

A pact for urban democracy

Equality of living conditions – a new project of the grand coalition in Berlin – is among the principles geared to achieving a social and territorial balance for freedom and justice.

The greatest fissures in the societies of the European Union are evident in neighbourhoods in which various forms of disadvantage are concentrated, cumulating and, ever increasingly, becoming chronic. In terms of equality of living conditions, the problematic situations in these **“diverse neighbourhoods”** present greater challenges than traditional differences between city and country.

The significance and the dynamics of this development demand a new project-oriented approach from local authorities, *Länder* and federal government, which should be tackled in the form of partnership-based development agreements. This calls for locally-concentrated solutions for the central fields of action, which include the housing market, altering employment patterns, integration, migration, ecology, inequality in the educational system and the security situation.

For far too long, the development of these neighbourhoods has been misunderstood as a phenomenon to be countered by the social state with urban development funding and programmes. This has not been a success; instead the “banlieues” in France and the “social hot spots” in Germany have become never-ending stories, negatively affecting faith in democracy and the state’s perceived capacity to act.

In France, numerous cities have joined forces in the **“Dijon Pact”**, a type of “empowerment” aimed at offering state institutions a specific contact partner with multi-faceted, practical steps. In Germany, the **“Appell von Mannheim”** (Mannheim Appeal) points out that fiscal reconstruction funding alone cannot stop what, in these neighbourhoods, is a tangible crisis in state institutions extending as far as the loss of social control.

A Franco-German convention of the Wüstenrot Stiftung with the City of Mannheim and the Baden-Württemberg association of towns and cities in March 2019 offered an opportunity to evaluate the situation in these diverse neighbourhoods.

Reports from the cities clearly indicated that state and city can, and must, cooperate locally **in a new way** - a way which is **tangible, on the ground, and targeted, and which creates focal points and invites participation** - to secure democratic ground rules and facilitate opportunities.

To this end, state action will also **have to intervene** proactively in civil society with the aim of forging communities.

What is needed in these neighbourhoods is an **“agile” state** using new communication forms to facilitate rapid reaction and participation with a specific local presence.

Regardless of how small these islands of evident injustice and inequality may be which destroy territorial cohesion, consistent **focus on combating inequality in living conditions** is required, as pursued by the above commission. Ultimately, islands of this sort endanger our democracy everywhere.

The political challenge in this context is not in persisting with the familiar paths of action, but in holding the **various state institutions accountable, demanding that they take specific and coordinated action** at local level in neighbourhoods with special challenges.