

## MEDITERRANEAN + 25 Dialogues

### RETHINKING URBAN RESILIENCE IN A POST-COVID-19 MEDITERRANEAN

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REPORT

#### INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process (1995-2020), the Government of Catalonia, in collaboration with the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), is promoting the “**Dialogues of the Mediterranean +25**” cycle. Within the framework of this initiative, the “Rethinking Urban Resilience in a Post-Covid-19 Mediterranean” gathered experts and practitioners from institutions and organisations involved in urban sustainable development in the Mediterranean to discuss the regional urban agenda in face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and socioeconomic inequalities in the region.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has led cities to adapt themselves, not only to the risk of contagion itself but also to the severe economic crisis it has created. As a consequence, transportation, urban infrastructures, housing policies and urban planning are some of the many sectors where urban policies have had to be rethought to enhance the resilience of our cities to the pandemic and its socioeconomic consequences.

The concept of **urban resilience**, defined by UN Habitat as the “ability of any urban system, with its inhabitants, to maintain continuity through all shocks and stresses, while positively adapting and transforming toward sustainability”, is particularly relevant to Mediterranean cities. Indeed, the region has seen the fastest urbanisation rates worldwide while being confronted with the climate emergency like no other region of the world, as well as with structural socioeconomic inequalities.

Against this background, the webinar discussed fundamental issues such as the capacity to combine efforts to combat the spread of the COVID-19 with the fight against climate change and growing socioeconomic inequalities, the strategies to achieve a resilient and sustainable Mediterranean urban development, as well as the major role of local governance in coping with this complex and intertwined mix of crises. Throughout the rich discussions, the participants offered the following critical perspectives and policy recommendations on the issue of urban resilience in the Mediterranean.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Put the concept of resilience at the centre of urban development**, ensuring that resilience leads towards sustainability, and reinforcing the integration of risk management in city planning, the adoption of integrated approaches between resilience and sustainability and long-term vision. Mainstreaming the Agenda 2030 into urban policymaking should become a clear priority.
- **Build and implement sound economic diversification strategies in Mediterranean cities.** The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that the most specialised cities were the most vulnerable ones in case of a crisis. A possible and highly desired movement of relocalisation of supply chains to the region would constitute a not to be missed opportunity to diversify, provided that necessary measures are taken to encourage this movement and driving it towards sustainable industries.
- **Encourage and promote the development of short and circular production and distribution chains.** Strengthening short food circuits around and within Mediterranean cities (including urban agriculture), reinforcing the linkages between cities and their immediate hinterland (including thanks to sustainable transport corridors) are ways to contribute to a more balanced territorial development, enhance food security, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Reclaim the Mediterranean and local urbanistic heritage and culture** (e.g. medinas in Arab cities) to develop innovative solutions for urban planning, accessible and sustainable housing as well as greater social cohesion
- **Rethink urban planning in favour of more compact cities.** With the adoption of “social distancing” measures, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced arguments in favour of urban spread. However, one must not forget that compact cities are the most sustainable urban forms (more social cohesion and urban vitality, reduced emissions and energy consumption, preservation of natural resources and agricultural lands), provided that they are centred on human well-being.
- **Green the Mediterranean cities:** promote the return of nature in the cities and nature-based solutions to fight urban heat island effects and pollutions, improve citizens’ well-being and quality of life, while encouraging urban agriculture and incentivizing cleaner and sustainable urban mobility.
- **Harness the potential of new information and communication technologies to develop and spread a model of “smart Mediterranean cities”**, increasing resilience and sustainability through the collection and use of data for better city planning, sustainable use of resources and enhanced risk forecast and management.

- **Foster decentralisation, multi-level governance and participatory approaches as crucial engines for sustainable urban development.** Local governments are key to ensure the implementation of the Agenda 2030 but face a significant lack of resources in the Mediterranean. National reforms and international cooperation need to empower local governments, channels funds and provide capacity building to local governments, providing them with the tools to build resilient and sustainable cities.
- **Support more regional and decentralised cooperation, multiply partnerships, synergies and build alliances** between regional stakeholders to foster the exchange of knowledge and experience, identify and promote best practices, building upon the work of existing networks (MedCities, AVITEM, UCLG) and platforms (UfM).

### RETHINKING URBAN RESILIENCE IN A POST-COVID-19 MEDITERRANEAN: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

**The COVID-19 has highlighted the vulnerabilities and deficits of the Mediterranean cities.** The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus is first and foremost an urban health crisis that has put cities under scrutiny for their inability to provide a safe and secure environment. Cities have even been perceived as a source of insecurity and anxiety for various reasons. On one hand, their high density, especially in the Mediterranean, has allowed the virus to spread quickly and made virtually impossible to observe “social distancing” measures, especially in crowded public transportations, shops and poor neighbourhoods. On the other hand, their lack of green spaces and disconnection with nature affected the well-being of the inhabitants, suddenly appearing less desirable to many. This perception of the city as a source of insecurity and distress was better illustrated by the “exodus” to the countryside, on the contrary perceived as a safe haven, when lockdown measures were to be implemented.

At the same time, these measures have brought the fundamental issue of housing to the foreground, putting emphasis on the striking inequalities for the access to a decent and affordable house. They also suddenly drew the attention on the fate of thousands of homeless and migrants left in the streets of Mediterranean cities.

Finally, the pandemic added a severe economic crisis to the health emergency, striking first and foremost the least economically diversified cities and territories, such as those highly dependent on the tourism industry (e.g. Marrakech, Venice, Dubrovnik), while disrupting supply chains.

Revealing the vulnerabilities and unpreparedness of urban territories, this health crisis, adding a new layer to the already existing migratory and climate crises challenging the region, has raised questions regarding the capacity of resilience of Mediterranean cities.

**Placing the concept of resilience at the centre of the post-COVID-19 Mediterranean urban agenda.** The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that urban environments in Europe and the Mediterranean must enhance their resilience in the sense that they better cope with crises and shocks: they should be able to better anticipate and prepare to risks, maintaining their continuity and facilitating a rapid recovery. Cities should do so in a way that ensure that resilience should go hand in hand with sustainability, thus enhancing their capacity to simultaneously face the health, socioeconomic, climate and environmental crises that they are currently confronted with in the Mediterranean region, without compromising the present and future well-being of its citizenry. Greater importance should be given to risks forecast and assessment in their urban policymaking processes while acknowledging three types of resilience, as suggested by the panellists: socioeconomic resilience, “food resilience” (or food security), and health and climate resilience, all with their necessary consequences on issues such as housing, employment, infrastructures, services and urban planning.

**Instruments showing the way forward for a more resilient and sustainable urban development in the Mediterranean.** Throughout the webinar, the panelists highlighted a wide set of strategic and actions plans designed before and in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis to support policy making for more resilient and sustainable Mediterranean cities. From the European Union side, building on the lessons learnt from the pandemic, the **2020 Strategic Foresight Report** was mentioned as a key instrument to make the concept of resilience the new compass of the EU policymaking. Acknowledging the linkage between resilience and sustainability, this strategic document highlights the need for a greater cooperation between cities and the EU to analyse and identify common and innovative solutions in face of future challenges.

The panellists also stressed that the **European Green Deal** (EGD) offers opportunities to pursue this path by providing a growth strategy with the ambition to make the EU’s economy sustainable and carbon neutral. The EGD will give a particular recognition to Green Cities and to long term solutions to mitigate and or adapt to climate change in urban environments. It recognizes cities as essential to fully implement the EGD in all its dimensions: circular economy, nature-based solutions, in planning such as digitalisation, housing and sustainable mobility. Participants also stressed that the EGD bears a climate diplomacy dimension which emphasizes the support to the EU neighbourhood and Mediterranean countries on various environmental and energy partnership programmes.

From the Euro-Mediterranean perspective, the upcoming Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Strategic Urban Development Action Plan 2040 will provide a key framework that promotes actions and policies driving Mediterranean cities towards resilience and sustainability, with a special emphasis on action and policies for affordable and sustainable housing, the promotion of multilevel governance, and integrated and place-based approaches.

**Key ideas for a more resilient and sustainable urban development in the Mediterranean.** Drawing on the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis, participants shared some recommendations to consider in order to solve Mediterranean cities' vulnerabilities and deficits. Among these recommendations, strengthening, widening and deepening the cooperation between various levels of governance in the Mediterranean comes first. Because they face common challenges, it is fundamental that Mediterranean cities engage in more cooperation to exchange their knowledge and share best practices emerging from experiences on the ground. They have a role to play in awareness-raising and climate diplomacy, notably to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities), by building upon the work done by networks and organisations such as MedCities, AVITEM, the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and the UfM Regional Platform on Sustainable Urban Development.

Among the solutions to be advocated by such a cooperation, the experts insisted in greening Mediterranean cities, while reclaiming their own identity and culture to find sustainable solutions to problems such as pollution, climate change, expensive housing with the help of nowadays' technology. The panellists also agreed on the need to better anchor Mediterranean cities into their local contexts, with economic activities more localised and adapted to their territories, with the aim to increase their diversification and competitiveness, and in fine their resilience. It was suggested that, rallying around shared sustainable production principles, Mediterranean territories could promote a "Made in Mediterranean" label reflecting this relocalisation to the benefit of their economies, as well as commitments for the Mediterranean environment and its people.

Another key message conveyed by the participants in the webinar was that the COVID-19 crisis is a plea in favour of local governance. Undoubtedly, countries with more decentralised systems of governance or where local governments and cities have more autonomy and resources, more technical expertise, seem to better manage the crisis. This comes in addition to the need to give local governance the importance it deserves to localise the Agenda 2030. The role of local governance should be kept in mind when designing and operationalising important strategies and programmes like the European Green Deal or the UfM Strategic Urban Development Action Plan: they really need to engage local governments and to support decentralisation.

Finally, one of the experts noted that the measures taken against the pandemic are also relevant to fight climate change, in the sense that they support social distancing measures as well as carbon neutral and greener cities (widening of pavements, pedestrianisation of neighborhoods, and promotion of individual but green transportation). This stresses once more the linkage between resilience and sustainable development, turning the fight against the COVID-19 as an opportunity to unleash a green recovery.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

A panellist underlined that cities in the world, and especially in Europe, had always known periods of great growth in the wake of the historical great pandemics. This recalls that the moment that we are living in will determine the path we will follow in future decades and highlight the need to draw all lessons from this crisis. As highlighted by the previous webinar of the “Dialogues of the Mediterranean +25” cycle on digitalising the Mediterranean SMEs, the pandemic can be turned into an opportunity to foster awareness, innovation, adaptation, and cooperation for a resilient and sustainable future. In this context, Mediterranean cities and their citizens, local and national governments, as well as regional and international organisations are urged to redouble their efforts to ensure that the post-COVID-19 era leads the region and its cities towards greater resilience and sustainability.