

Cities are engines of growth, wealth and beauty!

How many times has this not been repeated when introducing urban related themes!

In the institution I work for, the Swedish Metropolitan Commission, we do not contest the importance of cities, but we do indeed try to broaden the urban agenda to the other side of the coin.

Apart from being engines of growth, cities also cover pockets with poverty, polluting hot spots and potential "bombs" of social unrest and exclusion.

Some years ago, the Swedish Government decided to focus on the situation in 24 of the poorest districts in our country, all of them in the three metropolitan areas of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. The Swedish Metropolitan Commission was established with political participation from the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministries of Justice, Environment, Housing, Industrial and Labour affairs, Education and Culture. The policy has consisted in establishing long-term partnerships between the central level, the municipalities and the actual districts. Local development agreements were signed in which each party undertook to make special efforts against social exclusion and the promotion of economic growth. Extra resources provided by the Government were matched by local commitments to improve public services, housing, social integration etc in a targeted way and democratically influenced by the inhabitants in the districts concerned. This bottom-up approach has given direct and indirect effects of a positive nature and the results are continuously being monitored by researchers and authorities involved.

The method is however not an easy one. The problems dealt with are huge and complex and the effects not so easy to measure. And there is an inbuilt paradox to consider.

The more you invest in the physical surroundings, the more the targeted people tend to concentrate in other districts. Therefore, actions must be directed both to people AND their local neighbourhood.

The SUREURO project was brought to our attention through a Dutch Expert Center. This is the way things work in a globalising world. And this also shows how necessary it is to improve the dissemination from the many on going projects in the urban field in the enlarged European Union. I believe we are all thankful to the European Commission and its 5:th framework program on research relating to “Cities of tomorrow”. A number of extremely important urban projects have been financed through this source and – like in the case of SUREURO – are now delivering their findings. What we now need is a tool for harvesting and dissemination of these findings to other sectors of society.

During the coming Presidency of the European Union, the Netherlands have announced some very important initiatives relating to urban issues, including a conference on “Sustainable Refurbishment of High-Rise residential Buildings and Restructuring of Surrounding Areas”, to be held in Rotterdam in the second half of 2004 and an informal ministerial meeting on metropolitan issues also in Rotterdam in November of 2004.

Your work and your findings are therefore of interest not only to those who participated in the SUREURO conference but also for those dealing with policy issues related to urban development and, perhaps most important of all, to those living or aiming to live in the sustainable districts we would all like to see develop in the future.

I thank the organisers for letting me be here and to all of you who are here to share your views and experiences with the rest of us.