



## Mayoral Declaration

This declaration was initiated by eight small towns from different European regions who came together in the URBACT sponsored Re-growCity network to exchange knowledge on practices that respond to long term decline. The issues we addressed are relevant for all small and medium sized towns for whom economic growth is not a realistic option. We therefore invite municipalities, representatives of public institutions and governments to join our call for action at national and European levels to support small and medium sized towns in their struggle to secure a sustainable future.

Urban development in Europe is strongly influenced by large cities which tend to display combinations of problems that differ in significant ways from those of small and medium sized towns. While big cities and their regions are booming, drawing in residents despite their increasing problems with affordable housing and mobility, small towns are losing their population and their relevance for working families and young professionals. As local tax revenues drop the relative cost of services for those who are left behind takes up an ever increasing proportion of local municipal budgets.

Nearly two thirds of Europe's entire population lives in rural areas and the smaller towns that serve them, yet their economic influence is not strong enough to ensure that European policy is sensitive and responsive to the distinctive challenges they face. European urban development needs to be inclusive of contrasting social, economic and environmental contexts that characterise the diversity within and across European member states. Urban settlements of all sizes should therefore be supported through policy initiatives that promote solutions at different scales. Only then can the acceptance and support for European ideals by the many citizens who live in smaller towns be safeguarded and developed.

The successful management of long term shrinkage cannot be addressed in a two year project. The complexity of the shrinkage process and the nature of the interventions to halt and reverse decline require a long term and sustained change in policy and practice that needs to cut across all municipal functions. The support of citizens and their willingness to embrace change are central to this. It is in this context that the mayors of the URBACT Re-grow City network put forward these proposals:

1. Small and medium sized towns provide attractive and important living spaces and often fulfil important sub-regional service and administrative functions. But many suffer from long term demographic changes and economic decline which erode their capacity to provide essential services. The downward spiral of decline needs to be halted by exploring, testing and funding sustainable economic, environmental and social responses.
2. The majority of urban settlements in Europe have fewer than 50,000 inhabitants but receive very limited consideration within the structural policy instruments. All European towns require support when it comes to the provision of essential social and economic functions. Funding for urban development therefore needs to be distributed more evenly, and structural funding programmes should be accessible to municipalities irrespective of their size.
3. Although nearly 50% of urban settlements in Europe are shrinking, smaller towns struggle to influence European and national policy processes. The signatories to the declaration therefore aim to become the voice for small and medium sized towns in Europe.
4. European initiatives need to engage with and respond to the problems of small and medium sized towns in a focused way. This includes the acknowledgement that smaller towns tend to lack the staff, finance and expertise required to gain access to European projects. These barriers need to be removed collaboratively and over time, but initially European funding programmes need to be simplified and access thresholds lowered.
5. New short and long term policies, strategies and projects from smaller municipalities need to be established and supported by governments of different levels. The approaches that were tested in the URBACT Re-grow City network are not in themselves sufficient to tackle the causes and consequences of long term shrinkage.

We will advance our search for sustainable strategies that tackle long term decline and share the knowledge gained with the co-signatories to this declaration.

6. The early inclusion of citizens in problem analysis and decision making is essential. New ways of engagement and participation that reflect the characteristics of small towns therefore need to be developed and tested. This would range from practical contributions of volunteers in the provision of essential services, to the establishment of strategic development frameworks through citizen-led workshops and assemblies. However, at European level a wholistic approach towards tackling shrinkage should be advanced to assist the many towns affected by it. This would include the improvement of opportunities for exchanges between local decision makers as well as empirical research.
7. This network will continue to share knowledge on practical responses to urban shrinkage and seek new resources to engage with a wider range of national as well as European initiatives. Our goal is to open the Re-grow City network to the many smaller towns that are experiencing long term shrinkage and decline, fostering the exchange of good practices to build capacity and offering mutual support in securing resources to tackle decline.

Urban shrinkage is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly visible across European countries. Associated challenges must be tackled without delay. It is therefore essential to initiate a rapid response at European, national, regional and local level through research, policy, investment programmes and local projects. Inaction on this issue contributes to the disengagement of civil society with the political process, as the many people who live in shrinking and declining towns do not recognise how their lived experience is reflected in policy priorities. We emphasise that our towns have a central role in our countries now and in future and we are making these proposals with the determination to contribute to Europe's sustainable urban development.

Agreed with this draft:



Mayor of Altena (Westf.), DE



Mayor of Melgaço, PT



Ajuntament de Manresa



Mayor of Manresa, ESP



Mayor of Idrija, SI



Mayor of Aluksne, LV



Mayor of Nyírbátor, HU



Mayor of Isernia, IT



Mayor of Igoumenitsa, EL