

Global Parliament of Mayors Annual Summit 2025
“Empowering, Engaging, and Caring Cities: Delivering Democracy and Development with the Next Generations”

Position Paper Caring Cities

1. The world has changed faces. The ongoing globalisation process has integrated the economy in a worldwide financial structure, production chain, labour market and consumption area. That has remodelled the centre-periphery relations in the world system. It implies crossborder territories and interaction. In this process cities have become besides localities in a national space of places also nodes in the urban networks of the space of flows. The cities, as nodes in that network, become concentrations of diverse people, functions and institutions. Besides being influenced by the local populations they have been, at different degrees, incorporated in the continental and global dynamics. That is the basic diagnosis of GPM.

2. In that evolution national states, metropolitan areas and cities have been continuously pushed to sustain global competitiveness. In many cases, that has been accompanied by austerity and reshuffled budgets. The urban postindustrial service economies have been sustained at the expense of the agricultural hinterlands. Overall, sectoral and territorial inequalities have deepened. Welfare states and welfare provisions have been under threat. Two tier societies and poverty are global features. Most countries are confronted with the contradiction of necessary budget control and increased social needs. Welfare states cannot cater for all the social needs. What has been a post second world war model of development is now challenged by the needs of ever more competitiveness lowering production costs, income redistribution and social services.

3. As many other planetary challenges – climate change, pandemics, social inequality, cultural diversity – the social agenda lands in cities. Both growing cities with ever more diverse populations and shrinking cities after an industrial decline encounter social unbalance. As a local government with restricted competences and a municipal territory without a say on the suburban environment, most cities do not have enough local economic means to answer the social demands. In the growing cities of the global south these problems concentrate in slums and growing poverty. In the cities of the developed world these problems are illustrated by the shortage of state provisions confronted with the many social demands (housing, education, childcare, health, mobility, newcomers, etc.) producing visible deterioration of social inclusion. All mayors are confronted with the social demands as they occur in a concrete context in their city, related to specific socio-economic dynamics and a specific social geography in their city. But they all lack the means for a sufficient social inclusion alongside traditional policies. The urban social agenda needs rethinking.

4. Thus, the urban agenda needs a localized social policy. Besides attention for the competitiveness of the city and its economic sector in a broader context, a focus on the needs of the local population is essential. Studying the foundational economy – those economic activities oriented to local services, to regenerating and sustaining the city, to reproducing daily life, to provide for basic needs – shows that almost half of the urban economy is driven by these

local needs and not necessarily “in competition” with the rest of the world. It is the development of this local integrated policy, caring for urban inhabitants and users, based on local talents and resources and oriented towards a more sustainable, circular economy that we aim for in the notion of caring cities.

4.1. Caring cities develop policies oriented to catering the needs of their population, inhabitants and users. It is part of the new focus on local resources, circular economy, reuse and short chains, sustainability. Caring Cities is a broad concept around socio-economic sustainability that should be inclusive for cities across a variety of contexts. Cities need to cater to the needs and wellbeing of their citizens, and need to be enabled, structurally and financially to do so.

4.2. To do so, cities need to analyze their economies in a specific urban way. The urban economy should extract from the “normal” way of being but a local territory in a national GDP. The urban economy has to be further specified in two ways: a differentiation has to be made between the foundational economy (that is that part of the economy needed to sustain the local ecosystem) and the contribution to the national, continental and global flows AND there should be a clear view on the interconnectivity, the local chains of production, distribution and consumption between different sectors of the economy. In other words, the local economic assessment should become more “local” and more “transversal”.

4.3. On the other hand, caring needs a precise diagnosis of the needs in basic provisions: housing, health care, education, mobility, labour market, etc. And that analysis should include ways of interaction and transversal bridging of existing silos. In the reproduction of local lives, the economy, the social and the environment aren’t separate spheres. On the contrary they are integrated in a territorialized social geography, in neighborhoods and urban centers, in specific distribution of more or less accessible provisions.

4.4. Caring cities need a precise localization of these needs in the city: a planning of the spatial order of the city in the city center, urban and metropolitan provisions, districts and neighborhoods related to the social geography of the city. The spatial organization of the city, citizens and public services are vital to democracy and equity. An urban or even metropolitan development plan combines the spatial arrangements with the sustainable and social development goals. It is implemented both at the level of the wider space of global flows and at the level of very local neighborhood and proximity planning.

4.5. Caring needs also a clear cut view on the most adapted operators. Not all provisions are best delivered by private market operators. There is a need for good and affordable public services. And there is a place for voluntary work, for caring neighbors, for families and friends and ultimately for concerned citizens looking after their fellows. So, caring cities have a special attention for the soft powers, for the atmosphere, for art and culture, for the software of wellbeing. And they give a place to emerging commons, rebuilding social bonds in a very individualistic society.

4.6. Caring cities are inclusive. They notably pay a special attention to gender equality, to the respect of minorities, and to the diversity of their communities, including cultural, religious and

disadvantaged communities. In general, care is part of accessing human rights. In view of supporting caring cities in their achievements, the GPM has teamed up with the Human Rights Cities Network to develop and test a monitoring system for assessing public policies and their impact on individual human rights in regards to existing provisions and local policies in the city.

4.7. And finally, caring cities need to be enabled by states and institutions to get the necessary financial and legislative support. In that sense, the caring programme is part of the endeavor of multiscale and multilateral governance. This paper is completed by the two other contributions on Urban democracy and on Empowering cities.

5. GPM makes this topic a focal point of attention. Besides the focus on empowering cities and urban democracy, the focus on caring cities will help mayors and cities to analyze and design policies oriented to basic needs of the population and based on local resources and talents. Urban planning cannot only be based on hosting national or international investment and activities, but must also be oriented on territorialized catering for specific local needs. GPM serves as a platform to elevate cities' voices and increase their influence in the global arena. GPM has a multi-fold role as a lobbyist, catalyst, convener, and enabler to help cities care better for their citizens. The focus on caring cities is a way of developing an operational notion for welfare cities oriented towards the wellbeing of their population.

Prof. Dr. Eric Corijn. (Prof. Urban Studies Free University Brussels; GPM Director of Research and Policy)
