



# EUROPEAN

# POLICY BRIEF

## LIVING WITH DIVERSITY



The growing hyper-diversification of European cities is creating new living conditions for urban dwellers. This Policy Brief considers the relationship of diversity with social cohesion and social mobility at the neighborhood level. It calls for a multi-faceted policy approach to diversity, which would simultaneously deal with the perception of diversity, the creation of spaces of encounter and reducing social inequality.

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## INTRODUCTION

Life in the neighbourhoods of European cities has changed in the last few decades as urban populations became more economically, socially, and culturally diverse than ever before. The representations of neighborhoods, the housing choice by individuals, the use of public spaces and the goals and composition of neighborhood associations are affected by the coexistence of urban dwellers with very different characteristics. One of the main questions of the DIVERCITIES project is to ask whether this diversity contributes to the increase of social cohesion and social mobility in cities. The examination of residents' experiences of diversity may help policymakers to renew policies, as well as to find out how existing policies are perceived by citizens.

This Policy Brief reports on the findings of the third fieldwork stage of the DIVERCITIES project. It looks at the relationships between diversity and urban life at the neighborhood level. It argues that diversity has been 'normalised' in most urban contexts and has become a background element of everyday life. At the same time, however, specific social groups have become more diversity-conscious in both positive and negative ways. For some of them diversity may create urban spaces of tolerance and freedom, while others see increasing diversity as a factor contributing to the disappearance of old ways of life. The research also shows that inhabitants remain mostly unaware of diversity-related policies that are implemented in their neighbourhood. As such, there is a need for increasing visibility in relation to policies, and for connecting policies with inhabitants' concerns and priorities.

The research was undertaken in eleven EU cities: Antwerp, Athens, Budapest, Copenhagen, Leipzig, London, Milan, Paris, Rotterdam, Tallinn, Warsaw; and three non-EU cities: Istanbul, Toronto, and Zurich. In each city the research teams explored residents' perceptions and practices related to diversity in selected neighborhoods. Focus was on housing choice, representations of neighbours, activities in the neighbourhood, the creation of social bonds and trust, finding a job and perception of public policies and initiatives. The selected research areas share some predefined characteristics: they are relatively large (around 100,000 inhabitants); deprived (low individual income, high rates of unemployment, low quality of urban environment); diverse (in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, age, lifestyles); and dynamic (change of sociodemographic composition and of land uses). All partners conducted in-depth interviews with at least 50 residents from diverse backgrounds (in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic status, age and length of residence in the neighbourhood).

Living with diversity varies considerably in our fourteen cities. On a general level, we argue that the **inhabitants' experience of diversity depends** on three variables: the nature of diversification; the position of individuals in diversification processes; and the impact of urban policies.

### ***The nature of diversification***

The contribution that ethnicity, socio-economic difference and age have on diversity varies in different cities. Past and current processes of demographic and socio-economic change also affect the forms of urban diversity. Ethnic diversity takes different characteristics depending on whether it stems from the colonial past (London, Paris), the imperial past (Istanbul, Tallinn), postwar guest worker policies (Rotterdam, Antwerp) and current globalisation-driven immigration (Milan, Athens, Copenhagen, Antwerp). In cities in strong welfare states, socio-economic diversity at the neighbourhood level is in part an outcome of housing policies fostering a social mix (Paris, Rotterdam). In many cities socio-economic diversity is linked to intra-city housing mobility and gentrification processes (Paris, London, Milan, Warsaw, Budapest, Athens, Tallinn, Antwerp). In Istanbul socio-economic and ethnic diversity is also connected to current internal migration from rural to urban areas. In a shrinking city like Leipzig, the presence of an ageing population significantly differentiates the demographic composition of neighborhoods.

### ***The position of individuals in diversification processes***

Despite the variety of contexts, most research teams distinguished three categories of inhabitants: long-term inhabitants; native in-migrants; and international in-migrants. These categories of inhabitants tend to adopt different attitudes towards diversity.

### ***The impact of urban policies***

Policies affect the inhabitants' experience of diversity through various regulations (i.e. allocation of rented dwellings, urban regeneration programmes that favour gentrification etc.), as well as through the diffusion of categories of thought which become part of common usage and shape perceptions of diversity (the meaning of terms like 'multiculturalism', 'mix' or even 'diversity' is largely shaped by national and EU policies).

On the basis of these preliminary remarks, we identify seven themes that characterise the ways urban residents live with diversity in the following section. These themes are common in many of our cities, although not in all of them and not to the same degree. The reader should not interpret these trends as a general reality but as a framework of understanding and of comparing different urban realities.

### **Theme 1: Diversity operates as a background element of urban life**

Although diversity affects the life of residents, they do not prioritise diversity in their daily discourses and practices. Urban diversity in its different forms (ethnic, socio-economic, gender etc.) results as a side effect of individuals' choices and collective practices. For example, individuals choose to live in our research areas for reasons that include the availability and the affordability of dwellings, good location and access to transport, the vicinity to family and friends, etc. Diversity occupies a

secondary place in their motives for moving to the area. Thus ethnic, socio-economic, cultural diversity etc. comes as a non-planned result of many individual choices that follow their own logic.

This trend has three significant implications:

1. **People often experience diversity in a ‘natural’ way through everyday practices.** Public spaces in the neighbourhood (parks, playgrounds, squares, etc.) and networks among families whose children go to the same school are very important from this perspective as they bring people from different backgrounds together. These everyday practices constitute, as we will see below, a framework for socialisation in diversity for young persons.
2. **Individuals have low expectations from their diverse neighbours.** Residents are satisfied with diversity when their relations with persons with different ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds are characterised by civility and courtesy. Polite behaviour and discretion (the avoidance of invading the space of others) emerge as regulation mechanisms of relations between diverse people. Civility and courtesy becomes a tool to both keep in contact with others and to distance one’s self from diversity. This trend is even stronger in cities such as London and Toronto where diversity is seen as “banal”, an aspect of everyday life that is taken for granted.
3. **The experience of diversity is often rather superficial.** Everyday practices may bring together diverse people, but they do not necessarily mix with each other. Diverse people share public spaces such as parks and playgrounds but social interactions tend to be contained to among friends and members of the family. Everyday practices and public spaces do not seem to contribute to the creation of meaningful encounters and bonds between the individuals of different ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds who live in the same neighbourhood. Community centres constitute an important exception, hosting more substantial interaction among neighbours.

## **Theme 2: Socialisation in diversity at the neighbourhood level**

While for most people diversity tends to operate as a background element of urban life, for some categories of individuals diversity is a more ‘organic’ part of their social trajectory. People who have grown up in diverse neighbourhoods take diversity for granted. They tend to have more diverse social networks, which were formed at school and in local public spaces.

In many cities, low-income individuals tend to have more ethnically diverse networks than the middle classes. This is mainly the result of low-income individuals having a larger dependency on the social life of the neighbourhood. The middle classes maintain citywide and homogeneous ethnic and social networks (largely connected to their job environments), whereas lower class people are more inclined towards solidarity at the neighbourhood level. When the neighbourhood is a diverse area, lower class peoples’ local networks tend to be diverse.

From this point of view, diversity contributes to social cohesion of specific categories of population. While generally people tend to maintain social networks with people with similar characteristics (ethnicity, income, religion etc.), for people who have particular ties with diverse neighbourhoods diversity can be easily incorporated in relations of trust and mutual support.

## **Theme 3: The aesthetic value and commodification of diversity**

Diversity is seen as a cultural and/or aesthetic value. Some inhabitants, mainly young and highly educated persons, appreciate diversity as an asset of their neighbourhood. They see it as an element of cosmopolitanism or “Europeanness” and they are proud that they live in such a neighbourhood. For these individuals diversity is a pull factor to move to the neighbourhood. However, these inhabitants do not necessarily maintain diverse social networks. They mostly appropriate diversity through commodified services and products (ethnic restaurants and bars, ethnic grocery stores, etc.). From this point of view they ‘consume’ diversity passively rather than actively through the creation of diverse social relationships.

#### **Theme 4: Diversified neighbourhoods as spaces of tolerance**

Diversity is often greatly appreciated by groups which are threatened by social exclusion (minority ethnic groups, homosexuals). These groups may prefer to live in diversified neighbourhoods because diversity frees them from multiple pressures. On the one hand, they escape from stigmatisation by dominant groups, while on the other hand diversity protects them from excessive social control from within their own group (for instance, from social control by an ethnic community).

Diverse neighbourhoods emerge then as spaces of tolerance where people may experience a sense of freedom as they are not required to follow a strict normative standard, whether of the dominant group or of a minority group.

#### **Theme 5: Diversity is appreciated within limits**

Skepticism against diversity often concerns the limits of diversity. People may appreciate what they perceive as an equilibrated mix. 'Too much' diversity (for instance the presence of many immigrants) may be considered as a negative element of neighbourhood life. This skepticism expresses tensions between social groups and mainly takes the following forms:

1. International in-migrants often appreciate ethnic diversity as long as there is not one ethnic group that dominates. They are not concerned about being in a minority group in an area since there is no other ethnic group with a majority position.
2. Ethnic diversity may be seen as the cause of the downgrading of the neighbourhood (in terms of housing prices, urban environment, etc.). This stereotype may be part of discrimination, or even openly racist discourses, by native residents.
3. Long-term inhabitants may complain that the presence of too many in-migrants in the neighbourhood (relatively poor immigrants) or affluent middle class people (in gentrified areas) affect the old local way of life and social cohesion negatively.
4. 'Too much' ethnic diversity is often seen as a negative condition for the good functioning of schools. Parents, without being necessarily hostile to immigrants, consider that if the 'percentage of native students in the school population falls too much then the quality of education provided is reduced.'
5. Long-term inhabitants and low-income individuals may complain about 'gentrifiers' because their in-migration in the area leads to inaccessible housing and amenities (such as expensive coffee shops, butchers, bakers and even supermarkets).

#### **Theme 6: Diversity and social mobility**

Our research did not reveal a strong relation between diversity and social mobility. However, it showed that diversity does affect professional trajectories in some ways that should not be ignored by policymakers.

Diverse and deprived neighbourhoods may facilitate social groups with weak economic resources (low-income in-migrants, young creative people) when they enter the labour market by supplying them affordable housing which allows them to save money. Furthermore, local social networks may help members of the lower classes to find a job either indirectly, by providing them information, or less often, directly by providing an occupation within the neighbourhood (while middle classes tend to find a job through formal ways and through their citywide social networks).

Diverse and deprived neighbourhoods may also affect social mobility in a negative way. In some of our research cities, interviewees stressed that the bad reputation of their neighbourhood stigmatises them when they are looking for a job. Residents blame local governments and the press for creating stigma.

#### **Theme 7: Inhabitants are unaware of policies and initiatives**

A surprisingly common finding in almost all of our research cities is that inhabitants are not aware of the policies which are implemented in their neighbourhood (urban regeneration projects, initia-

tives fostering multiculturalism, etc.). They have a rather vague idea of municipal action and are not in a position to evaluate it. Similarly, the participation in local associations of any kind is minimal as a result of a general alienation from politics (Tallinn) or traditions of a weak civil society (Athens). In these general trends there are three exceptions:

1. People are aware of and appreciate festive events (e.g. festivals), which are visible and attractive.
2. Social activists and members of local associations are usually better informed of local policies than other residents. Members of local associations may be old inhabitants, who are very much tied to their neighbourhood, or 'gentrifiers' who expect the upgrading of the area. Immigrants participate only rarely in associations.
3. There are cities with a tradition of civic participation where local associations involve a significant part of neighbourhood inhabitants (Zurich, Paris, Copenhagen).

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Increase visibility of local policies**

According to our research, residents, especially less educated and poorer people, are not sufficiently informed on local policies regardless of whether they concern urban development or diversity issues. Therefore, policymakers should pay more attention to communicate their policies effectively. Participation and feedback from citizens are required to improve policies. For this purpose, local authorities should cooperate closer with members of local associations and social activists who may function as intermediaries between policy institutions and inhabitants. Members of local associations and social activists are already aware of policies and if they are provided with the necessary resources they can contribute to the mobilisation of the local population.

### **Mobilise immigrants**

Particular attention needs to be given to categories of the population that show the lowest level of participation in local policies and initiatives. As an expression of the wider difficulties of social integration, immigrants tend to participate less to municipal actions and local associations. Local authorities should adopt a dual goal: increase the cooperation with the communities' representatives; and increase individuals' participation in various actions and initiatives. If local authorities favour only cooperation with the communities' representatives they may indirectly strengthen the communities social control on their members (which, as we have seen in the analysis, is undesired by many immigrants). If local authorities only encourage individual political participation they may have limited success as some immigrant communities are well coordinated and their members (especially newcomers in the city) depend upon them for covering their needs (finding a job or a dwelling).

### **Preserving diversity**

One of major challenges posed by diversity to policymakers is that they have to manage different, and sometimes conflicting, needs of various ethnic, social and age groups. Our general suggestion is that policymakers should balance between avoiding the homogenisation of values and ideologies and mitigating the fragmentation of local society and isolation of certain social groups (e.g. elderly people, immigrants from abroad, deprived people). For instance, the design of public spaces in diverse neighbourhoods should allow for simultaneous symbolical and practical use by various age, social and ethnic groups.

### **Towards a new discourse on diversity**

In many cases residents of diverse areas take diversity in their areas for granted, more or less. This is especially the case for young people. Political discourses should adapt to this by reconsidering the use of old terms such as multiculturalism and assimilation. The 'ordinariness' of diversity could be highlighted in the public realm as a positive element of urban life.

### **‘Soft’ actions can be helpful**

Our findings show that living in the same neighbourhood does not mean that people actually develop in-depth relationships with each other. If politicians want social and ethnic mix to generate social cohesion, they need to invest in programs that bring together the diverse groups of the neighbourhood. ‘Soft’ actions, which foster encounters and interactions between people with diverse backgrounds, such as educational programs in schools and festive events in the neighbourhood, are effective tools that can be used to positive effect.

### **The neighbourhood is important**

For many residents of diverse urban neighbourhoods, the neighbourhood is an important place for all kinds of activities. This means that the quality of the urban environment is important to them. This does not mean that neighbourhoods and inhabitants profit from large-scale processes of urban restructuring automatically. Rather, small improvements in the public realm – making parks, squares, walking routes and playing facilities clean, safe and attractive – helps to make the neighbourhood an attractive place to live.

### **Focus on economic issues**

Residents of diverse neighbourhoods are more concerned with material issues – housing prices and unemployment – than with diversity. Policies implemented in diverse urban areas should therefore be associated with these core issues. Our research confirmed that the main impediments for finding a job are not associated with the neighbourhood; they are related to individuals’ skills, knowledge of language, the availability of suitable jobs, etc. This means that policies dealing with unemployment and social inequality should not necessarily be targeted on these specific urban areas, but should employ a citywide (or even regional) perspective and be part of broader policies using macro- and micro-economic tools. However, especially for some categories of the population, policies at the neighbourhood level may be effective. Local structures connecting individuals to the labour market may be helpful for low-income individuals who are not part of strong citywide social networks and do not have easy access to formal mechanisms that assist with finding a job. Inverting the bad reputation of the neighbourhood, which may result from wider urban regeneration programmes, may have indirect positive effects on inhabitants’ social mobility by removing prejudices and stigmatisation.

## **RESEARCH PARAMETERS**

Our multi-method research deploys an interdisciplinary approach, which draws on urban geography, political science, organisational studies, law, history, urban planning, economics and sociology. It aims to provide a comprehensive approach to the governance of complex urban dynamics and understand the case-specific characteristics of diversity in different contexts, to analyse new policy approaches that recognise and manage hyper-diversity, and to suggest instruments that can work in a range of contexts. Field research is being conducted in 14 cities by 14 teams, which make up the project partnership. The authors of this report and the lead partner for the Work Package ‘Fieldwork inhabitants’ are Professor Thomas Maloutas ([maloutas@hua.gr](mailto:maloutas@hua.gr)) and Dr. Nicos Souliotis ([nsouliotis@ekke.gr](mailto:nsouliotis@ekke.gr)).

## **PROJECT IDENTITY**

### **PROJECT NAME**

#### **DIVERCITIES**

Governing Urban Diversity: Creating Social Cohesion, Social Mobility and Economic Performance in Today’s Hyper-diversified Cities

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**WEBSITE**

<http://www.urbandivercities.eu/>

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**FURTHER READING**

- Towards Hyper-Diversified European Cities. A Critical Literature Review  
- Urban Policies on Diversity (14 city reports)  
- Governance Arrangements and Initiatives (14 city reports, available in autumn 2014)  
All available from our website [www.urbandivercities.eu/publications/](http://www.urbandivercities.eu/publications/)