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URBACT APN S.M.ALL

FINAL ARTICLE

issued by the Lead Expert - Mr. Pietro Elisei

A new map of movement: How nine European cities are redesigning accessibility for everyday life

Pietro Elisei

URBACT, S.M.ALL, Lead Expert

On a bright and cool autumn morning in **Bucharest**, Romania, a group of schoolchildren walks along a newly widened pedestrian path. There are no cars pushing through, no parents anxiously double-parking. What used to be a busy drop-off road has turned into a modest but meaningful corridor for movement. To an outside eye, it is merely a safer pavement. To local planners, it is the symbol of something bigger: **a shift toward mobility that works for everyone, every day!**

Across Europe, from historic **Ferrara** to metropolitan **Strasbourg**, cities are learning that **mobility is not just about how people move but about what, and who, they can reach.**

The URBACT network S.M.ALL (Sustainable Mobility for All) has become a laboratory for this movement, testing solutions that go beyond transport engineering and into the social fabric of daily life. At the heart of S.M.ALL is a simple but radical premise: **if a mobility solution works for the most vulnerable, it works for everyone**. Nine cities have used this lens to rethink accessibility, proving that safer school streets, incremental fixes, and citizen-led design can achieve more than any traffic manual. Their work reveals a new geography of accessibility where mobility becomes proximity, inclusion, and dignity: not merely circulation.

The shift begins with a change of vocabulary. Traditional mobility planning revolves around speed, congestion and capacity. Accessibility, on the other hand, asks different questions:

How far is the nearest school?

Can a wheelchair user cross safely?

What if a child walked instead of being driven?

This narrative took tangible form through **Urban Local Groups**, URBACT's participatory model that brings citizens, politicians and technicians into the same room. In Ferrara, teachers and parents redesigned school approach roads together. In **Druskininkai**, care workers co-created a **Mobility Aids Library** – a simple pool of ramps and assistive devices that public institutions can borrow. In Bucharest, congestion around public schools became the starting point for a discussion about governance fragmentation and shared responsibility.

Notably, **accessibility emerged as both a design principle and a social contract**. Every city approached it in a different way:

- **Metropolitan areas (Bucharest, Strasbourg, Sofia, Pentágono Urbano)** focused on reducing congestion, modernising public transport and synchronising governance arenas that often do not speak to each other. Here accessibility is structural: multimodal platforms, tram extensions, digital traffic systems and rules that make road space competitive rather than chaotic.
- **Medium-sized cities (Ferrara, Larissa, Komotini)** turned to active mobility, and school districts became the test ground. Larissa conducted detailed audits of pedestrian safety, while Komotini created a youth-driven monitoring system for accessible routes.
- **Small cities (Druskininkai, Škofja Loka)** translated accessibility into everyday usability: smoother sidewalks, easier wheelchair access, incremental fixes that may not appear glamorous but shift quality of life overnight.

Across all contexts, URBACT's signature methodology of co-creation and iterative learning produced not only reports but **public conversations capable of changing local cultures**. The S.M.ALL partners did not simply design streets, they reframed expectations. Parents began to understand that walking could be safe, children felt independent again, elderly residents regained confidence.

This was not planning just as negotiation but planning as civic literacy, that is a collective learning process.

Yet the road to accessibility is far from linear. Every city hit friction.

In major metropolitan areas, the journey slowed at the point where ambition meets governance.

Who owns the road?

Who funds the tram?

Who enforces the rules?

Bucharest's overlapping authorities remain a barrier to coordinated solutions, while Strasbourg, despite its famous cycling culture, faces a surprising decline in active mobility among young people.

Medium-sized cities confronted a different obstacle: culture. In **Komotini and Larissa**, decades of car dependency cannot be overturned by a painted bike lane. Even the most elegant tactical pilot risks being dismissed if accompanied by poor communication or if bumps and kerbs persist just a few metres down the road.

Meanwhile, smaller cities face the quiet but relentless challenge of demographic reality: ageing populations, shrinking budgets and distances that are sometimes too short for a bus but too long for a walk.

Despite shared commitment, all nine partners acknowledge the same structural weaknesses: **long-term financial uncertainty, reliance on EU funds, governance silos and the complexity of scaling up small pilots into citywide programmes**.

If mobility is the visible system, accessibility is what makes the system human – and humans, as planners know, are unpredictable.

The S.M.ALL experience does not tell a story of spectacular infrastructure or instant transformation. It tells a deeper and more political story: how mobility, when reframed through the lens of accessibility, becomes a tool for changing everyday behaviours, redistributing urban opportunities, and rebuilding trust between institutions and communities. Across nine very different European cities, from small towns to metropolitan areas and functional urban regions, S.M.ALL has shown that sustainable mobility cannot be reduced to technical optimisation. Streets, routes and services only work when they are embedded in social practices, cultural norms and shared responsibilities. By prioritising the needs of children, elderly people and persons with disabilities, partner cities discovered that designing

for vulnerability is not a constraint, but a strategic advantage: it reveals barriers that affect everyone and opens space for more inclusive solutions.

Perhaps the most important legacy of S.M.ALL lies in its challenge to the dominant technocratic narrative of mobility planning. **Rather than asking how fast or efficiently people move, cities began to ask who can move, under what conditions, and with what degree of confidence and autonomy.** This shift placed behaviour at the centre of planning: how parents choose to drive or walk, how young people reclaim independence, how communities negotiate the use of public space. In this sense, mobility became a collective learning process rather than a purely regulatory task.

S.M.ALL also demonstrated that accessibility is not only physical. It is institutional, cultural and political. It depends on governance structures that can operate across scales, on administrations willing to experiment and learn, and on communities recognised as co-producers of urban policy. Whether in a metropolitan neighbourhood or a small historic centre, change proved most durable where local actors were engaged not as consultees, but as partners.

The final lesson emerging from S.M.ALL is therefore both modest and transformative: sustainable mobility is not a fixed destination, but a shared culture. Accessibility gives that culture a concrete form—measured not only in kilometres of cycle lanes or service frequencies, but in everyday moments of autonomy, safety and belonging. When a child walks to school alone, when an elderly resident crosses a square without fear, when a street becomes a place rather than a corridor, urban progress becomes visible. And in those ordinary moments, the future of mobility looks less like movement, and much more like inclusion.

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This document has been issued by the Lead Expert of the URBACT APN *S.M.ALL - Sharing Urban Solutions towards Sustainable Mobility for ALL* as part of the project's activities and in line with the URBACT Methodology