



**Opinion 18 (2002)¹
on the preliminary draft
recommendation of the CDLR
on neighbourhood services
in disadvantaged urban areas**

A. Foreword

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE)² welcomes the initiative of the Committee of Ministers in preparing a draft recommendation on “neighbourhood services in disadvantaged urban areas”. The adoption of the recommendation at a time when public opinion seems to be increasingly alive to the consequences of the deterioration of the social fabric in certain disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods should help to strengthen social cohesion, which remains one of the pillars of local democracy;

2. The CLRAE considers the form of the recommendation, with its appendix proposing concrete lines of action, suitable for the application of the proposed measures in keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, taking local specificities into account;

3. The CLRAE generally agrees with the analysis of the challenges currently facing political leaders in the member states and in local and regional authorities as a result of the problems raised by disadvantaged urban areas;

4. The CLRAE agrees with the Committee of Ministers that the degradation of disadvantaged urban areas can be halted only by determined action by the public authorities over a period of time to improve living conditions in these neighbourhoods, to foster integration of their residents and to enforce the law, none of these lines of action being sufficient in itself;

5. The CLRAE also shares the opinion that these objectives cannot be achieved without strong political determination, reflected, for example, in the presence of neighbourhood services to help organise social solidarity by supplying essential services to cater for specific public needs;

6. The CLRAE notes the current trend in public services, particularly the legitimate desire to control costs, but agrees that the aim should also be to guarantee equality of access and provide the users of public services with guarantees at a time when significant inequalities continue to exist;

7. The CLRAE is pleased that its work was taken into account by the Committee of Ministers when preparing its recommendation, in particular the following documents:

a. Recommendation 19 (1996) on aspects of urban policies in Europe;

b. Recommendation 26 (1996) on Health and citizenship: access to care for the poorest in Europe;

c. Recommendation 36 (1997) on urban crime and insecurity in Europe;

d. Recommendation 80 (2000) on urban crime and insecurity in Europe: the role of the local authorities;

e. the European Urban Charter;

8. The CLRAE recalls that the involvement of local authorities in solving the problems of disadvantaged urban areas is not new: local authorities are in the front line when it comes to dealing with the problems of these neighbourhoods and their inhabitants and cannot remain indifferent to them;

B. On the draft recommendation

9. After detailed discussion, the CLRAE considers that the draft recommendation needs some additions in order to make it more effective. Accordingly, it proposes to the Committee of Ministers that the following elements be included:

10. While the CLRAE notes with satisfaction that the role of the local authorities in restoring harmonious living conditions in disadvantaged urban areas is paramount, it nevertheless wishes to emphasise that the state also has an essential role to play:

a. it is the state that sets the legislative and regulatory framework governing local authority action;

b. the state also plays an important role in the definition and even the allocation of the financial means needed to conduct a strong public service policy in disadvantaged urban areas;

c. finally, the state is often responsible for local public services, either directly or indirectly, through public or private firms;

11. The CLRAE welcomes the fact that the recommendation invites states to act in close co-operation with local authorities and other public service providers. It suggests adding that local services in these neighbourhoods should be “at least equivalent in quantity to those generally offered to citizens, and adapted in form and quality to the specific needs of the neighbourhoods concerned”. An addition to this effect could usefully be made to paragraph 1 of the recommendation;

12. The CLRAE stresses that maintaining public services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is essential to social cohesion and equality of access to public services:

a. it is therefore necessary to combat the all too general trend to do away with public services as part of a policy to cut costs and improve their financial performance;

b. the criteria used to evaluate the performance of public services cannot be purely financial;

c. in this connection the CLRAE stresses the need to maintain public services in these neighbourhoods, even when their financial performance might justify closing them down;

13. When providing or maintaining public services is clearly too much of a financial burden, alternative solutions must be sought, such as grouping services together in one place or developing a “one-stop-shop” approach to service delivery. This can make life much easier for residents in the neighbourhoods concerned, who are often discouraged by the numerous formalities and officials they have to contend with;

14. All the parties involved (state, local authorities, public and private firms) must make the necessary funds available to keep public services in disadvantaged urban areas open, or to reopen them. Local and regional authorities alone cannot be expected to provide all the necessary funds or to respond unassisted to challenges that concern the national community as a whole;

C. On the draft appendix “Guidelines on neighbourhood services in disadvantaged urban areas”

15. As stated in paragraph 2 above, the CLRAE noted with satisfaction the “Guidelines on neighbourhood services in disadvantaged urban areas” appended to the recommendation. Having carefully studied the appendix, the CLRAE suggests the following amendments to the guidelines:

a. the notion of “preventing” the degradation of urban areas, that is taking “timely action”, should be given more emphasis in the text. In particular, in the preamble, the notion of “maintaining” existing services is essential if they are to be geared to the specific needs of residents;

b. similarly, in identifying the target areas (paragraph I.1), research should serve “to determine the geographical limits of problem areas and potential problem areas”;

c. improving the accessibility of services (paragraph II.2) is a shared concern. The CLRAE approves the proposed measures. However, two factors in particular evidently need to be taken into account in these neighbourhoods: the presence of large numbers of people of foreign origin, who often have specific language difficulties, and persons with specific transport problems. It proposes adding the following to the proposed list:

i. “taking into account the language problems experienced by many residents of these neighbourhoods”;

ii. “efficient public transport services to facilitate access to public services that cannot be decentralised”;

d. another recommendation is to encourage participation and involve residents in neighbourhood projects. The CLRAE approves this proposal, which ties in with its own concerns. Based on the experience of some of its members, it proposes adding to the proposed measures: “The appointment of elected representatives specifically responsible for monitoring neighbourhood problems on a

cross-sectoral basis (allocation or delegation of powers on a geographical and not merely subject-specific basis)”;

e. the adoption of a global, integrated, multi-annual approach can help to promote effective, long-term action to achieve general-interest objectives. Better co-ordination between the different parties involved is essential here. The databases mentioned in paragraph III.1 could also include “an exhaustive list of the different bodies (public bodies, NGOs, private bodies) active in the area”;

f. the new technologies offer considerable possibilities for exchanging information. It should be remembered, however, that they have their limitations and, in particular, that for some disadvantaged population groups access to these technologies (the Internet, for example) is not a priority: learning the language is often more important to these people than learning to use electronic databases;

g. the new technologies are also costly. Before introducing them on a systematic basis it is important to evaluate the cost and make sure that the initial investment and the operating costs will not penalise operational funding needs: the ultimate aim of public action must not be to produce statistics;

h. as mentioned above (paragraph 15.e), co-ordination between the different parties involved is essential. In addition to the arguments set out in paragraph III.2 of the draft appendix, co-ordination also makes for a clearer picture of the action taken and the people involved;

i. there are numerous personal and family situations that require priority consideration (paragraph IV.1 of the appendix). Illiteracy and language problems should be added to the list;

j. improving housing and living conditions naturally means working to rehabilitate housing and neighbourhoods. The CLRAE thinks that “maintaining or encouraging a mix of social groups in these neighbourhoods” could be added to the suggested measures;

k. concerning the improvement of education and training systems, the CLRAE approves the proposed measures and thinks the following proposals might usefully be added:

i. adjust (or provide for the adjustment of) school curricula, particularly in response to problems of illiteracy and/or language learning;

ii. take steps to encourage the more experienced teachers to teach in difficult neighbourhoods (career prospects, salary incentives, etc);³

iii. provide teachers in difficult neighbourhoods with opportunities for further training tailored to the particular circumstances of these areas and the needs of pupils living there;

l. with regard more specifically to the measure concerning municipal children’s and youth councils, the CLRAE emphasises the need for these bodies in disadvantaged neighbourhoods “as in any other neighbourhood” and not only in these difficult neighbourhoods. Furthermore,

“these bodies should help to give young people an overall view of the town or city they live in”: they should provide them with opportunities to meet young people from other neighbourhoods, to help them broaden their outlook and avoid the “ghetto” effect, while developing a community feeling of safety in deprived neighbourhoods;

m. concerning the social workers mentioned in paragraph IV.4 of the appendix, the CLRAE thinks that the same measures could be applied as to teachers and police officers (see paragraph 15.*k*.ii and iii above) in order to encourage the more experienced social workers to work in these neighbourhoods;

n. one of the needs often voiced by residents in these disadvantaged urban areas (DUAs) concerns the lack of local shops and economic activities in general. The CLRAE suggests adding a paragraph IV.7 addressing this issue, as follows:

“7. Restore economic vitality to DUAs:

DUAs are often victims of economic desertification as the small firms and local shops that are an essential part of the urban fabric move away. People who live in DUAs must have access to these services, especially as the difficulties caused by their absence are often compounded by transport difficulties. Action must be taken to foster the continued

presence or the return of local shops and small firms capable of offering employment to local residents”;

o. the CLRAE approves the proposals made in paragraph V of the appendix, concerning the development of the use of information technologies;

p. however, it draws the attention of the Committee of Ministers to the fact that, as stated earlier (paragraphs 15.*f* and *g* above), these new technologies must not replace personal, human contact, as many of the residents concerned may have difficulty in reading and writing the official language(s). The CLRAE thinks it could be useful to point this out in paragraphs V.1 or V.3: “However, the development of these digital networks and the provision of on-line services must take into account the special need of residents in these neighbourhoods for real human contact.”

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1. Debated and adopted by the Standing Committee of the Congress on 15 November 2002 (see Document CPL (9) 6, draft opinion presented by Mr J.-C. Frécon on behalf of Mr L. Bartha, rapporteur).
 2. The CLRAE would like to thank the expert, Mr Claude Casagrande, former Vice-President of the Congress, for the preparation of this draft opinion.
 3. The measures suggested in paragraph IV.6 of the appendix concerning police and security services, which the CLRAE considers relevant, could be applied to teachers.