



D5.4 Policy brief#1 General Approach

HOW PRE-COVID TOURISM PATTERN INFORM RECOVERY AND POLICY-RELATED CHALLENGES

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a) MOBILE POPULATION AND FORMS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The **contemporary forms of mobility** are strongly intertwined with the **urban economy** of large cities: sectors such as culture and leisure, advanced information services and technologies, higher education, are key dimensions of the **economic engines and drive the movement of people, goods and capital**. They go together with the promotion of diversified activities in the service provision and food, and a strong penetration of on-line platforms in the supply management, from accommodation to service delivery.

The urban scene, which has become in the last decades more and more vibrant and culturally entertaining, used to offer a **variety of opportunities** for highly educated labour force, as well as possibilities for unskilled workers. It is highly reliant on flows of human mobility, which produces positive and negative externalities and social consequences that need to be explicitly highlighted.

On the contrary, the political approach toward social exclusion tends to have a **'sedentary' interpretation** of the urban environment, to which two diversified narratives about human mobilities are added. On the one hand, the phenomenon of **low-skilled migration** constitutes a flow of population that tends to become a long-term presence in the city. While scientific literature discusses it under the term 'migration', the policy discourses are dedicated to low-skill labour provision and demographic turnover, and in some cases, it gets protectionist tones especially if concerning people coming from stigmatised countries. Since migrants are willing to gain a sedentary status, they are framed by discourses and policy schemes that addresses them together with the poorer social groups in the city.

On the other hand, the **temporary urban citizens** are considered as a benevolent form of human mobility in city dynamics, which is mainly a source of positive externality for the local economy. They span from short-term tourists to medium-term students, but also high-skilled temporary workers, digital nomads, etc. They are a key part of the urban economy, and a variegated portfolio of policy discourses is focused on developing (sophisticated) strategies of attractiveness for specific groups of mobile population. Interestingly, they tend to be considered an additional component to the urban life, which is still conceived as 'sedentary', and it is almost a non-influential factor in the 'local' activities.

The growing concerns about the negative externalities of the excess of short-term mobility raised only recently, when the disruptive effects of uncontrolled phenomena became evident in some urban destinations that were heavily affected by what literature has addressed as over-tourism. Additionally, even if the dynamics that affect these two groups of mobility are

interrelated, i.e. the former becomes exploitable labour force for economic activities dedicated to the latter, they remain widely separated in the policy discourses.

In this frame, the SMARTDEST project tackles the relation between tourism and other related **forms of short- and medium-terms mobilities** and the **production of social exclusion in cities**. Its ambition is to contribute to the definition of a policy agenda for cities that takes the broad spectrum of implications seriously, considering the importance of human mobilities for contemporary urban environments and the potential of social innovation from citizen engagement for more resilient communities. The conceptual approach of SMARTDEST elicits some key dimensions that are included in this analysis and acquire a certain prominence in the current debate on post-COVID recovery.

- **Human mobility** is an expression of **democratic freedom** and leisure-related activities are part of a key dimension of the modern life.
- There is a large array of **human mobility forms** - e.g., tourism, migrations, commuters, non-resident students, 'digital nomadism', which we can expect to increase due to a growing number of smart workers, high-ranked mobile workers, etc. -, which are key components of the contemporary urban life.
- The juxtaposition and interrelations between the **highly mobile** and the **'less mobile' or immobilised population**, which tend to be underestimated, generate both positive and negative dynamics, which however may lead to conflictual processes.
- The full phenomenology of **positive externalities and/or conflictual dynamics** related to human mobilities and its forms of accumulation is strongly **spatialised**. It happens in specific places and through spatialised processes.

In this light, some preliminary results about the pre-COVID mobility-related dynamics points at **some dimensions of social exclusion**, which are variously associated with the **growth of mobilities 'landing' in places** at regional level.

To the scope of understanding better the various implications, **four main dimensions** seem to characterise the way the mobility-related dynamics lead to various forms of social exclusion among residents and workers. They can be listed as:

- **Poverty and wealth-related** social polarization.
- **Labour-related** deprivation: precarious/temporary employment, forms of exploitation, exclusion from jobs.
- **Housing** affordability: shift from traditional residential uses to short-term rental practices, skyrocketing of price, and related difficult access to fair accommodation.
- **Place and living condition**: conflictual use of places, marginalisation due to dominant uses and stigmatization, retail transformation.

The **early research activities** of the project set on to examine how specific patterns of growth and intensification of tourism are reflected in some social indicators that are referred to these four specific forms of social exclusion. However, the **COVID emergency** and the consequent frozen situation has made the analytical and operational frame more complicated.

b) A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The research approach, which departs from the wide array of place and social transformations registered in contexts of **relentless growth of tourism activity** in cities, faces crucial

epistemological and operative challenges given the current exceptional situation. The **COVID-19 pandemic** has represented a radical breakthrough in the previous trends. The temporary immobilisation of global mobilities, and the often-uneven restrictions to economic activity locally, may have – albeit for a relatively short period – radically changed the general framework. On the one hand, the social dynamics that come along with the various forms of mobilities – among which primarily tourism – have been suspended, and there is a big question mark about the directions toward which we are heading. On the other hand, some forms of social exclusions that have been part of the externalities induced by tourism (and over-tourism) were frozen, but there is the reasonable suspect that they have been transformed in higher social fragility – especially for those groups depending by tourism activities - facing the consequences of the exceptional pandemic disruption.

Therefore, the question about the impacts of mobilities on local communities from here onward needs to be reformulated. It should address the way the **previous structural condition of exclusion related to mobilities have changed**, and whether the **current crisis have brought new breaches and forms of injustices** related to the way in which individual and collectives have coped with it.

At the same time, the post-pandemic recovery becomes a key policy challenge, especially at the local level, because of the **transition phase toward a new regime**, and for which the struggles between various agencies can determine the replication of old models or new forms of urban organisations. The current period does not allow for a clear understanding of the general trend, and whether it will present diversified configuration across the EU. The shock represented by the COVID-19 crisis is utterly dynamic in its development: at the time of writing, restrictions are being progressively levied, vaccinations are achieving a larger level of immunity, and most remarkably the travel industry operations are starting motors for the summer season of 2021. While cross-border mobility is still unevenly constrained across the EU, it is likely that tourism activity levels and the related mobility of workers and goods will start recovery soon. Currently it is not clear yet whether the international mobility systems (air and water connections especially) will recover to full operation, given the corporate disruptions caused by more than one year of inactivity. Besides, the behaviour and mobility choices of travellers may also have been structurally affected during the crisis.

However, the **policy sensibility seems to have changed**. The coordinates of the debate as reported by the media and key informants, suggest that, albeit temporarily, the previous concerns about overcrowded streets, low-paid hotel workers and vulnerable families evicted to make space for short- and medium-term rentals have been largely put aside. The ongoing struggles focus on whether and how we will ever go **'back to normal'**, while the political debate has been strongly focused on the **re-booting of tourism as economic engine** as soon as possible. This policy objective occupies the centre stage of the recovery strategy, especially in countries and regions that are more dependent of tourism. Eventually, the return to high-intensity mobility is mostly welcome and is becoming the dominant narrative, which brings us back to a reinforced version of the **previous tourism-led economic imaginary**. Even at European level, making possible the unbridled mobility of EU citizens has been proposed as urgent imperative, which ties into economic recovery objectives. The few voices that warn against the excessively early reactivation of the travel market and the related practices of place use, or that are wary of the potential unjust character of such recovery, are mostly confined to the academia and to the social sectors. Nevertheless, they seem to be at loss in the discursive struggle that leads the recovery.

The **policy challenges** related to the **recovery strategy** are therefore embedded in the studies about the relationship between short- and medium-term mobilities and social exclusion. It is uncertain whether the 'bouncing back' of the mobility systems will soon present a similar scenario to the pre-crisis outlook, or if we can expect some long tail of structural change by which the future impacts of tourism mobilities – either by sheer dimension or by modality of intervention – can be expected to change soon. Paradoxically, this unforeseen planetary event is offering a unique opportunity to reflect on the complex relation between **the city and its contemporary societal uses** and even to sketch possible **alternative paths of recovery**. First, the effects of the unprecedented stop of mobilities shows how vulnerable urban economies could be, and how strongly dependent they are on the attraction of flows and mobile populations. Together with the fragility of some economic sectors, the overlapping between old and new forms of social **vulnerability** has been made tangible, especially in sectors of the resident population that are strongly dependent – directly or indirectly – on tourism. Second, evidence about both pre-COVID situation and current dynamics allows for new possible path of urban narratives and mobilities, for more sustainable dimension of tourism dynamics, and a more cohesive dimension in city. The temporary absence of large flows of non-resident population also proves the potentiality for reclaiming some **alternative uses of space**, slow-paced, adaptive, and configured on the **welfare of local citizens**, that until this crisis could not compete against intensive and exploitative forms of spatial consumption.

On the verge of having the current confinement relaxed, all places are struggling in defining '**new regime of post-COVID mobility**'. The '**recovery dilemma**' swings between two radical directions, which have been debated in the last year. On one side a **business-as-usual** scenario is advocated mainly by the economic stakeholders, which asks for a strong mobilisation of public and private resources to re-boost tourism jobs and economic activity lost in 2020. On the other side, a breakthrough change with a **radical transition** toward a new way of live places is claimed by groups that are advocating for a more **sustainable and inclusive development**, which involves more regulated and lower-impact mobilities and related spatial transformations (which, at a global scale, would be in line with the challenges of climate crisis) and more in general new avenues of increasing the resilience of urban economies through diversification and adaptability. What is most likely to happen, however, is a **broad variety of recovery paths** situated in between these two extremes. The way mobilities are promoted, regulated, and reified in the different scenarios of recovery, at multiple scales, will produce an **heterogenous geography**, whereas the societal fragilities, the vulnerability of some groups and the contested uses of space will be at stake. Additionally, they will be framed by different institutional and welfare models, which will make the condition of vulnerability different in some places compared to others.

Therefore, this period is a unique **window of opportunity** that allow (a) to reflect on the interdependence between contemporary urban environment and various forms of mobile populations, (b) to tackle the previous contradictory dynamics that produced growing concerns about urban tourism-related externalities, (c) to intervene on the ongoing practices of recovery and relationship between old and new fragilities, focusing on the political question about how to pursue a more inclusive social environment.

The early consequences that can be currently read at local level show that a large variety of factors determines a specific **place-dependent process of transformation** and configuration of social dynamics. They are the local urban regimes and their strategy, the political dimension of the discourses that informs the public policy, the agency of private stakeholders, from local to

transnational ones, and the like. Their combination could either enhance social exclusion or put on place innovative forms of mitigation and of social inclusion. Therefore, a strong support to cities in their action is needed, because the COVID-related disruption allow to reframe some of the policies dedicated to mobilities, through recovery patterns and various forms of actors involvement in the decision-making process.