Position paper of the German-Austrian URBAN-Network
on the future of the URBACT programme

Funding period 2014-2020

Background

Based on the Community Initiative URBAN in the past funding periods, the German-Austrian URBAN-Network supports German and Austrian cities in implementing integrated urban development measures which are financed by EU Structural Funds. The network provides an important platform for intense exchange of experiences, knowledge transfer and political awareness. Thereby, the direct dialog between all four levels (the European, the federal, the regional and the municipal level) provides considerable added value to all parties concerned. This position paper is based on the experiences of the network cities which have been involved in quite a number of URBACT I and II projects (as Lead Partners as well as partners) and which (in view of URBACT III in the upcoming funding period) represent a key target group for the European programme on sustainable urban development.

1. Thematic focus of URBACT III

Within the frame of the URBACT Annual Conference 2012, URBACT presented the following six workstreams which are based on the main challenges for European cities as identified in Commission study “Cities of Tomorrow”. In preparation of URBACT III, those topics are currently further elaborated and will define the thematic framework for the future URBACT programme:

- Shrinking cities: challenges and opportunities
- More jobs: better cities
- Supporting young people through social innovation
- Against divided cities in Europe
- Motivating mobility mindsets
- Building energy efficiency in European cities

Our comments as follows:

→ From the point of view of the German-Austrian URBAN-Network, the thematic field “More Jobs: better cities” should not only focus on employment and labour policy but involve by all means local economic development, entrepreneurship and innovation.

→ In our opinion, the topic “Building energy efficiency” is too restricted. Emphasis should be placed on an integrated approach regarding energy efficiency and the use of renewable energies in cities. Thereby, not only buildings but also urban neighbourhoods, infrastructure and...
business enterprises should be taken into consideration. A link to the topic mobility and transport seems reasonable and should be taken into account.

→ Furthermore, consideration of the topic “Urban-Rural-Partnerships” within URBACT would be desirable from our point of view.

2. Structure and organization of URBACT III

→ To allow for a stronger focus on thematic approaches, the administrative efforts (especially for Lead Partners) should be minimized and greatly reduced compared to URBACT II.

→ Smaller networks would be helpful in this regard. Different types of networks could be taken into account: classical “exchange networks” with 8 to 12 partners as well as smaller “cooperation and learning groups” with 3 to 5 partners, which would allow for a more intense exchange.

→ The strict quotation in regards to convergence and competitiveness regions should be designed in a more flexible way in order to avoid that the withdrawal of a single city can endanger an entire network. The same applies for the regulation concerning the minimum number of cities in the consortium. The provisions for the withdrawal from a network should be simplified to make the legal and financial consequences better manageable for the remaining network.

→ Further we suggest a simplification of the financial management. The system of budget categories and budget lines with the concurrent allocation of budgets for different objective-actions (as applied in URBACT II) in the practical implementation is much too complex and brings no added value for accounting and financial reporting. We propose to work more with lump sums (as already common in other EU programmes). Also audit procedures should be carried out only once on partner level (and not additionally on Lead Partner level).

→ To allow for a broader dissemination of best practice approaches on national level and to make them accessible to more cities, qualified results of URBACT thematic networks should more often be translated in other languages.

→ We propose that in URBACT III also NGOs should be accepted as project partners (thematic enrichment of the network activities and stronger support of cities through political positioning of the network topics on national and European level).

→ The 2-phase implementation of the projects with a co-financed development phase is evaluated positively and should be maintained in URBACT III.

→ In times of crisis and in view of the tight budget situation and indebtedness of many municipalities there is little scope for voluntary expenditures on communal level. Against this background, the prefinancing of URBACT project costs through the cities and the relatively late reimbursement (sometimes even up to one year) are critical points. The opportunity to grant an advance to programmes (as given in the Structural Funds Regulations) should also be used for URBACT projects. Furthermore, the period of audit and reimbursement on the part of URBACT should be accelerated. Discrepancies of single partners must not lead to retention of funds for the entire network but should be solved individually.

→ We evaluate very positively the local component of the URBACT programme with a focus on the establishment of interdisciplinary working groups on city level (Local Support Groups) and
the development of **Local Action Plans**. An *increased budget* for local activities (e.g. local studies and concept development) in our opinion would enhance the incentive for cities to participate in the URBACT programme.

→ Likewise we see a benefit in the idea of **cooperation between URBACT cities and the Managing Authorities of the ERDF Operational Programmes**, although the funding of Local Action Plans through the mainstreaming programmes, in practice, is rather problematic. (Privileging URBACT cities in the Operational Programmes is quite difficult. Often competition procedures on regional level are carried out to implement the urban dimension within the Structural Funds. Also some cities are even excluded from Structural Funds subsidies). To achieve an increased added value, we encourage a **stronger promotion and accompaniment** of the involvement of **Managing Authorities and intermediate bodies** (responsible for integrated urban development) in the upcoming URBACT programme period.

→ In some cases, the working methods of **Lead Experts** can lead to frictions with the responsible Lead Partners. Therefore it is essential to define more precisely the **interfaces of both work areas**, to concretize the **Lead Expert's roles** and at the same time to disconnect them from the **Lead Partner's project responsibility**.

→ The work of the **“Thematic Poles”** as carried out in URBACT II we see rather critically as it didn’t *bring direct added value* for neither the **thematic networks** nor the **cities** themselves but meant **additional efforts** for the Lead Partners. Nevertheless, we consider the interconnection of URBACT actors at programme level as important in order to address **political recommendations from within the URBACT programme e.g. to the European Commission**. We propose to **streamline** this exchange between thematically related networks (rather at the end of the project period to be able to build on project results), to therefore mainly involve the **Lead Experts** and to reflect prepared recommendations with the **project cities** within the frame of the URBACT Annual Conferences.

→ In addition to the **“URBACT National Dissemination Points”** which carry out communication activities on the programme in national languages and thus contribute to the dissemination of project results in the member states, we propose to **establish national and easy accessible service points**, with the purpose to

- give detailed information on the URBACT programme’s **framework conditions** (similar to the “National Contact Points” already existing for the INTERREG programme)
- offer interested cities and organizations **assistance in the application process**
- consult in terms of the **selection of partners** and (through the cross-linking with service points in other member states) also **support in finding partner cities**.

**Bundling** these **service points** with the respective “National Dissemination Points” would be advisable.