Position Statement on European Small Towns

Small towns have characteristics (economic, social and environmental) that are also to be found in well functioning neighbourhoods of larger cities and in close-knit villages in the countryside. They suffer less from the disadvantages of congested and stressed larger urban areas and offer access to the resources of the open landscape.

Throughout Europe the spatial relationships between major cities has been recognised (polycentric patterns)[1]. The interrelationships between urban and rural places, and between small towns and large regional centres are also gaining relevance in regional policy at European level.[2] Sub-regional policy and planning is increasingly involving partnerships of municipalities. There is strength through collaboration. This can be affective through networks of small towns and the villages that connect to them.

Municipalities and civil society need to be engaged together in visions and plans for the implementation of development in small towns and rural areas. In addition to significant stakeholders and community actors (including NGOs), the people of the towns and villages should be invited to be involved and attention given to their views, aiming to identify and address conflicting standpoints. Controversial discussion can lead to an understanding of different motivations and create consensus and support for future changes as well as for conservation (wise use of valuable resources).

For the communities of people of small towns and rural areas to survive (to be sustained over the longer term) and to build their capacity to be resilient to external threats and changes a local policy focus and local action is required.

'Localness' is important (in economic activity, food, fuel and services to inhabitants of the towns and surrounding areas) in the context of global influences (climate change, peak oil, international business and finance). It needs systems of governance that devolve responsibility to the local level, from nations and regions to sub-regions, from municipalities to community enterprises and voluntary organizations and, ultimately, to strengthen the responsibilities of the people themselves.

The European Union concept of 'subsidiarity' (taking decisions at the most local level possible) supports devolution (bottom-up rather than top-down; helping people to help themselves).

ECOVAST The European Council for the Village and Small Town

An open and tolerant dialogue and concerted action is needed, between authorities and the people, between municipalities and regions / states, in a transparent and well-communicated way. That can support actions to harness positive external influences for investment, for learning and understanding, for use of technology and for management of the townscape and landscape.

The connections and relationships between small towns and villages and the networks of small towns require co-operation, setting economic and spatial objectives though partnership working of administrations, politicians and civil society.

A high proportion of European small towns are historic in origin and form. In order to keep this heritage alive, their town centres should be vital and viable, rather than museum pieces. People who live in, and care for, small towns and villages can gain much knowledge through greater awareness of historical influences upon urban form that can, in turn inform decisions about the future of land, structures and places.

The fabric of small towns, their historic building structures, facades and spaces are characteristics valued as resources for their cultural significance and adaptability. Their retention and enhancement should be encouraged.

Traditional building forms harness ecological advantages in energy conservation, including thermal mass and passive solar, and their embedded energy should not be lost through demolition.

New buildings, where added sympathetically to the fabric of towns and villages, should also address energy conservation and the use of ecologically sound methods of construction and materials.

Self-reliance, rather than dependence upon globally resourced energy and food, will become important as fossil fuels, particularly oil and gas, become a scarce resource and increase exponentially in price. The fields, woodland and forest around small towns can offer a local source of energy. Although total self-sufficiency may be unrealistic[3], a greater degree of local energy production can be achieved.

A particular characteristic of small towns is the viability of small businesses, especially independent retailers, who are threatened by competition from superstores and urban retail complexes. Attention to the effectiveness and survival of local enterprises is required at all policy levels. They perform a social and cultural function in addition to their economic purpose.

Locally sourced food, with advantages of adding value in the locality and avoiding 'food miles' in an effort to reduce energy consumption and to minimize carbon footprint, can best be organized at the level of small towns. For example, local markets and farmers' markets

[1] ESPON, the European Spatial Planning Observation Network
http://www.espon.eu/
[2] Dirk Ahner, European Commision Direcor General of DG REGIO, made strong mention of small cities/towns/market towns as poles for provision of services and transfer of 'know how'. Loretta Dormal Marino - Deputy Director-General, DG for Agriculture and Rural Development saw rural areas as having knowledge intensive services and suggested an urban/rural focus, not just in micro-regions, but looking at wider regions of Europe.
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/conferences/urban_rural/index_en.htm

[3] The Town of Güssing in Burgenland, Austria has a high degree of locally resourced energy.
http://www.dorfwiki.org/wiki.cgi?action=browse&id=Energy/Examples/Self-Reliance%2BUseOfLocalResources

Sale of the produce and products that originate from the town itself, and from its surrounding fields, forests and woodlands, can generate economic activity in processing and manufacturing in the local area.

The concept of small towns as 'rural metropoles', hubs for economic and social activity, should become a firm policy in spatial planning.

As hubs, they can be laboratories for innovation and enhance the competitiveness of rural enterprises.

Marketing small towns, by branding for products and services, as well as tourism, is assisted by the identity and character of each place.

Small towns relate to their landscape and have an identity that, in concert with other towns and landscapes, contributes to the character of the wider sub-region and region in which they are set. Throughout Europe, those identities generate attractiveness for cultural tourism and also influence investors and decision makers who seek to locate their businesses in a pleasant setting.

Initiatives can come from citizen involvement in planning for the future, in conservation, in services for the health and care of the elderly and young and disabled, and in non-profit social and community enterprises. For those to flourish, local voluntary organizations require 'core funding' as well as project funding, sustained over a period of years (at least five years). That can support the retention and training of volunteers from all age groups. Through achievements, and from recognition by the authorities, the self-esteem of the people can be engendered.

One of the most prominent criteria in determining whether a human settlement functions as a small town is demonstrated by the presence of, and quality of, education, particularly higher secondary education. Retention of such 'high schools' and investment in their quality, is essential for each small town and its surrounding catchment. Education is the springboard for innovation, focusing upon the sets of skills that are important to modern enterprise and the future activities of the town, and also to traditional methods of building conservation, of management of the landscape and of food production.

Small towns can play a strong role in ensuring that sectors of the population are not excluded from education, training and quality of life. Small towns can support inclusiveness for businesses, families and voluntary organizations as hubs for information and communication technology (ICT) and broadband. In remote rural areas, services to the community are more expensive to operate. For example, technology can assist in delivering remote healthcare, as an outreach from small town hubs.

Outwards from the town, services can be delivered through a linked network of education and community buildings. The village schools can be a key point on such a network.

Trends towards uncoupling of the educational system, by closing remote schools on the false grounds of 'economies of scale', are damaging to localness and sense of place. The networks of good education are dependent on place, and the identity of places is dependent upon the schools. Small sized classes have a positive effect on the climate for learning and on learning itself. Whilst daily travel by pupils into small towns may have advantages to town trade by generating some retail activity, it can also adversely affect economic efficiency through traffic congestion.

Young people have different perspectives and perceptions from those of their elders, whether in towns or villages. Often their leisure ambitions cause them to gravitate towards towns and lager cities. Dedicated youth workers, listening to them and acting on their behalf, can enable young people become engaged with decisions for their future.

Opportunities for affordable housing and jobs for younger people and young families will sustain the lifeblood of the small town and village, and thereby services for those of all age groups. Young people may choose to move away from towns and villages, but they need strong roots so that they do not lose their connections with their places of origin and may choose to return one day to live and work there.

Education is not confined to younger people, and lifelong learning can be promoted from small towns.

Many European towns are facing an increased proportion of longer living population. People are living longer and call upon services of education and health. However, many contribute to social activity by volunteering and to economic prosperity by spending, whatever their level of wealth.

Small towns can offer innovative housing embracing several generations. That can include homes that are also workplaces ('live / work units'), for paid work or for voluntary activity, for desk-based writing and computer use, or studio space for artists and craftspeople.

Towns in rural areas have potential for improvement of infrastructure that can also serve villages and smaller settlements and people who want to use the landscape.

Local transport, by rail (where present), by bus and by taxi is focused upon towns as larger centres of population density. As remoteness from town increases, so does reliance on private transport, and for those without the use of a private car, a need for community managed transport increases.

Infrastructure for renewable energy, such as district heating, bio-fuel power stations and combined heat and power plants, can link town and country, connecting the greater number of users in the town with the availability of resources from the countryside.

Phil Turner, Vice President, ECOVAST European Council for the Village and Small Town May 2009