Small towns and cities must be given a greater voice in efforts to increase urban inclusion

A number of EU initiatives have been implemented to help make Europe's urban areas more inclusive spaces for the people who live in them. Yet as **Claudio Tocchi, Luciano Scagliotti** *and* **Licia Cianetti** *explain, the bulk of attention has so far focused on large cities. They argue that if the EU is serious about improving inclusion, it must better integrate the voices of small and midsize towns and cities.*

The growing political, economic, and social distance between metropolitan areas and 'the rest' is now a largely established fact in Europe. This urban-rural divide has been frequently invoked when explaining Brexit, the uneven effects of globalisation, and other recent phenomena.

However, between the global city and the rural village there is a continuum of other urban contexts that do not find easy representation in this framework. In the European Union, more than one in three citizens live in towns and cities of between 5,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, and yet small and medium-sized urban areas are typically ignored in urban-focused academic and policymaking circles.

This is also reflected in transnational city networks, which are highly imbalanced in their participation in favour of larger urban centres. These networks are key spaces for urban politics, but very few towns and cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants participate in them. In transnational civil society networks – which connect civil society organisations rather than local governments – this absence is even more acute.

Neglecting the specific needs of those who live and work in smaller urban contexts is particularly problematic in relation to inclusion and anti-racism initiatives. Although ethno-cultural diversity is increasing in urban areas of all sizes, debates on the local governance of diversity are typically concentrated on larger centres. The demands advanced by transnational networks on issues of inclusion and anti-racism are mostly based on the experiences of large (and often richer) cities. It is vital that new forms of knowledge exchange can be developed which include the voices of those living in smaller urban spaces.

Why local governments are central to inclusion

Inclusion is a fundamentally local matter. While migration may be governed at the national (or supranational) level, towns and cities are where people interact on a daily basis. For this reason, there has been a growing focus in Europe and beyond on the role of local governments in promoting inclusion, evidenced by a profusion of networks, initiatives, and action plans.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals specifically aim at making urban settlements 'inclusive'. With urban populations rapidly growing and outpacing rural populations worldwide, there is an increasing interest in reshaping inclusion (but also environmental, digital and welfare) policies from an urban perspective. This 'urban turn' has been particularly extolled in Europe, and 2020 saw the signing of the New Leipzig Charter that promises to garner "the transformative power of cities for the common good".

But cities are not only objects of national and international policies. Local administrations are also strong and visible political subjects in a position to develop targeted inclusion policies, avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach that is typical of national authorities. The importance of local government has become even more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past decade, international institutions have reinforced the role of city administrations in fostering inclusion. Several city networks have been established to promote diversity and combat discrimination. More recently, the European Commission has recognised the fundamental role of cities and other local authorities in promoting diversity and fighting discrimination in its action plans on integration and inclusion and anti-racism.

Small and midsize towns and cities

The absence of small and midsize towns and cities from these initiatives is problematic for at least three reasons. First, a significant proportion of people in Europe live in these areas. Around 70 per cent of Europe's population resides in an urban area, but around 56 per cent of this urban population is located in a small or midsize town or city. The variety of the European urban context is even more striking when compared to other countries such as the United States, where a greater proportion of people live in large cities of over five million people.

Second, small and midsize towns and cities are becoming more diverse. EU countries have differing levels of urbanisation, which in turn influences the distribution of migrants between urban and rural areas. However, in Italy, more than half of those with foreign citizenship live in cities with fewer than 50,000 people. In Germany, migrants tend to first move to bigger cities in the West of the country, but around 20% of those with a migration background live in a mid-size city and about 16% in a small town.

The UK stands in contrast to other countries as ethnic minorities are heavily concentrated in a few cities. Even within these cities, there is substantial concentration in only a few districts. Despite this, diversity is gaining ground in small and midsize towns and cities across the UK. Census data indicates that almost every local authority in the country has increased its level of diversity since 2001.

While big cities represent the first point of arrival for migrants and refugees, many later move to smaller centres. This is important as even if small and midsize towns and cities are untouched by initial waves of immigration, they are likely to need intercultural and antidiscrimination structures in the long-term.

Finally, the experiences of governing inclusion in smaller urban areas may be different from those of larger urban centres. The sharp urban-rural divide that now exists in many European countries suggests that although some approaches may be transferable across all urban areas, there are specific challenges and experiences within small and midsize towns and cities that need specific approaches and analytical frameworks.

Within city and civil society networks, the absence of representatives from smaller urban areas was maintained during the pandemic when most of the meetings and activities moved online. This suggests that barriers to participation may go beyond problems with travel budgets. Small and midsize towns and cities, and the civil society organisations that operate in them, may lack skills and resources that are common within large cities. This can make the approaches developed by these networks unsuitable for smaller urban areas. These dynamics may ultimately increase, rather than bridge, the growing socio-economic and political divide between 'successful' metropolitan areas and 'left behind' provincial spaces.

Future prospects

Migrants require a greater voice within small and midsize towns and cities. Equally, representatives of these towns and cities should be afforded greater opportunities to participate effectively in international networks. These networks must find a way to include the voices and needs of those who represent and live in smaller urban areas.

More research is needed on the obstacles to network participation that smaller urban areas encounter. The aim should be to devise networking practices that are inclusive of the experiences, problems, innovations, and aspirations of all urban areas, not only larger cities. It is not enough to maintain the same practices and spread them to smaller municipalities. To be truly transformative, networks will need to find new ways of working that can garner the experiences of these smaller urban areas and promote inclusive practices that extend beyond large population centres.

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