their reuse. Every sector of the economy must be involved in the organization of the new city. We cannot admit any more absurd waste.

Climate change and demographic challenges are global issues and we need an international framework in which we can combat these problems. However, at the local level, we can provide local protection and care services by using modern technology to inform citizens and create a culture of community service. Education is another very important aspect of dealing with these challenges. In that sense, the role of local authorities in sending and providing the information is vital.

One of the proposals to reach this end is to establish family councils in local communities so that they can have consistent communication with their local authorities. This would help to ensure that they get the right information about what is going on regarding these topics.

As these are competencies of national governments, which have both political and financial power to deal with the environment and demography, communication and interaction with local authorities should be also ensured.

The Venice Declaration

Back in 2017, the International Federation for Family Development promoted, with the previous thoughts in mind, the Inclusive Cities for Sustainable Cities project. Its purpose is to configure an alliance of territories from all over the world aiming to be inclusive of sustainable families by being responsive to their needs. The contents are included in the Venice Declaration, with these ten topics: Housing, New Technologies, Education, Healthcare, Safety, Clean Air, Transportation, Affordability, Leisure and Tourism, and Vulnerable Families.

The founding members were the Veneto Region (Italy), the Department des Bouches-du-Rhone (France) and the Region of Attica (Greece). Other signatories that have already joined are several Brazilian territories, more than 40 Mexican cities and a Polish region.

By joining the Declaration, they are committed to submitting a Monitoring Report every year to be presented to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs by the International Federation for Family Development secretariat, with information of the previous year on the progress made on those topics that is assessed by academic.

In November 2019, the first Annual Technical Meeting of the Signatories was celebrated in Curitiba (Brazil), hosted by the government of the State of Paraná, with observers from Netherland, Serbia, Sweden, Colombia, Qatar and other Brazilian states. The Curitiba Manifesto, agreed by all of them, contains the conclusions of the meeting and inspires the future evolution of the project.

After the pandemic, a second presential Annual Technical Meeting of the Signatories has been held in Brussels in March 2022. Its main conclusions included creating an online platform to compile good practices from which a manual can be produced for signatories, adapted to their needs; creating a thematic working group on food security, energy security and circular economy; and working on the update of the Venice Declaration in light of the post-pandemic era, to repair what has been damaged, and to prevent the risks of tomorrow.

With this, the project takes up the challenges European regions, cities and municipalities are increasingly suffering from the consequences of the pandemic, climate change and natural disasters, which have highlighted the complexity of ecosystems. It has been a unique observatory of how urbanization and migration trends have evolved during these years.

Some good practices from European signatories

State of Carinthia (Austria)

Carinthia understands housing as a fundamental right, which is an important highlight. In this field, it develops actions aimed at supporting the unemployed and people who have had significant declines in their income. Looking specifically at children, Carinthia supports housing actions aimed at families in crisis and those who adopt children. It is currently developing a pilot project for the first home. All of these initiatives are linked to the social protection network and the local social assistance actions.

City of Marseille (France)

In this city, the policies adopted for the inclusion of families in the plan of new technologies drew attention. The city of Marseille uses ICTs as important tools for public management. It develops advanced support and training programs for older people, to overcome the digital gap and understands technology as an instrument to bring people and communities together.

Departement of Bouches-du-Rhone (France)

The department has done important work in the health field. In addition to having invested to equip hospitals in order to better face the pandemic, it adopted, as a public health guideline, educational and guidance actions aimed at strengthening family planning, a topic of fundamental importance for the strengthening of stable and secure family ties.

City of Vicenza (Italy)

Vicenza's highlight is its policies for vulnerable families. There is an innovative notion of transient vulnerability responsible for shaping specific policies and focused on overcoming momentary difficulties, arising, for example, from economic conditions — such as employment for young people — or resulting from the breaking of the family bond, due to a separation, for example.

Kujawsko-Pomorskie Region (Poland)

They established Family Support Centers to offer comprehensive and specialized support for families, allowing parents and other carers to strengthen their competencies instead of replacing them, subsidiarizing all the resources they may need for it.

Veneto Region (Italy)

Within the framework of the contents of this project, the Region approved a new law on “Interventions to support the family and the birth rate”, pursuing integrated and organic policies aimed at supporting families in the performance of their social function; promoting actions to encourage solidarity between generations, social relations and the choice of life paths for adolescents and young people; supporting parenting; and developing research initiatives, continuous monitoring of the situation of families and the impact of family policies on the territory.

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More information about the Venice Declaration network is available at:
familyperspective.org/inclusive-cities-for-sustainable-families-3/