



**Local & Regional
Europe**

Post-2015 Development

Why Europe needs an urban sustainable development goal (Urban SDG)

Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)
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Why Europe needs an urban sustainable development goal (Urban SDG)

Cities have a key role to play in addressing global challenges and implementing the Europe 2020 strategy.
CITIES Issues Paper, European Commission, 2014

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) and the international community are working on defining a new agenda that will follow the Millennium Development Goals ending in 2015 and implement the outcomes of the Rio+20 Summit that took place in 2012.

This process, commonly referred to as “Post-2015”, will conclude by the adoption in September 2015 of a new set of goals – the **sustainable development goals or SDGs** – currently being discussed and drafted by a group of countries known as the Open Working Group (OWG)¹.

As urbanisation arises as one of the major challenges of the 21st century, and cities and regions will be playing a key role in delivering the SDGs, local and regional authorities from Europe and beyond are proposing to dedicate one specific SDG to sustainable urban development. This paper explains why an “Urban SDG” makes sense *in* and *for* Europe; and why European countries should support it.

1. WHAT IS THE URBAN SDG?

The **objective** of the Urban SDG is to build achieve safe, inclusive, productive and resilient cities and territories, with participative, efficient and accountable governance to support sustainable urban development.² It touches upon *all* dimensions of sustainable development.

The Urban SDG is not only about cities. It entails a **territorial approach** with due consideration to regional and rural-urban linkages; and allows the development of cooperation among *all* levels of governments. Most importantly, it places multi-level and multi-stakeholder approaches at the heart of sustainable development.

More concretely, the Urban SDG aims at:

- 1) Educate and focus attention on **urban challenges and opportunities** to reduce growing inequalities in urban areas, protect the environment and ensure resilience;
- 2) Mobilise and empower all **urban actors** around practical problem-solving, enhancing the participation of urban stakeholders;
- 3) Promote integrated and innovative infrastructure design and service delivery to address the specific challenges of **urban poverty and access to infrastructure**;
- 4) Promote urban and land use **planning** for more efficient spatial management and innovative infrastructure design and service delivery;
- 5) Ensure **resilience** to climate change and disaster risk reduction;
- 6) Promote inclusive and participatory **governance** built from the bottom-up and taking into account social and cultural realities and demands.

¹ European countries sitting in the open Working Group are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary (Co-Chair), Ireland, Italy, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, UK.

² As proposed by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments for Post-2015 Development towards Habitat III (www.gtf2016.org)

The Urban SDG is a default gateway to address the global challenges that we face – particularly environmental and social ones. While it remains focused on the issues that require an **urban lens** – this will temper the fear that it is too big to be implemented – it will indeed strengthen the efforts made on health, education, climate or food security which will have their own dedicated goals, and which apply to entire countries.

2. WHY EUROPE NEEDS AN URBAN SDG

The reasons why European countries and the EU should support an Urban SDG are numerous and varied. This paper has chosen to focus on four trends and commitments that the Urban SDG would positively reinforce in Europe.

❖ *Europe has become an urban continent, highly dependent on the state of its towns, cities and regions*

In the last century, Europe transformed itself from a largely rural to a predominantly urban continent. Today, over 350 million people – 72 % of the total EU **population** – live in cities, towns and suburbs.³

European cities and regions are **places of high concentration of problems**. Although they account for a large share of Europe's GDP⁴, they also know the higher rates of unemployment. Globalisation has led to a substantial loss of jobs. This has been amplified by the economic crisis, eventually leading to an increase of exclusion, poverty and segregation within European urban areas.

At the same time, however, Europeans cities and regions have come up with **genuine and creative solutions** to the challenges that citizens face. They are *de facto* central to achieve the **Europe 2020 strategy**, and its targets of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth within an increasingly competitive global context. The success of the Covenant of Mayors, for instance, shows the commitment of local and regional governments to effectively address an urban challenge, which is both local and global, in this case the reduction of energy consumption and CO₂ emissions.

Last but not least, our cities and regions have proven their commitment to implement cross-cutting and integrated policies, taking into consideration economic, social, environmental, cultural and governance objectives.

An Urban SDG can mitigate the impact of globalisation on European urban areas, while at the same time optimise the solutions that European local and regional governments have implemented to make urbanisation more sustainable.

❖ *Europe has implemented numerous urban policies, but still needs a unifying concept*

At EU level, a number of initiatives, in different policy areas, have been tackling urban development and its different challenges: the Leipzig Charter, the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities, the URBACT programme, the Territorial Agenda 2020, the RURBAN initiative, etc. This trend will only become stronger as European cities and regions will, in the coming years, benefit even more from EU's Regional Policy, and its investment priorities.

In particular, the EU has been promoting an **integrated approach to sustainable urban development**⁵ as reflected in the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities, a toolkit designed to help cities become sustainable by considering all aspects of development.

³ European Commission, DG REGIO, Urban Development

⁴ Sixty-seven percent of Europe's GDP is generated in metropolitan regions, i.e. "larger urban zones" with more than 250,000 inhabitants (Source: DG REGIO).

⁵ During the 2014-2020 programming period, in each EU member state, a minimum 5 % of the European Regional Development Fund will be invested in integrated sustainable urban development.

If there is an agreement of the principles that should guide urban development in Europe, there still is a lack of explicit objectives, targets and instruments. To this end, and in order to maximise the impact of these programmes and increase their coherence, a **European Urban Agenda** is being defined at EU level – an agenda that will precisely promote integrated sustainable urban development.

By considering all dimensions of sustainable development, the Urban SDG can serve as overarching framework for the European Urban Agenda and the policies that come out of it.

Furthermore, European states will be called to negotiate a “New Urban Agenda” at global level as outcome of the upcoming Habitat III Conference of the United Nations (2016); an agenda for which the Urban SDG can again serve as starting point.

In fact, at national level, the Urban SDG can also be a unifying principle **mobilising** all urban actors to solve the problems that our citizens face in their daily life.

Finally, and on a general basis, several other European documents make reference to the urban and territorial dimension of a specific global challenge. It is the case of gender equality in the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, for instance.⁶

❖ ***Europe is committed to multi-level governance and the empowerment of local and regional governments both at home and abroad***

Sustainable development is not only about *horizontal* but also *vertical* policy integration, and should foster alliances across different levels of government. In Europe, this has translated itself by a general commitment of a distribution of tasks between the EU, the Member States and their regions and local authorities – better known as **multi-level governance**.⁷

The capacity of the Union to act and properly address the challenges mentioned above depends on the quality and reality of this governance. Furthermore, it is the capacity of local and regional governments to mobilise their citizens and gather local actors (private sector, civil society, academia, etc.) that best illustrates what is good governance.

Multi-level governance goes, however, hand in hand with the **empowerment of local and regional governments** – both in budgetary and technical terms. In Europe, this occurs to a certain extent through the different programmes and policies mentioned, and which will be strengthened in the coming years.

On the other hand, the European Commission published in 2013 the Communication “Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes”. Endorsed by the Council of Ministers, this Communication stresses how local authorities in rural and urban areas have a decisive role to address the challenges related to urbanisation, making **sustainable urbanisation one of the four priorities of action** for effective development in EU partner countries.

In addition, it has given **decentralised cooperation** and peer to peer exchanges – which are at the heart of the Urban SDG – a prominent role in reaching more effective development outcomes.

By adopting the Urban SDG, Europe would renew its commitment to multi-level governance and the empowerment of local and regional governments, notably through decentralised cooperation, both in Europe and in EU partner countries.

⁶ Links between equality and sustainable development, urban planning, mobility, economic development and the environment (Articles 24-28)

⁷ In April 2014, the Committee of the Regions adopted a Charter on Multilevel Governance in Europe (<http://bit.ly/1iPhF9k>)

❖ ***Sustainable development goals will be universal; Europe must think what it wants out of it for itself***

The adoption of the sustainable development goals will suppose a major shift in how we conceive development and development cooperation. In comparison with the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs are to be truly **universal**, applicable to all countries worldwide – although in different terms.

The SDGs will, in that sense, also address a broader and more diverse number of **challenges** and no longer be dominated by a strictly aid-driven agenda.

This means that Europeans must not only think about the priorities of their cooperation with partners in the Global South, but also about what they wish to get out of this framework for *themselves*. In view of what has been explained above, it would only seem logical to support the Urban SDG. This would mean that our vision of sustainable territorial development would be strengthened, while at the same time the necessary policies and means are foreseen by the EU and the Member States.

It is here worth noting that other major world economies and strategic partners of Europe have already come forward to support the Urban SDG – China, Indonesia, Singapore among others. An Urban SDG would therefore increase and diversify the opportunities for exchange and mutual learning with those partners.

3. IN SHORT

Europe's future economic, social and territorial development will in major part be determined by its cities and regions.

Committed to integrated sustainable development, both horizontal and vertical, and on the path of defining a unifying framework for its urban policies, Europe has a lot to gain from an Urban SDG.

Most importantly, however, because they will be universal, Europe should think what the sustainable development goals will mean for the European peoples. Since cities and regions are the level of government that are closest to the citizens, their empowerment in Europe and beyond will be key, once again giving the Urban SDG all its sense.



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About CEMR

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) is the broadest organisation of local and regional authorities in Europe. Its members are over 50 national associations of municipalities and regions from 41 European countries. Together these associations represent some 150 000 local and regional authorities.

CEMR's objectives are twofold: to influence European legislation on behalf of local and regional authorities and to provide a platform for exchange between its member associations and their elected officials and experts.

Moreover, CEMR is the European section of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the worldwide organisation of local government.

www.ccre.org