



## COVID-19: what small towns expect of the post-crisis era

April the 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### Executive summary

Like others, small towns must assume their role in the recovery post-COVID19. The sanitary crisis has shed a cold, sometimes cruel light on the shortcomings of our political and institutional model. While being on the frontline, most of our small towns and municipalities have had the painful feeling of experimenting bewilderedness and solitude when confronted to the daily difficulties of their citizens: lack of human resources, financial means and institutional tools, such as municipal empowerment, for instance, to provide for and deliver the required outcomes in times of crisis.

The CTME offers its analysis and path to an inclusive, ambitious yet realistic recovery that would allow the very idea of our Union to keep having a meaning in the eyes of our citizens as much as a relation based upon trust and core values we think are essential to imagine the future we want for the next generations.

We advocate greater solidarity, investment in essential sectors, re-industrializing the real economy, territorial justice and solidarity as our way forward.

Small towns are to take a strong and very active part in the efforts at European level and in the Member States to the post-COVID19 recovery plans. They are the ones who are currently experiencing the limits of health systems, failed coordination, absence of human, budgetary and logistic means, and who are concretely and daily confronted to the many cross-border problems. The survival of many businesses and the most strategic public services will impact tremendously on the vitality of Europe's towns and cities.

This crisis, beyond having shown the limits of our health and sanitary systems, have also questioned our political organization. The coordination of the different levels of communal authorities like the Italian intercommunal model, has strengthened our ability to address the daily challenges of our citizens and therefore strengthened local representation. Our position regarding these critical issues must be common, strong and coordinated, both in the relations vis-à-vis our national governments and the EU; but secondly also regarding the nature of competences of municipalities and means to exert them.

The past few weeks have shown that issues as much as solutions to solve them are not bound by national borders, neither should our solidarity. We can reasonable hope to make this crisis history only with joint European action. At the opposite of the resurgence of old national reflexes, we believe the crisis very clearly calls for greater cooperation and a stronger, more integrated European society.

Our message should therefore turn around some key points: solidarity, substantial investments, an industrial turn-around, fight for territorial justice and re-evaluating the current institutional and political models.



## **Greater Solidarity: Our Union Needs to Recognize our First Priority**

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In such times of crisis, the first priority should be to firmly state our strong commitment to working together to address the challenges posed by the pandemic, at European level. Our communities, towns and municipalities rely upon our ability, as local authorities, to be able to come forward with common solutions to shared concerns.

Whatever the means chosen to express our solidarity, and there are plenty on the table, Europeans must stand united and come together, and in a coordinated fashion to answer trans-border difficulties, the order and dispatch of essential equipment, etc. The European Green Deal as well as the Conference on the future of Europe must bring some answers.

The very idea of our Union is at stake. Easing loans and access to warranties and insurance policies cannot be the sole solution. We deem necessary to achieve a recovery, the quicker the better, and Money should not be a break on our ambition as the cost of not coming together, we believe is way higher than responding massively, promptly and accordingly.

## **Investment in Essential Sectors, a Necessity for Our Communities**

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One of the evident conclusions we can already draw from the ongoing crisis, is that small towns and municipalities find themselves in the frontline of a wide, global crisis they can't face without appropriate infrastructures. For decades, States and the European Union has emphasized upon the need of "rationalization" of public spending. Small towns, notably, are left facing major consequences, without the means and places to react.

Essential public services must be considered as part of the solution. Infrastructures of all kind in the Health area (Hospitals, retirement homes), Education (Schools) as well as any public service that can help coping with the crisis and ensure the autonomy our local territories need to address the consequences of the crisis should be considered a top priority to protect our local, national and European sovereignty and ability to react in the proper manner. These investments should be carried out in Human Resources as well as in the building of additional structures.

## **Re-industrializing and Re-localizing the Real Economy: A Needed Security Net**

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Private partners are as essential to the recovery as the public sphere. Recent events have shown our territories and local economies need to rely upon solid partners at local, national and European level to ensure a level of production of the required equipments, essential to our survival. It concerns the ability to produce essential goods, as delivering local authorities with a socio-economic network of firms, small or big, to revitalize our peripheral, rural and remote territories. Moreover, it would constitute a sustainable way of fighting against brain-drain or desertification and provide our Youth with job opportunities in their local environment.

Besides Re-industrialization, Re-localization must be considered a sustainable strategy to mobilize all partners around a common objective, in times of crisis. It is a question of ensuring a smooth, prompt and local answer to the challenges faced by our municipalities. Moreover, it would constitute an unparalleled occasion to strengthen the real economy and give leverage to our economies vis-à-vis International continental States.



## **Territorial Justice: The Connecting Thread to The Recovery for All**

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As much as metropolis and big cities are essential to the recovery all across Europe, small towns and municipalities have their crucial role to play. The funds mobilized to invest in the private and public sectors should equally target peripheral, rural and remote areas. Because we all agree that a new model must be imagined, and because we are convinced we should think more 'local', small towns must be considered a key partner in the global and common effort to design our Europe of the future.

Small towns are at the frontline of the crisis and must not be left out. It is particularly true regarding the digital services, for example. Territorial divide will not be addressed efficiently without considering the current digital divide that prevents many of our municipalities and communities from assuming their role and driving the change we ought to see. The EU should accelerate and break down the divides as far as internet and phone coverage are concerned. Unless usable in all territories, and in small towns in particular, technology can cause further marginalization instead of strengthening the governance capacities.

Including all territories in the ongoing transitions, notably digital, must imply the social and economic support of the most fragile and give all the means to adapt to digitalization. This is equally true for people as it is for municipalities and local/regional authorities as a whole.

### **Subsidiarity: The Institutional and Political Equipment Small Towns Need**

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Beyond the access to equipment, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted some technical yet crucial institutional and political difficulties. Because local authorities are directly confronted to their citizen's questions, ambitions and uncertainties, they must have more competences to answer them. No municipality should suffer any disadvantage or impossibility of delivering when faced with the legitimate expectations of their citizens.

As terrible as it is already, this crisis can therefore be seen as a political opportunity to consolidate our municipal, local and regional authorities, and grant them with the required trust and means to deliver concrete outcomes for the common good – and especially in times of crises like the one we are currently witnessing.

Re-municipalization of certain services must be considered. Of course, we understand this has a price; but it is the one we need to invest in to preserve our sovereignty, a calculated move to foster local development and attractiveness. Because no more financial constraints can be imposed upon States in such times, we think the European budget, through increased own resources, should be the privileged solution to finance this new trust-based model. The different communal levels of authority such as intercommunality in Italy should be strongly supported by the EU: European policies must be more sensitive and incisive to that regard.

### **Conclusion: Trusting Local Authorities for Shared and Fair Recovery**

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Each level of authority has its own rationale, *raison d'être*, and purpose. Whether at European or national level, the ongoing crisis has shown certain limits to the socio-economic model developed these past decades. Of course, local authorities and especially small towns and municipalities must play their role in the collective effort. They have shouldered much of the crisis by being at the forefront, without necessarily having the required tools.

Let us see this crisis as a proving ground for the European community of values, inclusive of all territories, citizens and levels of authority to build a new Chapter of the European project, the one of solidarity and trust among Europeans.

