

Warsaw, 15 March 2016

## **VASAB opinion on establishment of an EU Urban Agenda**

VASAB (Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea) is an intergovernmental cooperation of ministers responsible for spatial planning and development in Baltic Sea Region (BSR) countries. VASAB is part of the network of the Council of the Baltic Sea States. VASAB prepares policy options for the territorial development of the Baltic Sea Region and provides a forum for exchange of know-how on spatial planning and development between the Baltic Sea countries. VASAB recommends transnational policy measures, promotes methodology development and cooperation projects, cooperates with other pan-Baltic initiatives, and promotes a dialogue with sector institutions. For fulfilling those tasks, VASAB takes into account also strategies and policies on European, European Union, pan-Baltic and national levels and provides inputs into these.

*Against this background*, VASAB contributes the draft Pact of Amsterdam prepared by Netherlands Presidency of the Council of the European Union in cooperation with the Member States.

VASAB supports sustainable development of cities and their cooperation within functional areas, as well as urban-rural partnership. VASAB also underlines that urban issues have a wider territorial dimension than the administrative borders of cities. VASAB considers the EU Urban Agenda as an instrument to strengthen the spatial dimension of urban policies and improve coordination of policies with a clear impact on urban areas. Moreover VASAB urges that this is done in line with a place-based approach. This is to achieve a coherent Europe forming an integrated, cooperative and well-balanced system of settlements and open spaces with shared functions. VASAB suggests specifying how such a horizontal coordination can be achieved in practice by the partnerships.

It is important that EU Urban Agenda takes full advantage of the fact that cities and towns cannot ensure sustainable development alone. Therefore VASAB proposes strengthening further on the territorial context of urban development described in the Pact.

Firstly, we do believe that cooperation of urban areas as well as urban and rural areas is needed; it should be studied, promoted and supported in order to achieve integrated and balanced territorial development as outlined by the Territorial Agenda of the EU 2020.

Secondly, different territorial contexts of urban development at local, regional, national and macro-regional levels need to be taken into consideration when proposing actions

under the EU Urban Agenda. VASAB underlines in particular the importance of the macro-regional perspective. The EU Urban Agenda needs to be anchored both in the Territorial Agenda of the EU 2020 as well as in macro-regional strategies including inter alia VASAB Long-term Perspective for the Territorial Development of the Baltic Sea Region. Otherwise, it remains a domain merely of authorities responsible for urban development.

Thirdly, VASAB underlines that: (a) the key target group should not only be cities themselves but also functional urban areas; good examples are Mälars region in Sweden, Öresund region, Hamburg Metropolitan region or Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot metropolitan region, (b) the focus should also cover tackling cross-cutting issues including among others better coherence between urban and territorial issues.

Fourthly, VASAB is of the opinion that success of the EU Urban Agenda depends on ability of partnerships to take cross-sectoral and integrated approach. Thus cross-cutting issues deserve better attention in the document and better guidance. Important cross-cutting issues are especially comprehensive urban regeneration and counteracting: negative phenomena of urban sprawl as well as adverse spatial and urban implications of demographic changes, which should be an important interest of partnerships. These phenomena have an impact on several priority themes and are relevant in the context of their development.

Finally VASAB draws attention to the fact that the notion of territorial cohesion – one of the key EU objectives – has not been used in the Pact. However, it has been mentioned several times in the Annex in reference to the names of several EU documents. VASAB does believe that one of key ambitions of the EU Urban Agenda should be enhancement of territorial cohesion while creating new jobs, reducing social exclusion and sustaining EU environment.

VASAB can offer the knowledge of integrated territorial development in the urban context from the Baltic Sea Region perspective and provide examples of tackling cross-cutting issues in development policy of functional urban regions in the Baltic Sea Region.

***Committee for Spatial Planning and Development in the Baltic Sea Region***