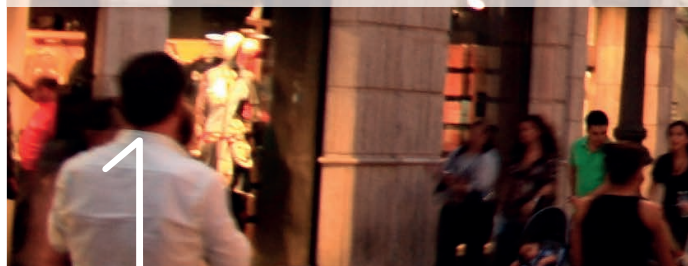


EUROPEAN WHITE PAPER

REVITALISING EUROPEAN TOWN CENTRES
THROUGH INDEPENDENT RETAIL:
an essential economic and human challenge
for social cohesion and European competitiveness





Current situation: the desertion of town centres is a problem that is common to all the European Union States and has now been wholly identified but is inadequately understood on a European level

A | Key indicators of the desertion of the town centres

B | The various factors undermining town centres that lead to their desertion have been clearly identified

C | A desertion trend that is accelerating in the digital era, as a result of a voluntary and decisive change in consumer habits

D | Major risk: territorial division and its corollary, social division

- 1/ The worldwide crisis reveals a multiple territorial division
- 2/ The job situation in small and medium-sized towns is declining in favour of large towns and cities
- 3/ The threat represented by the desertion of town centres for social relations and its consequences

6

7

8

9

9

10

11



The challenges of the revitalisation of European town centres

A | Fundamental challenges for Europe: economic, social and societal

- 1/ Return to growth and fight against mass unemployment
- 2/ Reinforcement of social cohesion
- 3/ Challenges at the crossroads of several societal issues

B | But the European Union is not sufficiently equipped to deal with these challenges

- 1/ Absence of global vision
- 2/ A Community policy focused on trade rather than on retailing
- 3/ Persistence of national differences

C | The urgent need for a strong, established European policy

- 1/ A necessary awareness of the efforts to be made for all of the town-centre players
- 2/ European challenges: integration of vulnerable populations by means of employment and training, maintaining social cohesion and the digital modernisation of society
- 3/ The necessary broadening of current policies to meet real needs

10

10

10

11

11

11

12

12

12

12

13

14



Conclusion

32

List of civil society members who supported this European initiative

33

Sources

35

3

Civil society is rallying for the inclusion of the revitalisation of town centres in Europe, in the absence of suitable management in core European policies

4

Prospects and proposals

A | A favourable context: materialise and get the best out of the Pact of Amsterdam

- 1/ Pact of Amsterdam and Urban Agenda
- 2/ Calls for projects and European programmes in favour of the vitality of town centres

B | Concerted approaches aiming to promote vitality in town centres in the Member States, at all levels

- 1/ Town-centre management and its tools
- 2/ A decisive option for the future: Placemaking
- 3/ The role of retailers and retailers' federations

A | Set up a European inner-city observatory

- 1/ Put together a European database of the principal indicators of vitality in town centres
- 2/ Enable a clear diagnostic of the economic trend of a town on the basis of criteria shared by all
- 3/ Use a shared European platform to put the towns' experiences and good practices online for revitalising their town centre

B | Facilitate the modernisation of shops, towns, and society

- 1/ Facilitate initial and vocational training of retailers and their staff members, in particular as regards digital tools and challenges
- 2/ Smart cities / connected shops: essential infrastructures for bearing up against worldwide platforms
- 3/ Prefer the sustainable development of town centres via the circular economy

C | Innovative proposals shared by all to develop local economies

- 1/ The local multiplier effect
- 2/ Pollinating businesses: the development of efficient local entrepreneurship

D | Definition of a European policy in favour of town centres

- Towards a global policy
- Towards a specific agenda for retail shops

- 1/ Simplify regulations
- 2/ Encourage the Member States to adopt specific measures for local shops
- 3/ Introduce mixed governance when drawing up European schemes
- 4/ Re-evaluate the policy on shop establishment to give priority to projects aimed at what already exists
- 5/ Vote a clear separate budget line in the European Parliament for the urban and economic regeneration of town-centre retail shops

FOREWORD

By Bernard Morvan, Honorary President of the Fédération Nationale de l'Habillement, and member of the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels

Since 2008, the European Union has been in a very unsettling economic, social and political situation. Ten years later, the spectre of the crisis continues to hang dangerously over Europe due to the lack of any efficient joint economic and social policy to resolve this challenge at Community level. This persisting situation leads to increasing Euroscepticism among populations and States, which has been on an upward curve since.

The retail sector, representing €2.6 trillion in 2011 in turnover in Europe and employing 19 million individuals, is one of the key economic sectors in Europe¹. It has been especially affected by both the crisis and the profound societal and technological changes. The European Parliament in its resolution of 2013 highlighted the fact that *"the current economic crisis is taking a heavy toll on retail, affecting in particular smaller, independent shops"*. Indeed, from 2010 onwards, European town centres have suffered considerably from the consequences of this multi-factor crisis and the gradual desertion of the town centres has heightened the impression of economic, social, and relational uncertainty felt by the population.

In this respect, several reports, studies, publications and books have set forth recommendations for reversing this trend, such as the plan for an urban renovation laboratory promoted by our Transalpine colleagues from Conf-Commercio, extremely active in terms of standing up for a new model of urban development. The Plan Marshall pour la Revitalisation des centres-villes from the Fédération Nationale de l'Habillement also raised the alarm very early on, regarding the considerable disappearance of shops throughout the whole French territory.

However, faced with the acceleration of the desertion of town centres and the difficulty in ensuring that this issue is understood globally and efficiently, the sector's representative bodies have decided to submit a joint economic, social and political project to the EU institutions in favour of the revitalisation of town centres through independent retailing. This project is now shared with internationally known experts, members of civil society and the public authorities who have taken an interest in the file.

Rejuvenating town centres should be a top priority for the European authorities, which must rapidly integrate this challenge into their public policies. The mobilisation must be powerful, coordinated and constant and be disseminated by all communication actions that commend the crucial role of retailing, guaranteeing social cohesion between all categories of populations.

The common objective must be to make our town centres lively, attractive and functional destinations. Local economic vitality and the resulting social connections are essential for restoring harmonious coexistence in the European territories, the *sine qua non* condition for a diverse and calm society, in line with the EU motto: "united in diversity".

This European action has been made possible thanks to the commitment of the Fédération Nationale de l'Habillement, championed by its Honorary President, Bernard Morvan, its Secretary General, Bernadette Fulton, the newly elected President, Eric Mertz, and members of the FairValue firm, presided by Anne Mazoyer. All of us together thank all those who gave us their time to discuss with them, listened to us and supported us with their contributions or advice.

“The current economic crisis is taking a heavy toll on retail, affecting in particular smaller, independent shops.”

INTRODUCTION

The major European capitals are a resilient model on a worldwide scale. Most of them were designed several centuries ago and have undergone numerous transformations, related to major historical events such as the two world wars, and the successive evolutions of society such as the urban explosion².

They therefore have their own identity and are recognised throughout the whole world as the basis of a form of social life based on closeness and neighbourhood³, through their high density, which provides their residents and their visitors with rapid access to all places of activity such as shops and cultural and historical places, with social and intergenerational diversity.

However, this model of European town is currently being challenged, particularly in the small and medium-sized towns in Europe, many of which have suffered over decades from a desertion of their town centre, in the broad sense, including the decentralised shopping streets along with the historical part. This is due in particular to a decrease in their population, while no long-term and concerted political response is made; their social cohesion and vitality are thus threatened in every aspect.

Whereas the issue of revitalising town centres in Europe was understood previously in a sector-based way by the local and national public authorities, the answers that must be found today should be comprehensive, multifactorial, and be based on the numerous experiences of revitalisation, which have joined together local governance, town-centre management experts and members from the civil society, as this partnership is the only solution for ensuring an effective revitalisation of European town centres. It is essential that the protection of town centres be defined at European level as an important reason of general interest, that is consistent with the orientations expressed in the Urban Agenda, for the policies conducted by the European Union and the case law of the European Court of Justice.

This initiative from the European civil society, in the form of a White Paper proposed to the institutions, led by the Fédération Nationale de l'Habillement (FNH), is the fruit of exchanges of information and dialogue among various civil society players, the academic world and EU institutions, and aims at encouraging the relevant authorities to promote the revitalisation of European town centres as a key stake for social cohesion and European competitiveness.



1

CURRENT SITUATION: THE DESERTION OF TOWN CENTRES IS A PROBLEM THAT IS COMMON TO ALL THE EUROPEAN UNION STATES AND HAS NOW BEEN WHOLLY IDENTIFIED BUT IS INADEQUATELY UNDERSTOOD ON A EUROPEAN LEVEL

The desertion of European town centres is the consequence of a combination of negative factors, which vary depending on the size of the towns, their governance, their economic and commercial development,

their cultural values or simply their level of vitality.

It is assessed on the basis of indicators that are specific to each country, that relate to the state of housing, shops, services, tourism,

various environmental factors and also accessibility and mobility, which are not currently pooled and coordinated at Community level.

A | Key indicators of the desertion of the town centres

Despite its complexity and particularities, a town centre's vitality, its risk of desertion or otherwise the danger of losing vitality, can be analysed using precise indicators.

These indicators are said to be "key" as they are used by regional and local politicians and civil society members as a basis for changing the direction of the trend when it is on the decline; they do not include public amenities, which fall within the scope of national policies.

There are currently four such indicators:

- * the housing occupancy rate (suburbanisation, unoccupied housing in town centres, quality of accommodation, comfort);
- * the population's sociology (aging, diversity, local identity, local services);
- * the occupancy rate of retail outlet establishments (unoccupied shops);
- * the number of public and administrative amenities (closure or transfers of public services).

Other large categories are added to these key indicators, such as the town's activity, the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, the quality of urban transport networks, the cost and availability of parking spaces or the feeling of insecurity, which are all factors revealing the state of the town centre.

B | The various factors undermining town centres that lead to their desertion have been clearly identified

These factors are grouped around several topics:

- * **Factors related to the sociology of the towns:** there is a correlation between the size of the towns and the evolution of their population. Where large towns become bigger, several medium-sized and small towns are losing their inhabitants⁴. The desertion of the towns and their town centres applies essentially to the smaller towns and the areas with small populations. As a result of the decrease in population, and therefore the decline of the local market, the number of shops is regularly reducing. In Sweden, almost 5,000 shops, i.e. the equivalent of a tenth of the total number of shops, have disappeared in only 6 years, between 2011 and 2017.⁵ In the United Kingdom, 25,000 town-centre shops closed in the 10 years, between 2002 and 2012.⁶ Certain types of shops have been more affected by these closures, such as clothes shops, or shops selling sports equipment or convenience food stores.
- * **Factors related to suburbanisation which disqualifies the historical centres of small and medium-sized towns, making them less attractive⁷:** The progressive development of access to ownership on the edge of towns and the growth of the automotive industry have led to a gradual urban sprawl. This is reinforced by the establishment of large shopping centres at the entrances to the towns, that are more competitive, offer longer opening hours, protection from bad weather and easy access with public transport and parking spaces for cars. This attracts several customers and thereby makes the town centres and their smaller shops less attractive⁸. The local elected representatives have not therefore assessed the imbalance that these factors create between the town centre and the outskirts.
- * **Factors related to local political choices:** in several European countries, the local economic development relies on the fact of attracting large brand names (large chains of shops in particular) through financial or tax incentives and trying to keep them on the territory where they are established, which, for the majority of them, is on the outskirts of large and medium-sized towns. This policy has led, for example, in Sweden, to doubling the gross rental surface area of the shopping centres between 2000 and 2014, whereas over the same period, the population only increased by 10%.

However, several studies, in particular those of Michael Shuman, an American economist, regarding localism, have shown that the shops that are managed locally and provide local products are the best drivers for economic development, as they create more cooperation between local actors, long-term jobs and, more generally, social cohesion.

- * **Factors related to the accessibility of town centres by cars and delivery trucks:** the question of the place of cars in towns in general arises differently depending on the size of the town and the complementarity with its public transport network, but it remains a key stake for its development. Thus, the town's power of attraction for consumers is directly linked to accessibility and the way in which the parking and mobility conditions are organised; the difficulties related to these issues are often highlighted by the retailers in town centres as being one of the factors for the desertion by consumers, who prefer the car parks of the shopping centres located on the outskirts of the towns. Pedestrianisation of part of the town centres has been one of the responses to this desertion, but it comes up against a question of scale. Precise structuring between the town centres' urban spaces and motorised access is an issue central to ensuring the vitality of these areas.⁹ The accessibility of vans and trucks for deliveries to the shops and for home deliveries is also a major challenge.
- * **Factors related to the state and qualification of the town-centre buildings:** many town-centre buildings, whether for housing or retail activity, are no longer able to satisfy consumers' expectations and requirements. While the historic heritage of a town centre has a great potential for culture and tourism, the different kinds of classifications of historic buildings have now become incompatible with current ways of life and with running a prosperous and innovative retail activity. Towns must be places to live in but also take advantage of their cultural heritage and their tourist and commercial attractiveness. At this stage, it has become essential to reconcile all these stakes, particularly by means of ambitious spatial organisation and space development policies.

* **Factors related to the capitalistic value of the buildings of business premises:** there is a special situation in several EU Member States of a curb in renting business premises. Indeed, an investment in commercial buildings requires the consideration of several aspects: profitability based on the rents received, the value of the buildings indexed on the rents and the rents indexed on a chosen index; the important aspect for the investor being the value of the assets in the balance sheet. The consequence of a rental market on a long-term decline leads investors, in the event of unoccupied business areas, to prefer to leave the premises in question unoccupied in order to maintain their value while awaiting a return to better rental conditions. The resale of business premises is also based on the amounts of rent received, within a range in France of 7 to 10 years of rents; investors therefore prefer sometimes to keep devalued assets in their portfolio, rather than have a negative impact on the balance sheet. This situation leads to major complications for the towns, and contributes to a rapid decrease in attractiveness of shopping streets.

* **Factors related to regulations:** retailers clearly represent important contributors to the vitality of a town centre. However, when opening a sales outlet, they are confronted with numerous regulations that exist in varying degrees; for example, in terms of the size of the shop, the place where it is established or the procedures to be undertaken to obtain certain specific authorisations, or further, when doing business, the opening times, Sunday openings, taxation, etc. Many of the regulations can be justified by legitimate public policy objectives, but their accumulation may be a barrier to the installation of new shops and may have a negative effect on the sector's productivity.

C | A desertion trend that is accelerating in the digital era, as a result of a voluntary and decisive change in consumer habits

The transformation of society boosted by the increasing use of new technologies and digital means has accelerated over the last few years and is now affecting several sectors, with visible consequences within towns: shops, housing, tourism, mobility, entertainment, etc.

Citizens have as a result become voluntary actors of these changes, being automatically transformed into consumers, independent in their choices in relation to the products and living trends that the market designs for them:

- * they are asking to be informed in real time about products and services offered by the physical shops and online (price comparisons, checking of origin and social and environmental impact of the product, in the context of a boom in circular economy), leading to a reversal in the balance of power between consumer and seller;
- * they want to be able to consume products at any time of day or night, via online sales or check-out systems available in busy public areas, to collect products ordered and paid for beforehand;

* finally, they place less importance than in the past on the object itself, focusing rather on the use that it enables, such as for self-service shared vehicles (cars, scooters, bicycles and even electrically-powered scooters) or the boom of the sharing economy (Airbnb, Blablacar).

However, this change in consumer conduct does not imply a complete desertion of the physical sales outlets as studies show that consumers are still attached to this type of local shop as a place of encounters and social connections. Thus, when they go somewhere, these new consumers are seeking a real purchase experience, with a varied and quality offer, and personalised and professional advice from the sales advisors.

The desertion of town centres is the consequence, among other factors, of the failure to anticipate the changes that society is currently undergoing. The revitalisation of the European town centres may only be successful if the solutions provided take these evolutions in consideration by integrating and analysing the disruptive systems, by educating the general public and by providing innovative solutions, in particular in terms of training.

D | Major risk: territorial division and its corollary, social division

1 / The worldwide crisis reveals a multiple territorial division

The worldwide economic crisis has revealed the extent of the multiple territorial divisions, on several levels within the European Union between the various European regions and between their urban, suburban and rural areas.

This division is found between (i) the regions with large towns and cities, taking the main part of the investments and administrative structures and with the highest economic, social and cultural activity and (ii) the regions with geographical, economic, social and institutional handicaps.

Thus, if we compare the regional GDP per inhabitant per EU Member State, we will observe very large differences between the capital regions and the national average. The most representative example of this is the United Kingdom where the difference between the wealthiest region, Inner London – West and the poorest region, West Wales & The Valleys, is the highest, i.e. around 9.¹⁰

The territorial disparities are intensified when a region suffers from being positioned on the outer edges of the European Union with a scarcely diversified economy, as is the case, for example, of Andalusia or East Slovakia, where unemployment rates have reached very high levels. This situation tends to intensify the risks of social segregation in the regions.

2 / The job situation in small and medium-sized towns is declining in favour of large towns and cities

Ten years after the destabilisation of European economies by the financial and banking crisis of Autumn 2008, Europe is still faced with the slow economic recovery and the accumulation of elements indicating an increase in unemployment rates, especially among young people (44.2% in Greece, 33.8% in Spain, 31.9% in Italy¹¹).

Even though the creation and improvement of the quality of jobs for 20-64-year-olds is one of the main objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy for an intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth, the European institutions have to deal with a difficult situation in small and medium-sized towns throughout Europe.

In France, between 2006 and 2013, only urban areas of more than 500 000 inhabitants have experienced an increase in the number of jobs, to the detriment of urban areas with fewer than 100 000 inhabitants where the rate of employment declined by 0.6% per year and even by 0.8% in the smallest urban areas.¹²

This is one of the indicators of the desertion of these small and medium-sized towns, where the inhabitants join the larger towns and cities to find work there.

In 2016, the largest group of professions in the EU was that of employees of direct services to individuals and employees in trade and sales, with 9.5% of the working population, i.e. 21.4 million people.¹³

Bringing new life to the sector of independent retail and sales in these small and medium-sized towns is one of the solutions that could be of benefit to the whole town and its corollaries (housing, activity, etc.).

3 / The threat represented by the desertion of town centres for social relations and its consequences

Several researchers have stated that the closure of shops in the smallest towns and the low-populated territories could lead to a loss of social links and attractiveness.¹⁴

Indeed, the shops present in the town centres of small towns are not only sales outlets for the purchase of supplies or other everyday consumer goods; they are also extremely important for tourism and often act as hubs for the supply of other services, such as sale of fuel, pharmaceutical products or postal services.

They are also places of encounters, exchanges and sociability where inhabitants may meet, discuss new events and thus create relations and social ties. The presence of shops and related services is an important factor for ensuring that citizens may live and work and that firms may develop, in particular in the smallest towns.

The decline in the number of shops and the closure of the “last shop” in the smallest towns throughout Europe has thus had several consequences, which are however more or less visible.

The first of these consists in the increase in the distance required for the consumers to reach the nearest sales outlets, which may be a source of worry for several people, in particular the elderly and those without access to a car.

Another less direct consequence to be taken into account is the presence of health problems within the population. Indeed, in the existing shops which are often very small, such as petrol stations, for example, fresh produce, requiring more logistics, is no longer available. The consumers therefore purchase the only products available, thus increasing their consumption of ready-made products, crisps and snacks.¹⁵



2

THE CHALLENGES OF THE REVITALISATION OF EUROPEAN TOWN CENTRES

A | Fundamental challenges for Europe: economic, social and societal

Several structuring challenges derive from the good health of the town centres, including the fight against mass unemployment, long-term and inclusive growth and social cohesion. These challenges intersect with several questions about society in which the European Institutions are particularly interested.

1 / Return to growth and fight against mass unemployment

Regenerating town centres is one of the answers to the key macro and micro-economic preoccupations of the European Union: a return to growth and employment, the integration of populations affected by poverty and social exclusion including that of refugees (three of the Europe 2020 Strategy's priority objectives), and support for the development of the SMEs.

That is why this challenge has been included for many years among the priorities of the Pact of Amsterdam and the Urban Agenda, adopted on 31st May 2016, the objectives of which will be to take more notice of and involve urban areas in defining laws and implementing the EU's main priorities, even though formally, the EU does not have any jurisdiction in terms of towns' policies.

2 / Reinforcement of social cohesion¹⁶

As indicated previously, the ideal town must be lively and diversified. This does not only require a combination of the use of spaces and a high density of population; it also requires the existence of a large range of buildings, of all types and from all eras.¹⁷

This issue may seem of little importance in light of other more visible challenges. However, it must not be neglected as the co-existence of different buildings within the same town enables the cohabitation of populations from different social backgrounds, with different levels of income as may be the case of the elderly, single-parent families or young workers.

Thus, all of these categories of people occupy the public area in a different way, which contributes to the liveliness of the district or town at all times of the day.

3 / Challenges at the crossroads of several societal issues

Employment is the economic and social theme that is the most directly impacted by the desertion of the town centres. Indeed, town centres are an extraordinary pool for low-qualified jobs that cannot be relocated, and an opportunity for integrating refugees throughout the whole of the EU.

Education and vocational training also represent a means of developing independent retail shops, which hold an essential position in the liveliness of towns, as they enable professionals of the sector to become more efficient and more competitive, and enable business owners to learn to manage, develop and modernise their businesses, in light of structural changes as a result of digitalisation and internationalisation of exchanges.

The Digital Agenda is and has been for several years the cross-cutting theme par excellence in European policies. The digital technological changes provide opportunities for growth and employment that are likely to benefit all public and private players. Therefore, it is now a key prospect which all players in the town centres must adhere to, due to its influence on economic performance and competitiveness.

Finally, **sustainable urban development** is a decisive challenge to consider. Indeed, a dense and compact town encourages movements over short distances and the use of public transport, unlike more sprawled towns where the various activities are scattered and where there are more difficulties (increase in road traffic, energy consumption and available ground space, etc.). An attractive town centre enables both to curb this urban sprawl, while also contributing positively to the boom in **circular economy** which affects several sectors such as retail, industry, transport or waste management and recycling.

B | But the European Union is not sufficiently equipped to deal with these challenges

Even though Europe is fully aware of the existence of the problem regarding the desertion of town centres, it is not currently sufficiently well-prepared to provide answers that are commensurate with the challenges involved, and in particular regarding the issue of independent retail shops, the major player in the vitality of towns.

Indeed, more EU involvement would enable to develop European town centres in their role as a network node, in particular on aspects such as the circular economy, which requires a more cross-cutting vision in order to reach the right balance between the players, or by assisting the SMEs to enable them to contribute usefully to this process (e.g. renovation of their shops, reduction of waste and CO₂ emissions related to transport).

1/ Absence of global vision

As the European Union plays no direct role in the management of towns, the revitalisation of town centres is to all intents and purposes, absent from European policies, despite the catastrophic economic situation experienced by most independent SME retailers, tradesmen and service providers in Europe, and whereas several plans dedicated to these kinds of companies have emerged at the level of the Member States over the last few years.

This situation is especially regrettable in that the European Union would be able to take action and offer wide-ranging solutions, as it does indirectly through environmental policies, for which it has authority, whilst respecting the subsidiarity and proportionality principles that guide its actions.



2 / A Community policy focused on trade rather than on retailing

As the third trading power in the world, the European Union is an outward-oriented economy: its trade with the rest of the world represents 15% of the international trade in goods¹⁸. Although this trade is essential for the competitiveness of the EU on a worldwide level, the EU's trading policy only concerns wholesale trade and does not deal with the issue of retailing, even though it is fundamental for the vitality of the town centres and their shopping streets.

As a reminder, the retail sector represents the largest economic sub-sector in Europe in terms of jobs: it provides 8.6% of the total number of jobs in the EU in one of the more than 3.6 million businesses of the sector and generates 4.5% of the added value of the European Union's economy¹⁹.

3 / Persistence of national differences

The contrasts of the European business landscape are the result of many factors, such as market size and dynamics, differences in tax treatment, but also socio-demographic factors which can act in opposite directions: some, such as

urban and demographic concentration, tend to densify the business fabric; others, such as the percentage of cars owned by households, encourage businesses to set up further away.

Their cultural and economic specificities mean that all the European countries are far from having applied the same policy for local shops: while countries in the South and West of Europe still continue to be very attached to the vitality of the town centres, some Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden, much less sensitive to this issue, have had no hesitation in pushing shops out to the outskirts of the towns. However, it would appear that the EU Member States as a whole agree on considering local shops as a key sector of the economy and essential for regional and sustainable development.

Although the persistence of national differences seems at first sight to be a curb to the emergence of a common policy for local independent shops, the awareness now present in all the Member States of the necessity to halt the desertion of the town centres to respond to the important economic and societal issues of the moment should be able to make the public authorities more sensitive to this subject, which is one of the answers to it.

C | The urgent need for a strong, established European policy

1 / A necessary awareness of the efforts to be made for all of the town-centre players

Regenerating town centres is one of the answers to the key Inner-city dynamics are a challenge that has many origins and consequences. They can only be supported by a town centre that reverts to its historical role: easily accessible, renovated and equipped with quality infrastructures, able to facilitate traffic and mobility and proposing an attractive environment for firms and independent retailers who would like to set up shop there and for consumers. These dynamics also imply the presence of urban services that are appropriate, effective and adapted to the new technological uses.

The transformation of independent retailing in this framework is an essential factor for the regeneration of town centres and the preservation of the European territories. We have been experiencing a process of "creative destruction" over several years, as several physical shops attempt to face these new challenges imposed by e-commerce and by the change in consumer habits to avoid their disappearance, by varying their offers and by specialising in products and services that cannot be found online.

All independent retail shops will not be able to be saved but those who manage to adapt to the current technologies and ways of living, will be able to become part of the main driving force of European competitiveness.

Thus, the means of assisting the retailers must be adjusted to suit the requirements and difficulties involved in facing this in-depth transformation, by offering courses for staff members in charge of customers or by pooling good practices and logistical and human resources within groups of employers.

The construction of a strong European commercial identity, integrating a full abundant offer combining shops, culture, leisure activities, heritage, quality of life, tourism and adapted modes of transport, constitutes one of the essential levers of attractivity and economic competitiveness for the European territories, and a wonderful ferment for social cohesion.



2 / European challenges: integration of vulnerable populations by means of employment and training, maintaining social cohesion and the digital modernisation of society

Europe has to face up to a double challenge: encouraging citizens to stay where they live to achieve a productive local economic environment, and safeguarding access to a local bricks-and-mortar offer of goods and services, while developing digital systems.

It is therefore a question now of:

- * Promoting the professionalisation of inner-city retailing (training of business managers and sales persons and lifelong learning);
- * Reinforcing productivity and economic performance by investing in teaching and research;
- * Promoting a European policy in favour of employment in SMEs, ensuring they will have a status corresponding to their size and constraints.

A non-negligible influence in maintaining social cohesion

The inner-city shops play a key role in the integration of people with no or few qualifications and the more vulnerable people such as older people or refugees. Through practice and permanent training, these people are able to acquire skills throughout their professional careers.

Access to employment in inner-city shops where the social connection is preponderant is an element of strong cohesion among the various components of society. Indeed, they represent the places of encounters, exchanges and sociability where inhabitants can meet, especially older people.

Indeed, if we consider that 19.2% of European citizens are over 65 years old²⁰ and that many of them do not own any means of transport, the regeneration of inner-city and local shops makes complete sense. Developing employment in inner-city shops is an indisputable means of integrating various vulnerable populations, whether local or immigrants, and of maintaining social ties for all populations.

Modernisation of society: taking advantage of digital development

Digital technology has for several years become the cross-cutting theme par excellence in European policies. *The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)*²¹, implemented by the European Commission, enables to assess the progress of each Member State on the basis of 5 main indicators: connectivity, human capital, use of the internet by citizens, level of digitalisation in businesses and that of public services.

Indeed, since 2010, the digitalisation of businesses has been one of the priorities of the European Commission through the strategy for the digital single market.

Town centres and independent retailers (although most of them are not included in this indicator, as the very large majority of them have fewer than 10 employees) are affected by several aspects of the Digital Agenda: the development of technological skills of the workforce, development of an omnichannel presence of all retailers (mobile, tablet, website, telephone, social media, physical networks), sharing of data (personal online spaces, emails, text messages, in-store interactive terminals), etc.

From smart city to connected store...

The smart city is a new conception of towns: it is the way in which towns and cities can invest their resources and use them more intelligently and efficiently by using information and communication technology.

A smart city has become a place of urban planning challenges and opportunities giving a new dynamic to independent retailing, which must learn how to make use of the available data about consumers so as to adjust what they offer by making it distinctive and personalised.

Digital technology drastically changes consumer habits and behaviour and consequently retailers' strategies, so that they can continue to exist and develop. The personalisation of the services and products offered by a connected business becomes one of the most important criteria in a shop's development.

Nowadays the traditional boutique has to reinvent itself, taking inspiration from the advantages of e-commerce, while retaining those of a bricks-and-mortar shop, to attract customers who are always on the look-out for novelty, in both the products themselves and the service accompanying the sale. The bricks-and-mortar sales outlets must continue to be places where people can meet and where consumers can interact in real life.

3 / The necessary broadening of current policies to meet real needs

New Skills agenda: a spur for employment in Europe

In June 2016, the European Commission made public the new version of its "Skills Agenda for Europe". The objective is to equip each European with the skills needed to find work today and in the future. The Commission sees it as the essential ingredient for growth, employability and competitiveness expected from the European economy.

The objectives set in terms of professionalisation and reinforcement of training are directly able to encourage job development and their qualification in independent retail shops.

Digital single market

The EU institutions have implemented many actions to adapt the single market to the digital era and eliminate the regulatory barriers. This digital single market could generate 415 billion Euros per year for the European economy, and create hundreds of thousands of new jobs, especially in independent retailing.





3

CIVIL SOCIETY IS RALLYING FOR THE INCLUSION OF THE REVITALISATION OF TOWN CENTRES IN EUROPE, IN THE ABSENCE OF SUITABLE MANAGEMENT IN CORE EUROPEAN POLICIES

A | A favourable context: materialise and get the best out of the Pact of Amsterdam

The objective of maintaining vitality in the towns is shared by the European Commission which, in connection with the EU urban programme launched on 30th May 2016 with the Pact of Amsterdam, is working together with the Member States, the towns and other stakeholders to promote policies focusing more on towns that are more efficient and more rational, and to contribute to territorial cohesion.²²

Partnerships have been set up for each of these themes in order to identify the challenges that should be faced to encourage the treatment of the urban dimension of each of these specific areas.

These 12 urban partnerships are at varying stages of progress as only 4 action plans have been brought forward (housing, poverty of towns, quality of air, inclusion of immigrants and refugees), whereas others were established more recently, in February and March 2017, under the Maltese Chairmanship of the Council of the European Union.

1 / Pact of Amsterdam and Urban Agenda

This agreement puts the finishing touch to the European Urban Agenda policy and confirms the precise orientations of its application over the coming years, based on three main themes: better regulation, better funding and better distribution of information.

Thus, the 12 priority themes identified in relation to this Urban Agenda are related to the environment (climate adaptation, air quality), social concerns (poverty in towns and cities, housing, integration of immigrants and refugees), societal issues (digital transition, mobility) and the economy (circular economy, employment and skills in local economy).

The Pact of Amsterdam thus recognises that harmonious urban development meets a demand for quality and innovation that attracts Europeans to the towns and cities and their shops, while increasing competition between them, thus creating a genuine emulation between the various players.

4 fundamental priorities for independent retailing in town centres within the Pact of Amsterdam

- * In chapter 10.6 on Jobs & Skills, emphasis is put on the creation of new businesses, which include many SMEs;
- * In chapter 10.11 on digital transition, the issue is to improve public services but also create business opportunities through the collection and management of data (although it is not mentioned by name, Big Data is clearly hinted at);
- * Chapter 12.5 deals with innovative approaches including Smart Cities;
- * Chapter 12.8 explicitly mentions “urban regeneration” in terms of its social, economic, environmental, cultural and spatial aspects.

2 / Calls for projects and European programmes in favour of the vitality of town centres

Several calls for projects and European programmes exist in favour of revitalising town centres, both multidisciplinary and sector-based.

Multidisciplinary programmes

URBAN INNOVATIVE ACTIONS (UIA)²³

UIA is a European Union initiative enabling urban areas in Europe to set up new and innovative solutions in order to face the urban challenges that they encounter.

Indeed, research on urban issues is already well-developed, and yet the potential solutions struggle to be implemented as the urban authorities are reluctant to use their budget to test new, uncertain and therefore risky ideas.

Urban Innovative Actions offers the urban authorities the possibility to bear these risks and to test the most innovative and most creative solutions through a participation to funding the project of up to 80% of its activities, and to assess the way in which these solutions work in practice and meet with the complexity of real life, in order to share the experiences of it with the other urban areas.

The UIA Initiative has a budget in the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) of a total amount of 372 million Euros for the period 2014-2020.

INTERREG IIIC

The INTERREG IIIC programme is one of the 3 mainstays of the European INTERREG III initiative, which was implemented between 2002 and 2008 and which was funded by the ERDF, as part of Structural Funds, alongside national financial partners.

This third aspect concerns the interregional cooperation within the European Union and with its neighbouring countries. This cooperation has enabled to share experiences between the players in question in terms of regional development policies and the creation of synergies between the players. The overall aim was to improve the implementation of the regional development policies and their tools through an exchange of information on a large scale, and to structure these exchanges within networks.

That is the context in which TOCEMA Europe²⁴ was created, the European network for managing town centres, consisting in a large partnership, made up of towns, regional authorities and equivalent public organisations such as national town-centre management associations, and which is currently composed of 9 Member States (Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland, United Kingdom and Sweden).

TOCEMA encourages the development of town-centre management initiatives throughout Europe and the implementation of novelty projects in the sector of urban development.

It aims at structuring the existing network in order to enable the debate on issues of urban development related to retailing, the environment (cleanliness, safety, usability, etc.), tourism, culture, accessibility, housing, etc.

Since 2012, the European network has become a global think-tank, TOCEMA Worldwide, welcoming new partners from America (Canada, USA), Asia (Japan, Singapore) and Australia.

URBACT

Since 2002, Urbact has been a European programme for exchanging information among towns and learning from them, with the aim of developing solutions to deal with major urban challenges. With the networking of European towns, the strengthening of skills and capitalisation on good practices, it provides support to public decision-makers and practitioners in the field to create sustainable solutions integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of urban development.

Following on from the Urbact I and II programmes, Urbact III continues its promotion of integrated and sustainable urban development and contributes to the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. With the prospect of the reinforcement of urban policies in 2014-2020, the European Commission has added a contribution to the amount of the ERDF allocated to the programme of approximately 40% compared to the previous period, i.e. more than 74 million Euros. Urbact III's total budget amounts to 96 million Euros.

Sector-based programmes

RETAILINK

From September 2015 to May 2018, ten medium-sized European cities participated in the RetailLink network, which collaboratively developed an Integrated Action Plan to improve the competitiveness of independent retail businesses, considering them as key economic drivers. Overseen by the town of Igualda (Spain), participating cities were Romans-sur-Isère (France), Fermo (Italy), Sibenik (Croatia), Pécs (Hungary), Bistrita (Romania), Liberec (Czech Republic), Hengelo (Netherlands), Hoogeveen (Netherlands), and Basingstoke And Deane (United Kingdom). The website retailand.eu makes all the results of this programme available to the public.

GO TRADE

Launched in 2017, the Go Trade project aims to bring new life to markets in Northern France and Southern England by supporting businesses in the creation of sustainable opportunities and increased commercial traffic, making them attractive to visitors and tourists. This programme includes training sessions for business owners, a new "click & collect" tool to encourage more modern consumption practices, and events for residents and tourists. Go Trade expects to train over 270 business owners and generate 275 jobs and 260 500 visitors over 3 years.

B | Concerted approaches aiming to promote vitality in town centres in the Member States, at all levels

1 / Town-centre management and its tools

Principle of town-centre management

According to the TOCEMA network, town-centre management consists in managing and developing town centres to make them lively, attractive and sustainable.²⁵ Town-centre management is organised in the form of a public-private partnership. It acts as an interface between the private, public and associative sectors and users of the town centre, being at one and the same time a catalyst, a coordinator and an incentive. The objective is to assist the various players in discovering a mutual interest in their collaboration by encouraging impacts on the town centre as a whole.

Each town centre is unique; this is why town-centre management encourages the development of partnerships according to the reality on the field, relying on the most appropriate group for its development.

Each partner (local authorities, retailers, estate agents, bankers, etc.) contributes its address book, particular skills, know-how in favour of a common objective in the common interest.

Most town-centre management structures essentially develop actions qualified as short-term (sales events, quality of the environment, communication, etc.). These enable to create optimum conditions for commercial development: management of public and private spaces, marketing communication, commercialisation of unoccupied retail premises, etc.

However, some structures initiate and provide assistance with medium and long-term structuring projects. The development and implementation of these kinds of projects (urban renovation, mobility, housing, heritage, etc.) remain the prerogative of the public authorities and/or private sector.

Town-centre management does not replace the players or the sites of decisions specific to each player. It coordinates actions and develops a strategy that is common to all the players, by means of missions which do not fall within the competence of a specific player: commercialisation of unoccupied retail premises, assisting a retailer with investment formalities or (re)positioning its business, finding solutions for an abandoned building, instigating the use of renovation subsidies, etc.

The composition of the governance must be evolutive depending on the various stages of the plan including diagnostic, preparation of a shared action plan, finalisation of contractual aspects with investors, operational implementation and assessment of results.

The town-centre management is funded by the public sector and/or by the private sector. It is proactive and must anticipate the new challenges of the town of the future, answer them efficiently by planning evolutions in terms of economy, environment, way of living, trends of citizens and develop new working methods.

Several examples of cooperation throughout Europe in favour of the revitalisation of the town centres

- * **In Ireland:** the “*Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Training Programme*”, grouping together 7 towns throughout the country.
- * **In the Netherlands:** the implementation of the “*The Groningen Business Owners’ Agenda*”, in the town of Groningen.

- * **In France:** the formalisation of the State with the 222 small and medium-sized towns selected for the “*Action Cœur de Ville*” national Plan.
- * **In Belgium:** case of the Walloon network of town-centre management.

The town-centre management jobs

TOWN-CENTRE MANAGER

The town-centre manager’s work is characterised by a cross-cutting and multidisciplinary approach to the urban question. He/she has to integrate into his/her work:

- * the logics of the public-private partnership,
- * economic development,
- * the quality of the urban environment: urban planning, buildings, signposting, urban furniture, etc.
- * the increased value of the urban heritage,
- * the marketing approach: commercial diversity, communication, etc.
- * the transport and mobility policy,
- * the well-being and safety policy.

THE COMMERCIAL PROMOTION SPECIALIST

This function implies supervision and specific monitoring, particularly to reinforce the power of attraction of the pole by giving operational support to the retailers and coordinating with the retailers’ federations. The promotion specialist also ensures the continuity of the commercial promotions and organisation of events.

THE URBAN STEWARDS

They are the strongest and most visible link between the management of the town centre and the town-centre users. This kind of work implies having very good knowledge of the town centre and its players. It is composed of several job descriptions depending on the missions accomplished. Among them are low-skilled personnel, for whom this activity will serve as a springboard for their future professional career, but also more qualified personnel implying longer term contracts. The urban stewards are given training when they take up their duties and also receive vocational training specific to their tasks in the field. They have a very high satisfaction index with purchasers and retailers.

URBAN WORKERS

They are less visible than the urban stewards and are often made available to the work teams of the towns in question, in order to optimise the speed and quality of the interventions on the outskirts of the town centre.

2 / A decisive option for the future: Placemaking

The development of town centres in medium-sized towns has often been designed and imagined by urbanists, architects, and local authorities favouring a coordination model (interactions between stakeholders are managed on a top-down basis).

In recent years, the town's fabric has evolved with methods of co-construction and cooperation, originating in the USA, whose spectacular results have appeared in Europe, in Anglo-Saxon countries, then in France, in particular in urban projects which have reclaimed vacant urban premises and therefore the improvement of the real-estate value and the quality of life of the local community.

These initiatives are too often the prerogative of large towns and cities in which engineering and the importance of higher education enable to stimulate innovative thinking and find local players able to relay this public initiative. Small and medium-sized towns are too often excluded from this dynamic, which should be amplified.

So, what do place branding, placemaking and place management mean? Place branding consists of redefining the public space's identity by giving it a strong image that defines it. Using this new identity, the place's image is

developed by means of actions that resemble it and activities which the populations can adopt as their own and which facilitate social interaction and improve quality of life for the local community: this is placemaking.

These activities and services are tested and assessed in the place, which is managed by a team, this management being known as place management.²⁶

Reinforcing the involvement of citizens and local players (associations, companies, schools, artists, etc.) in the production / emergence of development projects in town centres via the dissemination of the placemaking approach: training of elected representatives and developers, provision of necessary tools, involvement of experts in governance, etc. This approach aims to ensure the development of **spaces which are vibrant** (in line with local identity and needs), **functional** (co-constructed and varied in terms of uses and accessible services) and **attractive** (lively, aesthetic, accessible and open).

Placemaking is a bottom-up process comprised of a **set of tools to support the creation of a project / living and meeting space for inhabitants and local players, thus improving their quality of life**. It is a co-construction dynamic with the inhabitants and players of a town centre or district.

Based on observation and discussions with people living and working in the territory, the placemaking methodology is structured around four main stages:

- * Framing of the project: definition of the territory (a place, a development lot, an entire town-centre) and people to consult (residents, retailers, etc.),
- * Consultation and formalisation of a shared vision of the territory: discussions with stakeholders, identification of local issues, understanding of needs and co-definition of a shared vision,
- * Translation of the vision into a functional programme followed by short-term experimentation (test period),
- * Implementation of the project over the long term: continuous evaluation of experiments, adaptation and collective implementation of the functional programme (involvement of local players in the development, animation and maintenance of spaces).

Already integrated into the development methodologies of public and/or private players in Anglo-Saxon countries, the placemaking approach has proved itself by allowing the emergence of attractive places for residents, retailers, and for tourists, and the enrichment of planning and land development processes. Beyond the integration of the "Placemaking" impetus in the town-centre development toolkit, two operational measures should be supported:

- * The opening of a "town-centre factory" in a vacant space during the diagnostic period led by the town-centre manager, open to citizens, artists, and local associations,
- * A metropolitan mentoring system to initiate the process, i.e. "to force" the sharing of skills between large towns and cities and small and medium-sized towns.

3 / The role of retailers and retailers' federations²⁷

It is important for retailers to be able to become integrated in a positive dynamic and work with the other retailers as partners and not as competitors, in order to support the actions that the public authorities are introducing, and to give back to the town centre its role as main meeting place of the town.

Thus, in order to support a local dynamic, it is important to present a structured, coherent, united and well-thought-out image, with a strategy looking towards the development of new concepts and commercial formats (mixed shops, showrooms, pop-up stores, parcel collection points) and the organisation of events based on current or potential customers' expectations.

To do so, they have to work proactively by presenting a strategic plan sufficiently in advance so that it can be modified and approved by all the players. Ideally, the plan presented should be forward-looking over several years.

Marketing techniques can also help in the development of a town and a retailers' federation; this requires having a team of specialists or relying on the town-centre management. It is important to know how to unite the retailers, enable them to put forward their problems and attempt to find solutions in a positive reasoning manner.

Moreover, it would be advisable to identify the major priorities in the town centres but also in the neighbouring towns, in order to make use of their initiatives, such as, for example, a museum with strong potential, a dynamic company or top-quality artistic events.

Reinforced cooperation initiatives between local authorities and local private players, on several levels:

ON A NATIONAL LEVEL: the national urban renovation laboratory (Italy)²⁸

The national Urban Renovation Laboratory was created in May 2016, further to the signature of the MOU between Confcommercio-Imprese for Italy²⁹ and the ANCI (National Association of Italian towns) in order to promote social and economic revitalisation of urban areas. The laboratory is a place of discussion between the local Confcommercio and the corresponding authorities. The aim is to share good practices throughout the territories which, by joining the experiment, have signed agreements to implement shared initiatives. The aims of these initiatives include: revitalisation of towns (impact on the tools and regulations in terms of urbanism);

introduction of advantageous tax measures; signature of partnerships for completing projects (national and European funding); training of professional members able to manage the urban renovation processes in which they have taken part. Since 2018, an operational stage has been launched, during which towns have set up local laboratories, defined an urban renovation action plan and identified possible sources of local funding.

AT THE LEVEL OF THE TOWN: the creation of entrepreneurial funds (Netherlands)

These funds are created by and for local entrepreneurs such as the *Het Fonds* of the town of Groningen in the Netherlands, initiated by the federation of local entrepreneurs, the *Groningen City Club*.

All owners of real-estate that is not of residential nature contribute to this fund, through an additional tax of 6% on the property tax, which enables to fund activities for residents and tourists such as the "Let's Grow"³⁰ Festival, or for more specific categories of public such as retailers or future retailers, via the *Groningen Retail Academy*.

The Groningen local authorities act in support of this initiative, by sharing engineering knowledge and experience and by co-financing certain projects. Thus, they see the establishment of this fund as a way of grouping together the community of entrepreneurs and involving them more in the town's development. The local authorities and the community of entrepreneurs become more equal partners.



4

PROSPECTS AND PROPOSALS

A | Set up a European inner-city observatory

1 / Put together a European database of the principal indicators of vitality in town centres

Objectives sought on a Community, national and local level

Statistics and data are available within the European Union, whether via the Eurostat European Statistics Office or via more specific tools such as those of the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and the resulting initiative known as CityBench³¹, which enables the comparison between towns on the basis of economic, demographic, environmental or quality-of-life criteria.

However, there is currently a shortage of data that is specific to town centres and pooled on a European level. The existence of a database dedicated to analysing the vitality of the European town centres will enable to provide statistics to the Commission and to the other European institutions, so that they may define, implement and assess the community policies according to reliable and objective indicators.

This data, which should be communicated compulsorily by the Member States, will also be sent to the national and local public authorities in order to draw up a diagnostic enabling the implementation of actions, but also to the investors and businesses and retailers seeking new opportunities, the sector of research and education, journalists and all of the European citizens.

Main indicators

The Observatory's task will be to define the same indicators for all Member States, according to several themes such as retail, business climate, housing, quality of life, sociology, tourism or the number of pieces of administrative equipment.

In this respect, these indicators would be, as examples:

- * for retail: the rate of unoccupied business premises, retail restrictiveness indicator (RRI), average rate of rents per sqm, number of square metres of business surface areas in inner-city areas and in the suburbs, etc.;
- * for the business climate: ability to make deals, price of electricity and gas for industrial customers, etc.;
- * for housing: rate of occupancy of the accommodation, etc.;
- * for the town-centre sociology: age of the population, percentage of working population, number of students, etc.;
- * for the tourism: number of overnight stays per year, etc.;
- * for the quality of life: number of people who enjoy living in a given town centre, the cleanliness, flat-hunting, etc.;
- * for the administrative equipment: rate of administrative equipment.

However, the implementation of these indicators and the feedback that is necessary to enable a clear diagnostic of a town's economic dynamic based on criteria that are shared by everyone must not create an additional burden for the European SME.

2 / Enable a clear diagnostic of the economic trend of a town on the basis of criteria shared by all

The European observatory of town centres should enable all towns to assess the dynamism and sustainability of their centre and to highlight the decisive role played by town centres in the socio-economic, environmental and cultural development of the town as a whole, and in the quality of life of its residents and its visitors.

This diagnostic, which is based on quantitative and qualitative studies, sent in particular to visitors, residents, business owners and retailers of a town, enables to define the shared strategy to be implemented in a defined perimeter, to make the town more attractive, more sustainable and more viable, in all of the areas of action.

Countries such as the Netherlands, with their National Retail Agenda, Ireland with its Town Centre Health Check³² or France with its "Action Coeur de Ville" plan propose extensive, detailed plans which could be shared on a European level. The indicators assessed could be: general attractiveness, liveliness of the town (quality and diversity of events, cultural offer), retail opportunities, availability of accommodation to rent or for sale, availability and cost of parking spaces, quality of public transport, feeling of security, etc.

These plans all share the fact that they rely on an extended governance, most often combining local public authorities and associations representing all of the players of the town centres, such as business owners, representatives of the transport, tourism or housing sectors, and the residents.



3 / Use a shared European platform to put the towns' experiences and good practices online for revitalising their town centre

All of the national or local plans in favour of revitalising the town centres, and their indicators and their practical results, may be shared on a shared platform, accessible online and open to all.

This operational tool could be used as a reference for elected representatives, all of the players of the towns and the persons interested in town-centre management, enabling them to develop their strategies, policies and sustainable urban development projects.

Some platforms already exist on a European level, such as www.rfsc.eu, a reference of towns and territories, enabling to reinforce the sustainable development strategy of a town, assess its project and its progress, but it is a shame that there is a lack of diversity of the indicators, and that the use of the site is reserved for elected representatives or urban development stakeholders.

Thus, this site could serve as a basis for the European platform for revitalisation of town centres, and would enable to exchange good practices in favour of towns between the Member States and between each town. This new platform would also enable to have access to a list of main contacts working in favour of the revitalisation of town centres within each Member State (local authorities, town-centre management associations, federations of business managers, etc.).

Resolutely evolutive, it could provide other functions offered by its users and in particular by the elected representatives, as it is used.

B | Facilitate the modernisation of shops, towns, and society

1 / Facilitate initial and vocational training of retailers and their staff members, in particular as regards digital tools and challenges

The specific feature of SME retailers is the difficulty for the retailers and their employees in freeing up some time to follow training. The entire cost of the training can be financed, in the same way as the cost of the employee's absence.

However, the dynamic consisting of making the effort to follow training does not exist: this is why incentives must be proposed to retailers to convince them to initiate initial and vocational training, in particular on digital technologies and on all new technologies which will allow them participate in the dynamics of the 21st century.

Initiatives to support the initial and vocational training of retailers: retail academies

The example of the town of Groningen in the Netherlands: The Groningen Retail Academy³³

The Groningen Retail Academy is a project sponsored by the Groningen City Club, alongside the Hanze University of Applied Sciences. The academy proposes workshops and courses on a variety of subjects leading to the improvement of the quality of retail trading. MKB Noord, the local employers' organisation, has also developed a series of support systems intended for business managers.

In the medium term, the Groningen City Club's objective is to improve the professionalisation of these retailers by insisting, for example, on training in the following areas:

- * The importance of the relationship with the customer
- * The advantage of differentiation and know-how
- * The layout and visibility of the shops (physically and on the social media)
- * The importance of storytelling
- * The advantages and disadvantages of the new technologies

2 / Smart cities / connected shops: essential infrastructures for bearing up against worldwide platforms

Planning digital training for retailers is one thing: it is quite another to be able to present them with the tools that will allow them to put their training into practice.

Smart cities allow those towns that have taken the subject on board to set up the various indispensable networks for a smart town.

One of the essential prerequisites for this implementation is the installation of optical fibre in the towns so that the retailers, who have to modernise and use the new technologies to continue operating their business, can do so.

Furthermore, local platforms are starting to appear that are able to give visibility to retailers but are also able to process all customer-related data. The introduction of local platforms should be encouraged so that they become tangible supports for the town's commercial vitality.

The digital tools made available to the retailers: display window sites and market places such as Shop'In

The display window sites and marketplaces provide visibility for all the commercial activities in a given geographic area, like the various Shop'in sites in Brussels, Kortrijk, Charleroi or Huy in Belgium. This kind of site implies a strong involvement on the part of the retailers and an extremely dynamic management by its administrators.³⁴

Indeed, the platforms are one of the tools for regenerating town centres just as they are that of the local commercial rebirth in Europe, for the simple reason that retailing, whether small or large, is increasingly dependent on flows of data and that they are the compulsory vector for enabling the increased visibility of these various structures.

Thus, several solutions exist for using the local data; the most efficient of these include the applications that enable consumers to input a certain number of criteria in order to receive a selection of shops, which are geo-located and which orient them towards these sales outlets.

It is appropriate to highlight the importance of the availability of these platforms for the retail industry, which enable its members to have access to a broader market. The local authorities will have a crucial role to play in the implementation of these local, efficient and useful platforms for their local shops.

Training of retailers in digital tools

An effective training method for retailers was implemented by the CoSto network in Paris. The network offers retailers the possibility of experimenting with digital solutions in their shop at no cost and for several months. These solutions are proposed by digital start-ups and concern, for example, loyalty operations or customer recruitment.

3 / Prefer the sustainable development of town centres via the circular economy

The growth of the circular economy relies on the observation that in the 21st century, we no longer have the time to reason and act on short-term logic and actions. The climate changes and other environmental challenges such as increasing population, depletion of natural resources, shortages in drinking water and disappearance of biodiversity, present a risk for the planet and therefore for our towns.

Thus, aware of these risks, all of the players in the towns are increasingly inclined to alter their conduct in order to reduce their impacts on the planet:

- * the public authorities invest on various levels (renovation of housing, mobility, waste management and recycling, public lighting, etc.),
- * businesses and shops make their activities more sustainable, whether in their relations with their suppliers (reduction of waste produced in the supply chain, increase of efficiency of products), in their own activities (renovation of offices and shops to reduce energy consumption, more ecological transport, recycling and reuse), or with their customers (information via labels, varied, responsible and ethical offers, recyclable products, reusable products),

- * the consumers ask to know more about the environmental and social impact of the products and services available to them to help them make informed choices and attempt to reduce waste.

The European Union thus has an important role to play in assisting and supporting this societal and cultural transformation, which is necessary in order to protect the population and the competitiveness of firms on a medium and long-term basis.

Several actions may therefore be implemented on a European level to act in favour of a low carbon and circular economy, at all levels, by coordinating the economic and environmental policies transparently and efficiently, which represent an opportunity for innovation, development of opportunities and jobs in all Member States.



C | Innovative proposals shared by all to develop local economies

1 / The local multiplier effect

Several studies published over recent years and in particular those of Michael Shuman, Economist and Expert on issues regarding communities, suggest that local firms and shops contribute more to the economic development than large companies attracted to the territories by tax or financial incentives such as large chains of shops and franchises.³⁵

Indeed, these firms generally contribute more to what is known as the “local multiplier effect”. This indicator corresponds to the territories’ ability to maintain and circulate locally-produced wealth.

These results may seem paradoxical, as the smaller firms and shops, the majority of which are managed locally, often pay lower salaries and offer fewer financial benefits to their employees than the larger firms (even though this difference is tending to decrease).

Therefore, even if these firms and shops contribute less to the local economy in terms of volumes of wages than the foreign companies, they provide more support for the local economy by using the services of local suppliers more often or by contributing directly with local organisations, which emphasises the redistribution of the wealth in the economy and enables the creation of new income and new jobs.

In this respect, in order to develop the territories, it is not enough to attract large companies; it is also important to have a strong local economic circuit, that is varied and complementary between the sectors of the local economy (personal goods, home goods, services, health care, etc.).

Knowledge of the local multiplier effect will enable to develop a list of actions to improve or consolidate it. Maximising the local multiplier effect equates to ensuring more vibrant, diverse territories.

The aim here is that each town centre is equipped with a digital platform for measuring the local multiplier effect. This measurement and monitoring tool will enable to:

- * Orient producers and distributors to the most active local markets;
- * Communicate in a new way with investors and developers of external projects by emphasising local opportunities;
- * Encourage local businesses to respond to local demand through innovative measures;
- * Share best practices.

Example of the town of Preston in the United Kingdom

In 2011, Preston was severely affected by poverty, social inequality and a reduction by half of its funding from the British government. Instead of turning for further help to external sources, the town joined forces with the CLES (Centre for Local Economic Strategies), a think tank located in Manchester. The CLES performed a study involving 6 institutions in Preston, including the town hall, the university, the police and the hospital, and observed that only 5% of total expenditure was maintained at local level.

The town council and the CLES set up a new economic development strategy, enabling to reorient annual expenditure of these institutions towards

local firms, whether by implementing procurement processes or by creating local cooperatives.

The CLES highlighted that for each pound spent in a local firm, 63 pence would be reinjected into the local economy, whereas this amount would only be 40 pence for a foreign company.

In 5 years, this strategy enabled to bring 74 million pounds to the town's economy and 204 million pounds to the county of Lancashire. Furthermore, this work enabled the population to understand the importance of keeping local retailers and tradesmen.

2 / Pollinating businesses: the development of efficient local entrepreneurship

"A pollinating business is one whose mission is to support local entrepreneurship." This concept, also inspired by Michael Shuman, is based on the idea that although businesses sometimes receive occasional support from the local authorities, Chambers of Commerce and Industry or state services, this only lasts a certain time and stops once the funding runs out, which does not enable to support the local economy on a long-term basis.

However, certain firms, pollinating business, commit to contributing usefully to the development of local entrepreneurship, by providing their added value to other local businesses, thus reinforcing the global ecosystem on a long-term basis. This mission may be perceived as a responsibility, a commitment on behalf of businesses to support the welfare of relevant stakeholders and of the territories in which they are implanted.

By supporting the emergence of entrepreneurial projects which respond to local needs with local resources (goods and services, human resources, raw materials, financial support, etc.), the pollinating business contributes to a transition towards more sustainable, inclusive, and collaborative local economies. This pollinating mission contributes in turn to the nourishment of the economic model, strategy, and organisation of the business, until it becomes its main objective.

There are several categories of pollinating businesses, sometimes without even knowing it. It may, for example, be a law firm that assists local businesses with legal issues. Other examples may fall within the management of space, trade, training, funding or partnerships.

Thus, the reinvention of local economic development will not guarantee the success of each town centre. In the end, this will depend on the skills, background, local culture, but it is clear that each community that invests in pollinating businesses may reasonably expect to create more jobs, income and prosperity and improve its inhabitants' quality of life, which sets the basis for several other initiatives in the sectors of health, housing or energy.

D | Definition of a European policy in favour of town centres

TOWARDS A GLOBAL POLICY³⁶

The EU has no competence in matters regarding town policies. The European recommendations and programmes related to town policies are often dealt with through policies for which the EU does have authority, such as environmental policies.

Various working memoranda published by the Commission agree on the idea that the Policy of the towns must cover two levels: at the level of the urban area as a whole and at the level of the districts in difficulty, mainly located in the suburbs.

These two levels neglect the viability and vitality of the town centres which constitute the Gordian knot of the network town. The dynamics and creation of value must take place as part of an offensive prospect.

In order to structure a third level as part of the recommendations in terms of good urban governance, three tools are essential:

- * A vertical integration: creation of a representation structure of town centres on a European level;
- * A horizontal integration: creation of a specific legal structure to supervise the development of public private partnerships that are essential for integrating the various local players in order to manage the defined perimeter of the town centres;
- * A specific and offensive financial support to develop the European town centres in their role as network node (short circuits, circular economy, etc.).



TOWARDS A SPECIFIC AGENDA FOR RETAIL SHOPS

The force of the Urban Agenda prompts us to request that it be completed by a specific section devoted to retail shops entitled "Retailing and town centres", with the prospect of a more local vision of retailing, which becomes preponderant in relation to the circular and local economy. The working group that would take on this subject could work on the following issues:

1 / Simplify regulations³⁷

The fragmentation of the regulations does not currently enable the implementation of a global common policy that would be beneficial for inner-city retailers. The issue is then to start simplifying, defragmenting and grouping together the common points so as to create a base for more efficient regulations. Among them are the following:

Commercial leases

The issue here is to adapt commercial leases to the reality of the situation and to strategic objectives. The development of new commercial concepts, such as pop-up shops and shared stores, implies looking into the legal solutions that should be adopted, without compromising the guarantees that the laws on commercial leases offer retailers.

Tax on vacant shops

The problem of vacant shops is particularly pronounced in areas where the cost of real estate is relatively high, such as in the main streets of medium-sized towns. Streets where economic growth is falling are strongly impacted by this situation. The owners keep the rent levels abnormally high for capitalistic reasons, with the risk of intensifying the number of vacant shops.

The development of the new concepts of retail parks also creates vacant shops along out-of-town main roads, in former warehouses in which the sales area generally exceeds 400 sqm. These buildings age badly and often deteriorate very quickly.

Vacant shops are also very present in the intermediate districts and in the main streets of small towns where they concern small surface areas.

In this context, imposing a tax on vacant premises seems to be a measure that would enable the problem of absent owners and abandoned premises to be addressed directly.

Such a tax exists in Belgium, France and Canada. In France, a tax on vacant shops can be applied to any real-estate property which has not been used for a business activity for at least two years. The tax, based on the estimated rental value of the vacant property, is subject to varying rates which go from 10% the first year to 15% the second year and 20% from the third year. The municipal authorities are also authorised to double these rates if necessary.

It would be relevant for a generalisation and harmonisation of this regulation to be discussed and tested at European level.

Fees – taxes allocated

Several existing systems require the need to make use of a dedicated tax logic or a “fee” arrangement, enabling the public authorities to collect taxes within a precise perimeter and to transfer the proceeds to a private or private-public organisation to perform specifically-defined missions within that perimeter.

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS - BIDS

Developed and implemented in Canada and the USA in the 1970s in order to have a multidisciplinary approach to urban revitalisation, the BID is a legal device enabling funds to be collected from all activities (independent professions, banks, estate agents, etc.) of the perimeter considered, with the exception of the residents, in order to improve the management of a clearly defined urban area or district.

Even though numerous variants exist in the way they are financed and operated, the English BIDs comply with precise rules defined in a document dated 2004 called “Statutory Instruments – The Business Improvement District (England) Regulations”. The BID is a not-for-profit organisation. Its Board of Directors is made up of private members and observer representative(s) from the public authorities.

The creation of a BID is often a long and complicated process. It implies:

1. A request made by economic stakeholders (retailers, business managers, real-estate owners) in the district or street in question, in particular with a view to the increase of the real-estate value,
2. The definition of a precise perimeter of action in agreement with the local public authorities,
3. The presentation of a strategic plan for a maximum of 5 years³⁸ and an operational plan accompanied by a budget forecast,
4. The organisation of a vote of the stakeholders in question (in the case of victory of the planned BID in the elections, the public authorities receive a compulsory “contribution” from the players in question for financing the mechanism and return the income from the BID with the exception of the amount aiming at compensating the local public authorities for the work performed),
5. The intervention of an oversight structure (Association of Town-Centres Management, British BIDs), indispensable for this type of development, which is responsible for defining the intervention perimeters, validating the strategic plans, organising the elections and checking that the strategic plans are respected by the BIDs.

When the BID is in place, two situations can arise: either the BID subcontracts the operational work or it recruits its own personnel for the work. In the case of the British BIDs, they were created to fund town-centre management. In most cases, the BIDs continue to be financing structures and the town-centre management via a private-public partnership continues its field work with greater resources.

We can see that in certain countries where there are no regulations on BIDs, like in Denmark or Sweden, alternative organisation models have been created, on a voluntary basis.

Whether they are regulated or voluntary, all of these structures share the fact of working on all of the components of urban attractiveness of the area in question (cleanliness, safety, mobility, housing, viability, green areas, quality of public areas, economic vitality, etc.) in order to increase its attractiveness, and to increase commercial opportunities for the economic players.

A set of residences, businesses, shops, cafés, restaurants, hotels and administrative buildings ensures that the town centre remains alive at all hours of the day and night, thus contributing to reinforcing security in the area in question and its surroundings.

Finally, other development models have also been implemented throughout Europe, such as the *Environmental Improvement Zones*, aiming at reinforcing the ecological sustainability of the areas in question.

Legislative and regulatory tools to encourage urban attractiveness

Several tools and as many incentives are currently little known or not known at all. This is the case, for example, of the renovation of facades, of the accommodation above the shops, of the regulations on brand names or the harmonisation of terraces.

It would undoubtedly be worth reducing the number of tools, simplifying them, planning them in time and with concertation, developing them with the stakeholders in the field, and finally, assessing them by using performance indicators.

Furthermore, in addition to the existing commercial offer, the markets, fairs and street sales that take place regularly in the heart of the towns and villages contribute greatly to the vitality of these places and attract many residents and tourists³⁹.

In order to respond to several requests from European street traders wishing to perform their activities in all Member States, it would be necessary to analyse the added value, feasibility and necessity of establishing a single administrative document that would allow street trading and commercial activities to be performed throughout the European Union.⁴⁰

Information given in advance and during the course of long-term worksites

Public works are a recurring problem for urban commerce. One solution used in the context of town-centre management structures consists of validating the phasing of the works with the work contractor and then providing information to the retailers by means of a worksite “gazette” recounting the assistance provided by the town-centre management to the service providers.

This method enables the retailers to anticipate the works and get organised to reduce the negative impact on their commercial activities. The generalisation and harmonisation of this kind of process is advisable at the level of the Member States. In addition, in accordance with the results of the study on the economic impact of public procurement contracts in the context of the rehabilitation of industrial wasteland⁴¹, public procurement contracts are an acknowledged vector of economic development for businesses.

However, the businesses would prefer that a more efficient medium and long-term scheduling be organised. In the same way as the businesses, the retailers are also asking that potential worksites be scheduled and coordinated in order to be able to anticipate and organise their business.





2 / Encourage the Member States to adopt specific measures for local shops

This involves putting point 14 of the European Parliament's Resolution of December 2013 into practice, which asks for "a climate favourable to small, independent shops, which are typically established in town centres, by lowering energy rates – including for signs illuminated by night – and rents via public-private partnerships, and by introducing business rate discounts on local charges for small businesses and independent retailers".

The Rapporteur Mr. Dennis De Jong (GUE NGL – Netherlands) also emphasised that while "spatial policies may not discriminate on economic grounds, there may be grey areas though, whenever local authorities wish to promote the high streets in town and town centres".

3 / Introduce mixed governance when drawing up European schemes

Special attention must be paid to the participation of the towns and of the most representative economic players for the preparation, scheduling, management and governance of strategic programmes, such as national reform programmes, partnership agreements and operational programmes.

The new governance method must associate the local level and the business federations in question more closely in all stages of the political cycle so as to move the policies closer to the realities of the environment and make them more coherent and responsive towards the constant changes in urban areas.

4 / Re-evaluate the policy on shop establishment to give priority to projects aimed at what already exists

The European Parliament resolution of December 2013 asked "*local and regional authorities to adopt a balanced approach, taking into account the fact that in many regions, especially in view of the economic crisis, the saturation point has already been reached*" as regards shopping centres established outside town centres."

This does not mean restricting the right of establishment. In some areas in Europe, the development of these shopping areas, of which many are on the outskirts of towns, may meet with a real economic need.

However, in several countries, the creation of new square metres of shopping area does not meet with a real demand, in light of a saturation of the market, or with an evolution in the population and their purchasing habits. Moreover, this adds to the existing competition with e-commerce, further undermining the town centres and threatening the jobs located there.⁴¹

A spatial development policy on a European level is thus necessary in order to ensure that the new projects target existing surfaces, whether they are unoccupied premises in the town centres or shop vacancies on the outskirts, without creating new structures.

Example of the Netherlands and their “Retail Agenda”⁴²

The Retail Agenda of the Netherlands, launched in 2015 by the Ministry for Economy, is a document that defines the commercial development policy on a national level.

This initiative responds to the observation that before 2015, 20% of the existing commercial surface area was in excess. The reduction of these shopping areas was therefore the condition for guaranteeing a better future for the town-centre shops and in particular for the SMEs.

This document also enabled to distinguish between the town centres with potential for commercial development and those without potential. Thus, investments must be made in these so-called “promising” towns whereas the other towns must be requalified as residential areas or business zones.

5 / Vote a clear separate budget line in the European Parliament for the urban and economic regeneration of town-centre retail shops

The report of Parliament’s Internal Market Commission considered in 2011 that *“incentives to renovate the urban building stock, also by using the Structural Funds, could enable rents to be reduced (public-private partnership) and could facilitate the return of businesses, particularly local ones, which are instrumental to economic and social development”*.

The European Union budget must contain a specific budget line for the regeneration of town centres that are in difficulty, with the publication of easily understandable programmes, disseminated nationally and not just locally, for a better identification by the national players in charge of these issues (especially business federations and associations of elected officials).



CONCLUSION

The revitalization of town centres through independent retail and local entrepreneurship will be one of the major challenge of the next European mandate. Indeed, the desertification of town centers, whose causes and mechanisms have now been fully identified, have consequences in the United Kingdom (Brexit), in France and in Belgium ('Yellow Vest' protests), in the Netherlands, in Italy, in Poland and in Hungary, in a brutal and threatening way. All Europe is affected by these social and territorial inequalities that national policies have failed to reduce efficiently.

With the perspective of the next European mandate, it seems necessary that this phenomenon should be integrated into European policies in a much more effective way than before. It is the aim of the various civil society players, the academic world and EU institutions that have been involved in this European White Paper.

Initiatives aiming to promote vitality in town centres emerged almost everywhere, demonstrating the urgency of a concerted action in order to overcome differences and allow efficient and concrete results. It is the backbone of European town centers that has to be created. The proposals are based on the observation of the level of town centres' vitality and on the modernization of retail businesses. They are also based on innovative and collaborative approaches.

Their goal is to strengthen the social, economic and territorial cohesion in Europe and add value to the Urban Agenda objectives initiated in 2016. It is a starting point to allow the implementation of common tools, common landmarks and share of good practices to fight against this scourge which threatens the foundations of our European democracies. Thus, the future of Europe is now at stake in a world that is undergoing profound changes and whose new face is still not fully known. It is time to take action!



List of civil society members having supported this European initiative

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

European Parliament

Georges Bach, MEP (PPE/Luxembourg), member of the TRAN Committee and the Urban intergroup

Brando Benifei, MEP (S&D/Italy), member of the EMPL Committee

Jean-Paul Denanot, MEP (S&D/France), member of the BUDG Committee

Arne Gericke, MEP (ECR/Germany), member of the EMPL Committee and the SME intergroup

Krzysztof Hetman, MEP (PPE/Poland), member of the REGI Committee and the Urban intergroup

Dennis de Jong, MEP (GUE/Netherlands), member of the IMCO Committee

Jan Olbrycht, MEP (PPE/Poland), member of the BUDG Committee and President of the URBAN intergroup

Joachim Zeller, MEP (PPE/Germany), Vice-President of the REGI Committee and member of the Urban intergroup

European Commission

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Tomasz Husak, European Commission, DG GROW, Head of Cabinet

Colette Maloney, European Commission, DG CNECT, Head of the smart cities and sustainable development unit

Maria Nyberg, European Commission, DG EMPL, Manager of the European public policies “Collaborative economy, digitalisation, entrepreneurship and education”

Kirstin Schreiber, European Commission, DG EMPL, Director of the COSME programme and policies affecting SMEs

CEDEFOP

Jens Bjornavold, Senior Expert, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Cosmin Roman, Liaison Agent and Information Specialist, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Belgian Association of Town-Centre Management, AMCV, Belgium

Association of Town and City Management, ATCM, United-Kingdom

Bundesvereinigung City- und Stadtmarketing Deutschland e.V. (bcSD), Germany

Cities Northern Netherlands, Netherlands

ConfCommercio, Italy

Spanish Confederation of Commerce, Spain

Portuguese Confederation of Commerce and Services, Portugal

Gospodarska zbornica Slovenije, Slovenia

Heritage Council, Ireland

LivingCities, Denmark

MKB-Nederland, Netherlands

SMEUnited, Europe

Stadtmarketing Austria, Austria

Svenska Stadskärnor, Sweden

Town of Groningen, Netherlands

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Ioulia Ossokina, Urban economist and Assistant Professor of Housing research and modelling, Eindhoven University of Technology, Netherlands

Gilbert Rochecouste, Worldwide Expert of placemaking, Founder and Managing Director of Village Well, Melbourne, Australia

Michael Shuman, Economist, Worldwide Expert of the community in economy, Washington, USA

Additional list of organisations consulted in connection with this project

COMEOS, Belgium

Der Mittelstandsverbund, Germany

Fédération Nationale des Marchés de France, France

Finnova Foundation, Spain

Independant Retail Europe, Europe

Retail Grocery Dairy & Allied Trades Association, Ireland

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