

Sustainable city: Global picture, local colour

Cities, home to most of the world's people and growing rapidly, are often where environmental problems both emerge and are resolved; they are where the fight for global sustainability will be won or lost.

It all begins in the city

More than half of the world's population live in cities, where some 80 % of global gross domestic product is produced. Huge quantities of resources are required to sustain urban dwellers' daily lives and activities. Cities represent almost [two thirds](#) of global energy demand and consume [75 % of natural resources](#). They generate 50 % of global waste and account for 60 to 80 % of greenhouse gas emissions, the most significant driver of climate change. Air, water and soil pollution; traffic congestion and noise; and loss of green and natural spaces are problems commonly faced by city dwellers across the globe. The United Nations predicts that continuing population growth and urbanisation will add another [2.5 billion](#) people to the world's urban population by 2050. Making urban settings more liveable for more people while dramatically reducing their impacts on the environment is therefore one of the greatest challenges ahead. In the European Union, where three quarters of the population is urban, an ever-growing number of cities, [from Stockholm to Nijmegen](#), are making environmental sustainability the cornerstone of their urban development strategies.

Protecting the planet: enhancing urban sustainability

Lowering resource needs and environmental impact means rethinking various, interlinked elements of the [urban system](#), such as energy, housing, mobility, waste management, public spaces and green areas. Several steps can be taken. For instance, cities can take advantage of their density and the high proportion of short-distance trips to shift towards a cleaner transport system (incentivising walking, cycling and public transport and/or car-sharing and car-pooling schemes to reduce private car use; promoting low-emission vehicles). They can use renewable energy on a wide scale; renovate buildings to improve their energy performance; develop [district heating and cooling](#); commit to the [circular economy](#) approach; harvest and recycle water; invest in [green spaces](#). Building new or retrofitting existing sustainable urban districts, the eco-city projects many European cities are implementing, roll many of these aspects into one. Conceived to minimise resources and waste through an integrated approach to city planning, they allow ideas for enhancing the sustainability of urban living to be tested on a small scale. Innovations include [smart city](#) solutions, based on digital technologies and applied to energy and mobility management, for instance.

How the European Union supports cities

EU action focuses on providing guidance, facilitating city-to-city learning, fostering cooperation, and funding urban development projects. Initiatives for cities include the [Urban Agenda for the EU](#), aiming to give cities a greater say in policymaking on issues affecting them directly, through 12 thematic [partnerships](#); the [European Green Capital Award](#), rewarding cities for their environment-friendly achievements and enabling them to inspire others; the [Covenant of Mayors](#), an influential movement for local climate and energy actions; and the [European Innovation Partnership on Smart Cities and Communities](#). Sectoral platforms for sharing best practice are also in place, such as [CIVITAS](#) and [ELTIS](#) in the field of transport. At the same time, several EU funds provide [support](#) for cities. For instance, for the 2014 to 2020 period, the European Regional Development Fund has devoted €15 billion to sustainable integrated urban development. It is also financing [urban innovative actions](#), enabling urban areas to test new and unproven solutions to urban challenges, and the European territorial cooperation programme [URBACT](#), promoting exchange and learning among cities.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.

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PE 614.762 – May 2018



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