



COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF POLITICAL AGENDAS

# Identifying Models of National Urban Agendas

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A View to the Global  
Transition

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*Edited by*  
Francesca Gelli · Matteo Basso

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## The Forthcoming Geography: Capacity Building, Social Innovation, and Public Participation

Contributions in the third part of the book add further insights to the comprehension of urban agendas as policy instruments that have at least two functions: to enhance coordinated policy responses and to address strategies of urban and social change according to a glocal perspective. With this premise, the section is structured with a dual purpose.

A first intent is to offer an update of the European geography of urban agendas in its most contemporary evolution. The focus is on the national urban policies' state-of-the-art, from a comparative perspective. To this end, Valeria Fedeli's contribution provides a critical reflection. While growing national government interest in launching national urban policies is currently recognizable, the author argues that what emerges is still a rather fragmented and contradictory picture. By focusing on some common characteristics of policy debates in Europe fostered in the last forty years, the final part of the chapter opens a debate on whether a specificity of the European city—in terms of approaches in building urban policies—can actually be identified. Mainstream definitions of national urban policies in European urban studies share the idea that policies that are promoted by National States are coherent within an explicit centrally led or inspired framework. An integrated approach to urban interventions characterizes such policies. Starting from this assumption, recognition of urban policies conceived as an integrated set of actions and operating through place-based programmes, in central areas and/or suburbs, is a discriminatory factor to highlight that a country has a national urban

policy and also an explicit urban agenda. The author then stresses the mainstream notion of urban policy on the basis of findings from comparative research conducted by the National Urban Policies working group of the European Urban Research Association.

As known, urbanization in Western European countries evolved with a high density of settlements and population. Urban areas are home to around 80% of the population and occupy, at present, a relevant surface of the countries' land use, varying from 14% of Spain and Portugal to 16% of France, 17% of Germany, 24% of the UK and Italy, 31% of the Netherlands, and 40% of Belgium (World Data.info 2020).<sup>1</sup> Belgium is an extreme case, with 98% of its residents living in urban areas. In fact, "territory consumption" produced by cities' expansion is on the rise. A dense network of infrastructures connects a myriad of small- and medium-sized centres. Agricultural areas occupy a vast surface of land use, varying from 40% in Portugal to 71% in the UK. Overall, land exploitation for anthropic uses is very high and it is not comparable, in terms of growth and ecosystem balances, with the countries described in the previous section (part II). Nevertheless, urban economies and societies are not always at the heart of state political agendas: attention to the city level has long been controversial, even within the European Union.

The European Commission played a key role in developing awareness of the urban dimension of policies, giving impetus to the supranational level to define a sustainable framework for analysis and strategic programming. Since 2016, the European Union has equipped itself with an urban agenda that sets principles and priorities for a decisive shift towards sustainable and integrated forms of urban development. To facilitate such transition, the agenda was designed in harmony with national strategic objectives and cities' effective involvement. The result of an *Urban Agenda for the EU* was achieved after twenty years of commitment, on the part of the European Commission, through a gradual confrontation and bargaining process with key decision-making bodies of the Union and its Member States. In parallel, exchanges with academic, expert, and civil society sectors have been broad and intense in terms of the knowledge acquired. Continuous changes in the equilibrium, due to the Enlargement Policy and agreements on the Cohesion Policy, which were at stake in the various programming periods, have affected the urban agenda-setting process. However, great concern also arose for the underlying frictions related to

<sup>1</sup><https://www.worlddata.info>.



the exclusive competence of Member States in urban and territorial policies.<sup>2</sup> The implementation structure of the European Urban Agenda reflects a multi-level governance model that emphasizes public-private and inter-institutional cooperation among different government levels. Thematic partnership served as the working formula, acting as arenas that included governments and non-governmental actors in charge of specific policy issues.

The focus has shifted from explicit urban policies adopting area-based approaches to a wider urban dimension of public policies. To address the challenges that urbanization poses, in terms of both problems and opportunities, it is essential to consider urban and territorial effects of a variety of sectoral policies that affect urban areas and the population living therein. In addition, those sectoral policies can be a lever for action at urban scale to mobilize resources, strengthening local capacities. Within this frame, in a later phase, the *Urban Agenda for the EU* has contributed to the UN-Habitat New Urban Agenda. Thus, the European Commission has played the role of “entrepreneur of transnational policy transfer” in allowing the circulation of its ideas and patterns of development. From this perspective, a specific issue deserves attention. Considering urbanization and related issues experienced in Western and Southern Europe, the *Urban Agenda for the EU* incorporates theories in favour of density to contain land consumption, promoting patterns of sustainable mobility for goods and people. Mobility is regarded as a proper answer to many problems since vast territories of circulation respond to the needs of urban life and the contemporary economy. However, the pandemic has heavily affected these two basic assumptions. Currently, debates over a recovery and relaunch of programming policies do not foresee a clear future development model: the whole European Agenda is being redesigned. Meanwhile, decisions at the EU and state levels are often quite contradictory. The shift towards ecological transition is permeated by an influential narrative, even though concrete policymaking still struggles with demands that are not always consistent with strategies and contents aligned to the new principles. Policy learning seems to find obstacles again. Resistance to change in this case is motivated by both emerging interests and cognitive and inertia factors.

<sup>2</sup>Resistance to a direct European urban policy has been strong, despite the successful implementation of some experimental initiatives launched by the EU Commission, such as Urban programmes or, in more recent years, the Innovative Urban Actions.

A second intent in this section is to include case studies that focus on meaningful cross-cutting issues such as capacity building, social innovation, and public participation. All these issues may become important policy factors in the design of urban agendas, and even more in their implementation.

A focus on the European case, from a capacity-building perspective, underscores the “Europeanisation” of urban policymaking contents and styles within the Member States. The experiences of individual countries in building their own national urban agendas, selected for this very purpose, include Spain and Portugal.

The two cases represent meaningful trajectories. Moneyba González Medina and Sonia De Gregorio Hurtado introduce the Spanish case: a country that, over the years, has made good use of European funding and policy tools to design and implement urban policies and programmes. Their in-depth analysis of the origin and evolution of the Spanish national urban agenda (approved in 2019) sheds light on two dimensions which are key aspects in policy studies. On the one hand, policy transfer mechanisms—through imitation and adaptation—have inspired the construction of the agenda, namely, the EU’s approach on sustainable urban development, and the UN’s 2030 Agenda. The process has been quite technocratic in that the expert and technical knowledge served as a primary source to elaborate the agenda. On the other hand, changes in political leadership among ministers shaped the agenda’s contents, affecting its main features and the international documents of reference.

Housing policy is used as an opportunity to explore the Portuguese urban agenda in the chapter co-authored by Marco Allegra, Simone Tulumello, and Giovanni Allegretti. Herein, the authors provide a detailed historical reconstruction of the country’s housing sector trajectory, reflecting on the main changes due to the EU’s influence. Shifting from simply being a matter of public works to one of social welfare and spatial planning, in the Portuguese urban agenda housing policy has evolved, reversing the idea of what a city should be in terms of built environment and homeownership.

The last two chapters provide a more general reflection on two cross-cutting issues that are distinctive features of the social facet of the European *urban acquis*: social innovation and public participation. They represent current issues and thus help define different national urban agendas worldwide. Maurizio Busacca focuses on the debate on social innovation, analysing related policies within a comparative perspective that draws from

case studies of the agendas of nine European countries. According to the author's research hypothesis, there is a relationship between welfare regimes and social innovation policies: the reason is found in the solidity of national and local welfare infrastructures. Finally, Giovanni Allegretti and Gianluca Sgueo's chapter centres on the case of a policy tool—namely, participatory budgeting—framed as a “travelling policy”. Drawing on the concept of policy instrument, the authors analyse the origin and evolution of such a tool, from the first experiments in the Global South thirty years ago, to recent applications in Asian contexts. Participatory budgeting has been reconfigured and re-semantized by traveling through different historical periods, countries, and legislation systems. The chapter aims firstly to understand whether the “community of intent” that gathered around this tool—advocates, practitioners, policymakers—has actually triggered a common agenda of participatory budgeting goals and modes of operation. Secondly, it explores whether such agenda has a proper transformative capacity when interacting with other types of agendas such as urban ones.