

Urban Doers Community

Policy Paper: Bridging urban niche innovation
and European ambitions



The Driving Urban Transitions Partnership

The Driving Urban Transitions (DUT) Partnership is an intergovernmental research and innovation programme addressing key challenges of urban transitions. Our ambition is to shape and facilitate an innovation eco-system for all urban actors to engage in and benefit from.

Through research and innovation and capacity building, we enable local authorities and municipalities, service and infrastructure providers, and citizens to translate global strategies into local action.

We develop the skills and tools to make urban change happen and boost the urgently needed urban transformations towards a sustainable future with enhanced quality of life in cities.

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Foreword

SOPHIA SILVERTON | ICLEI Europe

Urban doers are creatively and collaboratively making their cities more sustainable and equitable. These community groups, NGOs, small start-ups, and others are the perfect example of active citizenship: identifying problems such as construction material waste, isolation of elderly during heat waves, or unsafe biking infrastructure, and taking action to address them. While the impact of a single urban doer may sometimes appear modest, there is no doubt that, as a collective, they are accelerating and elevating their city's sustainability transition.

Through discussions with local governments over the past few years, it has become clear that community-driven sustainability initiatives can become excellent partners for delivering urban public services. This owing to their innovative ideas, wide-reaching networks, and deep expertise on specific issues. These groups often share similar goals with the city, enabling collaborative work towards common objectives. At a time where most urban public administrations face a shortage of staff and an overload of tasks, they need the urban doers of the world – those closest to the ground and most aware of local challenges – to become capable partners in building sustainable and just cities that everyone can enjoy. Even when collaboration is not possible, local sustainability initiatives serve a crucial role for critiquing public administrations. Several local government staff indicated that they see grassroots action as a force for transformation since these groups are able to act faster and in more boundary-pushing ways, compared to the slow bureaucratic pace of change in public administration. In essence, whether through collaboration or more ambitious sustainability agenda setting, initiatives like those in urban doers are highly relevant for urban public administrations as they govern urban transitions.



Sophia Silvertton.

When public funding is directed towards community-led change, its value multiplies. More diverse groups of people in cities get involved and feel like active parts of the sustainability transition. Local stewardship of sustainability solutions combats political apathy or cynicism.

Grassroots groups are better able to reach people in vulnerable socio-economic situations, who otherwise may lack trust in public administrations. Importantly, public funding mitigates civil society burnout, where people's work towards the public good is chronically undervalued financially. This is especially crucial considering the role of local governments and urban doer-esque initiatives as the 'front line workers' in implementing European sustainability ambitions.

For these reasons, ICLEI Europe is increasingly focusing on connecting local civil society and municipal governments through projects like UrbanCommunity for Sustainable and Just Cities, and advocating for local-level empowerment through strategic declarations such as the newly released Aalborg Conditions. The Conditions dedicate part of their message to promoting partnerships with civil society and urging all societal groups to see themselves as actors rather than observers in sustainability transitions.

Yet local sustainability initiatives often struggle to find funding, and European support is rarely directed in an accessible form to this level of change. The Urban Doers Community represents a step towards addressing this gap – a fact

that should be celebrated. Through the Driving Urban Transitions Partnership, the Urban Doers Community has convened a group of passionate, intelligent people in a space where participants can see they are not alone in their efforts to make a difference. Over the past year, the community's participants have grown closer: some have presented solutions in each other's spaces, applied for funding together, and remained active in an online group by posting articles, updates, photos, and scoping out other opportunities. The financial support for the first cohort of urban doers not only helps support their city-making work, but to build a sense of solidarity in action by collectively demonstrating that small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens can indeed change the world.

There is a clear need for initiatives like the Urban Doers Community. It is important that public funding bodies as well as private foundations and other stakeholders, recognise this as well, and direct their support and partnerships accordingly.

Introduction

With this collection of policy recommendations, we want to highlight the importance of connecting local initiatives involved in urban niche innovations to European ambitions to drive change in cities.



In 2023, the Driving Urban Transitions (DUT) Partnership launched the Urban Doers Community, a pilot initiative that has demonstrated the transformative impact of hyperlocal knowledge, community-driven experimentation, and innovative solutions to tackle urban challenges. By amplifying the voices of urban doers, the initiative has strived to bridge the gap between neighbourhood-level actions and European policy, proving that meaningful connections can drive substantial change.

The experiences and policy recommendations from this pilot initiative will serve as a foundation for future efforts in the DUT Partnership, deepening our commitment to a resilient, thriving urban future.

Who is an urban doer?

Urban doers are typically urban niche innovators, be it urban community associations, NGOs, micro enterprises,

neighbourhood initiatives, social entrepreneurs, activist groups, civil society organisations, designers and other actors from the cultural and creative sectors with a high ambition to drive change in cities. Often characterised by a high do-it-yourself ethos and strong community basis, these initiatives engage in the implementation of small-scale, experimental approaches that address specific urban challenges within a confined, everyday-life context.

Key contributions of urban niche innovations to European research and innovation programming include:

- **Localised approaches for global challenges:** urban doers' niche innovations allow urban areas to develop locally relevant responses to global challenges and crises such as the climate and biodiversity crises.

Group picture of the first 20 initiatives in the Urban Doers Community.

Photo by:
Mario Palumbo

- **Accelerated innovation cycles:** by creating flexible and experimental spaces, urban doers tend to test new ideas, technologies and approaches in real urban settings, generating strategic insights that can be used across the EU.
- **Enhanced engagement of residents:** urban doers often provide frameworks for including results and local stakeholders directly in design and decision-making, fostering stronger connections between residents and EU policies.
- **Translatability of tested experiences and knowledge:** successful urban doers initiatives provide a basis for translating context-specific approaches to other neighbourhoods, cities and countries.

A missing link: connecting urban niche innovations to European efforts

Urban doers typically operate outside mainstream research and innovation systems, “under the radar” of European activities. They hold tremendous experiences and knowledge(s) based in their neighbourhoods and therefore carry the potential to support EU’s strategic goals in sustainable urban development, climate resilience and social inclusivity that inevitably need to be realised on the ground. Yet, a disconnect remains between their locally generated knowledge and the European level. To bridge the gap between European research and innovation funding and local actions, the DUT Partnership launched the Urban Doers Community.

The Urban Doers Community

The Urban Doers Community supports urban initiatives by connecting them to research and innovation, mobilising local knowledge(s) and experiences across Europe to inspire and translate the locally tested activities to other contexts.

The first edition of the Urban Doers Community was launched in 2023. With over 190 submissions from 24 countries, this pilot call demonstrated a significant interest from urban niche innovators eager to engage with European research and innovation programming. During the course of a year, 20 selected initiatives came together to exchange experiences, build networks, and amplify their impact.

Blending local insights with European urban transition goals

The first cohort of the Urban Doers Community brought together diverse initiatives addressing urban transition challenges, such as advancing Superblock concepts, mobility policy, community-based experimentation, nature-based solutions, circular economies, and local energy innovations. Participants gained valuable networks with other innovators and researchers, while DUT gained critical insights into how local actions can align with European urban transition goals. The exchange also highlighted the importance of tailored support for local actors driving change.



Joining the Urban Doers Community came at just the right time for us.

After 30-years of work, we felt something like an existential crisis. Being part of this community showed that our work is recognised on European level and that our local experience contributes to European ambitions.

JOSIP ROTAR | Maribor Cycling Network

Policy recommendations from the Urban Doers

Drawing from these hands-on experiences, the Urban Doers Community has co-developed 12 policy recommendations with insights into how localised, community-driven approaches can and support European ambitions for sustainable, inclusive urban transitions.

The recommendations address the unique challenges faced by urban doers, whose work is deeply rooted in local contexts yet resonates with broader European ambitions. By integrating these insights into future policy frameworks, European institutions can continue to support the essential work of urban doers, amplifying their impact and embedding their expertise within the broader landscape of urban transformation.

These recommendations provide inspiration for policymakers and serve as strategic guidance for research and innovation projects. They also offer actionable strategies to enhance the impact of European research and innovation programmes.

Message from the Editor

JOHANNES RIEGLER | DUT

Since the early days of DUT and its predecessor programme, JPI Urban Europe, there was the ambition to include urban doers in our activities as they (often) are actors experimenting in everyday life settings with niche innovations. It is fascinating to see and hear about the strong personal ambitions to improve cities, neighbourhoods, and streets driven by curiosity, often a strong do-it-yourself ethos and an immense amount of flexibility. Urban doers bring fresh perspectives to entrenched challenges, translating ambitious visions into tangible, on-the-ground experiments.

Urban doers have contributed to the strategic orientation of the DUT Partnership, by for example participating in our co-creative workshop forum, the AGORA dialogues. They brought the hyperlocal perspective to European research and innovation programming to meet EU ambitions. Yet, despite their contributions to tackling urban challenges, urban doers often struggle to align their innovations with the rigid frameworks of European R&I programmes.

The Urban Doers Community has been designed by DUT to bridge these gaps, and in spring 2023 the first call for expressions of interest was published. Twenty initiatives took part in a one-year journey of connecting local experiences to European ambitions, building networks, showcasing their work joining discussions with policymakers and, not least, synthesise their work and knowledge, DUT's strategic development.

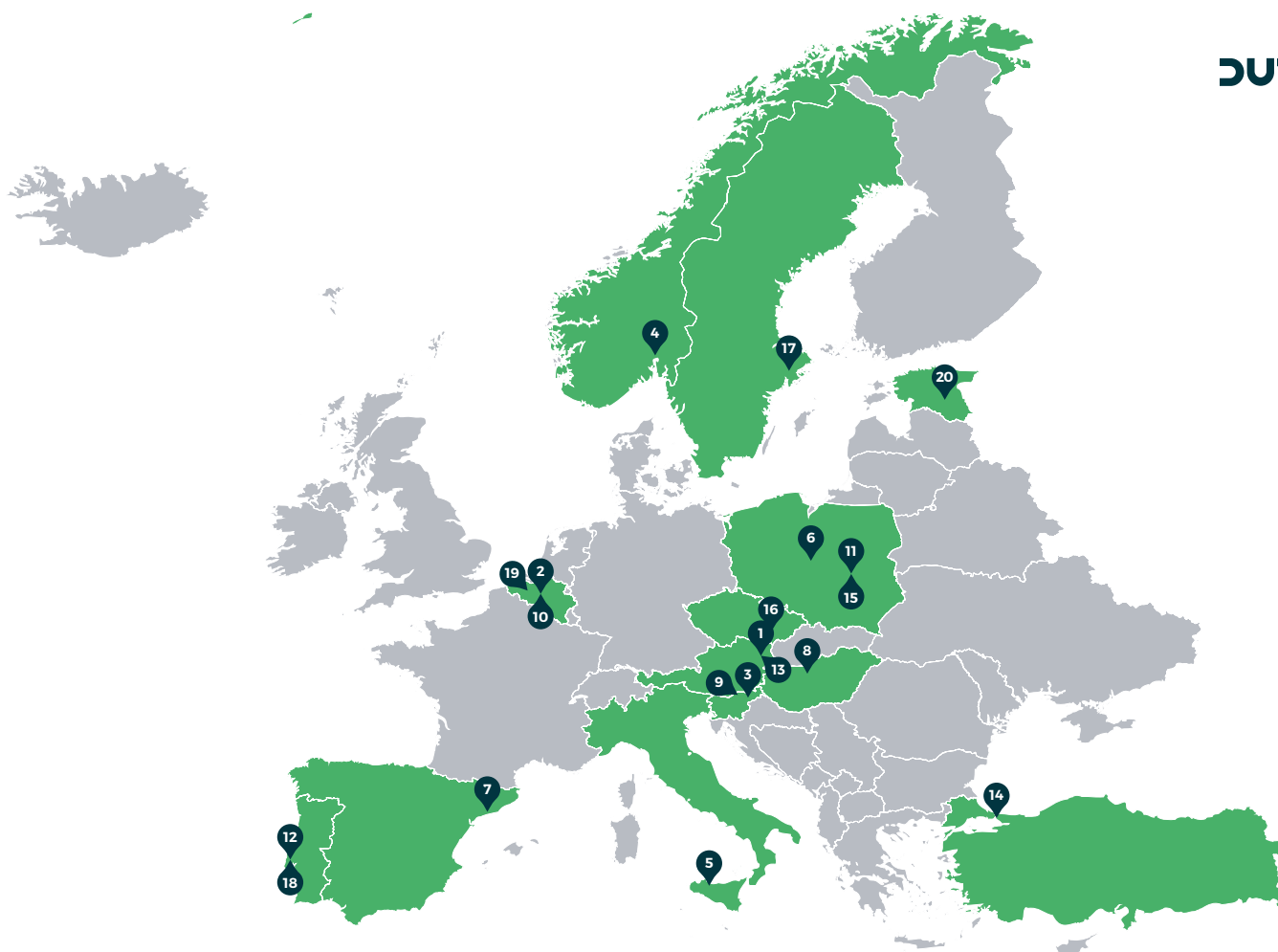


Johannes Riegler.

This policy paper is one central outcome, among others, of the first round of the Urban Doers Community. It brings together the vast knowledges and experiences of urban doers and makes it accessible for policy makers. It is the product of the co-creation and combination of local knowledge from different areas and disciplines. The recommendations bring together the collective local knowledge present in the first Urban Doers Community.

How to use this paper

We encourage policymakers at all levels—local, national, and European—to adapt and implement these recommendations in their unique contexts. Let this paper serve as both inspiration and a practical guide for advancing urban transitions, from individual streets to the global stage.



Urban Doers Community Initiatives

1. Smarter Than Car (AT)

Smarter Than Car is an advocacy, research, and design group for post carbon mobility and socio-ecological transformation.

2. Imperfect (BE)

Imperfect offers a user-friendly online platform that promotes circular economy in the construction and renovation sector.

3. Maribor Cycling Network/ Mariborska kolesarska mreža (SI)

Maribor Cycling Network raises awareness and promotes the use of bicycles as an environmentally friendly and healthy mode of transportation in cities.

4. Fragment (NO)

Fragment is an Oslo-based microenterprise specialising in architecture and urban planning with a focus on participation and biodiversity.

5. MUV (IT)

MUV developed out of the idea to turn mobility into a sport. Through their mobile app MUV is encouraging people to be more active, whilst also influencing sustainable and citizen-friendly urban policies.

6. OK NON-PROFIT (PL)

OK NON-PROFIT offers demand-responsive transport to reduce energy consumption and to support a reduction of number of cars in urban areas.

7. La Papiro (ES)

With their project Sustainable City Promoter, La Papiro aims to transform railway stations into vibrant urban centres that serve as hubs for sustainable services and practices.

8. Solidarity Economy Center/ Alsómocsolád energy community project (HU)

The Alsómocsolád energy community project aims to advance community energy initiatives and reorganise energy production in democratic, consumer-owned, and decentralised ways.

9. Viver Telheiras Association/ Telheiras Renewable Energy Community (PT)

Telheiras Renewable Energy Community is a non-profit network offering sustainable energy solutions that promotes energy poverty mitigation and urban transformation.

10. Centre for Spatial Justice – Domestic Heat Comfort for Energy Poverty and Climate Adaptation (TR)

The Centre for Spatial Justice advances urban transformation by examining spatial justice, gathering data on vulnerabilities, capacities, and experiences tied to energy poverty and heat waves.

11. Thriving Communities (SI)

Thriving Communities enables communities to thrive within the planetary boundaries through initiatives that focus on how to organise, resource, plan and manage radical enough change.

12. Groupe One (BE)

Groupe One aims for a fundamental change towards a sustainable economy by coaching and leading transitions projects with municipalities.

13. Wise Europe (PL)

Wise Europe is an independent think-tank on a mission to improve European policy-making by using economic and institutional analysis.

14. Supergrätzl Lichtental (AUT)

Supergrätzl Lichtental reimagine and revitalise neighbourhoods by transforming them into superblocks using local action and citizen participation.

15. PLAN ZERO (PL)

Plan Zero supports cities on their journey to net-zero through guidance on strategic and implementation actions.

16. Frank Bold Society – Shared Energy Management of the Tolštejn voluntary association of municipalities (CZ)

Frank Bold Society promotes the creation and development of energy communities which uses collaborative approaches to energy management.

17. Barkarby Science AB (SE)

Barkarby Science offers a test bed for academic institutions, government bodies, industry leaders, and the local community, to innovate, test, and collaborate around sustainable urban solutions.

18. SUSDESIGN – Design for Sustainability Studio Research (PT)

Susdesign is a micro enterprise devoted to the implementation of sustainable and circular design projects.

19. Buurtcomité Ekkerghem – Local Energy Action Plan for Ekkerghem (BE)

Buurtcomité Ekkerghem is an open association of citizens developing a local and shared renewable energy system.

20. Elav Tānav – Mobility Interventions for Schools (EE)

The Mobility Interventions for Schools project is developing a set of sustainable mobility interventions for schools that aims at shifting commuting habits towards sustainable modes of travel.

Policy recommendation 1

Collaborate with local advocacy groups to foster community engagement and align mobility policies with diverse community needs



Photo by: Supergrätzl Lichtental

To ensure that transport policies truly reflect the needs of diverse urban communities, municipalities must bridge the gap between policy-making and community perspectives. A structured mechanism for engaging civil society organisations at the decisionmaking stage, fostering transparency, accountability, and better alignment of municipal policies with public needs is needed to overcome this disconnect and facilitate co-creation of inclusive, equitable and responsive mobility approaches.

THE CHALLENGE: lack of mechanisms for community-aligned municipal policies

Local governance often falls short of aligning policies with the specific needs of residents, particularly in areas like infrastructure design and traffic management. Traditional democratic processes, such as elections, provide limited opportunity for detailed public input on such focused topics.

THE OBJECTIVE: embed civil society in policy decision-making

Civil society representatives need channels to participate in municipal decision-making stages. These channels would allow them to provide input on policy options before final decisions are made, fostering alignment between mobility policies and community needs. This approach preserves municipal authority while promoting transparency and accountability in the policymaking process. While national and international governance can support with resources, funding, and guidance to promote and sustain engagement initiatives, the responsibility for using open and truly co-creative formats lies with local municipalities.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: Enhanced understanding and cooperation across sectors, with initial learning for municipalities and civil society organisations as they adapt to new processes.

Long-term: Improved alignment of policies with community needs, resulting in higher-quality, more effective municipal governance and increased public trust.

Who to involve?

Effective collaboration between municipalities, civil society organisations, and academic institutions is essential. An externally funded project could provide the necessary resources and platform for sustained, structured engagement among these groups. Establishing experimental arenas for co-creating approaches and pathways towards sustainable cities is not only applicable to mobility-related questions but also to other areas such as: renewable energy, decarbonisation, overconsumption, circular economy, public health and lifestyles.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

- **Experimental projects:** Implement a one-time pilot to test this collaborative model, demonstrating its value and gathering insights on the best practices for such engagement.
- **Develop guidelines:** Formulate a toolkit or formal guidelines on structuring and managing civil society engagement in decision-making, based on pilot findings.
- **Create incentives:** National or international bodies can provide conditional funding or educational resources to encourage municipalities to adopt this model. These incentives can help shift the perception of public participation from a concession to a critical component of high-quality policymaking.

Policy recommendation 2

Establish a legislative framework to incentivise companies to allocate (public) space for social entities



Photo by: Julie Hrcirova

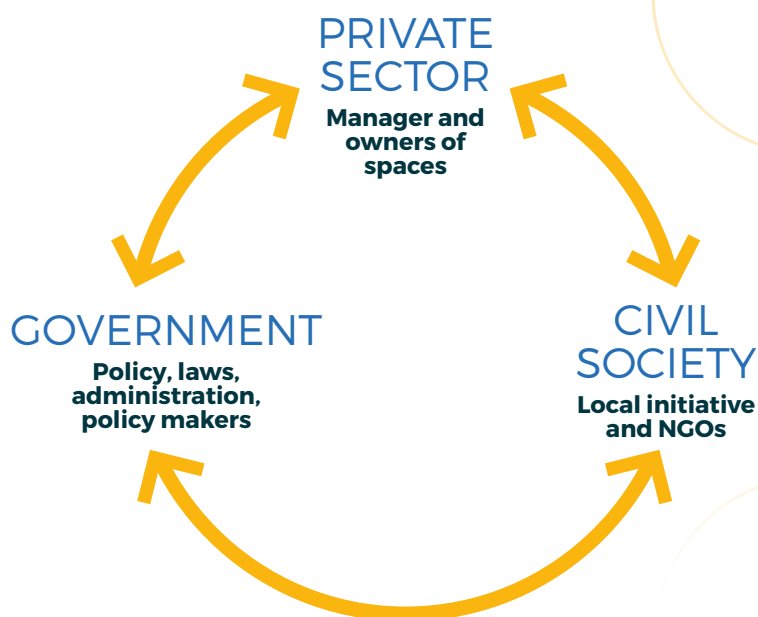
Establishing a legislative framework that incentivises companies managing spaces in public infrastructure to allocate a percentage of investment or physical space to social entities is crucial in addressing the challenges of affordable spaces for social initiatives. This recommendation aims to mitigate the privatisation of public spaces and enhance the resources and opportunities available to social entities by fostering collaboration among government, private sector, and civil society.

THE CHALLENGE: inclusive spaces for all

Establishing a legislative framework that creates benefits for private companies to provide affordable spaces for non-commercial, social use with societal benefit addresses and array of issues: the increasing difficulty for social entities to secure affordable spaces, the ongoing privatisation of public spaces, a significant lack of resources and opportunities for social initiatives, and the prevalence of vacant or underused spaces. These issues collectively hinder the ability of social entities to thrive and serve their communities effectively.

THE OBJECTIVE: accessibility of inclusive (public) spaces

The primary objective is to open spaces to those who need them and, thus, create (economic) opportunities and to enhance financial accessibility for social entities, enabling them to acquire or utilise spaces that support their missions. Additionally, it seeks to create environments conducive to action and reflection, wherein the dynamic use of spaces can prompt meaningful community engagement. By diversifying the use functions of public and private spaces, this recommendation aims to foster a more inclusive urban landscape that accommodates a large variety of social initiatives.



Three actionable steps to make change happen:

For making this change happen, a collaborative approach involving multiple levels of governance is needed. At the international and national levels, legal frameworks should be established to guide local authorities to incentivise the opening of underused spaces. Local governments will play a pivotal role in operationalising these frameworks by identifying the details such as percentage of tax reductions and ensuring that the incentives translate into tangible benefits for social entities.

- **Define tax incentives:** Policymakers should develop a range of tax incentives aimed at private companies that allocate investment or space for social entities, thereby encouraging them to participate in community-oriented initiatives.
- **Create managing agencies:** Establish agencies at municipal and provincial levels that focus on managing the allocation of spaces for social initiatives, ensuring effective oversight and coordination.
- **Implement a database of available spaces:** Develop a comprehensive database that lists available (public) spaces, making it easier for social entities to identify and access opportunities for utilisation.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: increase in opportunities for social initiatives to access affordable spaces, and increased citizen involvement in the governance of urban areas.

Long-term: broader awareness of social issues and the need for diverse urban spaces, fostering a more vibrant and mixed-use environment in cities; improvement of the quality of spaces and enhance social cohesion; strengthening of social initiatives.

Who to involve?

Successful implementation requires a circular interaction among key stakeholders, including government bodies at various levels responsible for policy and legislation, private sector entities that own and manage (public) spaces, and civil society organisations that act as custodians of these spaces. Engaging these stakeholders in a collaborative process will be essential to ensure that the legislative framework is effectively operationalised.

Policy recommendation 3

Establish a democracy label for public participation formats in EU countries

The introduction of a democracy label for all instruments of direct democracy and public participation formats across EU countries aims to enhance the transparency and quality of engagement of residents in decision-making processes. Similar to the Nutri-Score for food products, this initiative will provide EU residents with clear and accessible information about the effectiveness and inclusivity of various participation formats.



Photo by: Unsplash / Teddy O

THE CHALLENGE: enhancing transparency in public participation formats

Public participation in decision-making is a cornerstone of democratic governance, yet many current formats lack the transparency needed to foster meaningful engagement. For example, it is difficult to assess in how far a participatory process is open to co-creation and experimentation among participants and not aiming to implement predefined results. Establishing a democracy label for participation formats across EU-countries addresses the pressing issue of transparency in public participation formats, such as official petitions and workshops. There is currently a lack of clarity regarding the quality of these formats, which often leads to ineffective citizen engagement and disenfranchisement.

THE OBJECTIVE: make the qualities of participatory formats comparable

The primary objectives of establishing a democracy label include fostering higher quality in public participation processes, identifying and eliminating bad practices, “participation-washing” and promoting good practices by making them widely known and accessible. This initiative seeks to catalogue various participation formats, focusing on the quality of engagement rather than the quantity

of events. Criteria for the democracy label may include the extent of power transferred from government to residents, the creativity allowed within the participation format, the transparency of the process, its understandability, and its popularity among citizens.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term benefits include constructive criticism of existing participation formats, allowing for immediate improvements and adjustments.

Long-term benefits encompass an overall enhancement in the quality of participation formats and democratic tools, leading to increased citizen awareness, empowerment, and engagement in governance.

Who to involve?

Successful implementation of the democracy label will require collaboration among key stakeholders, including governments at both state and municipal levels across EU countries. Engaging these stakeholders in the development and implementation process will be important for ensuring that the democracy label is effectively integrated into existing public participation structures and that it resonates with residents.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

The implementation of this recommendation should occur primarily at the EU level, with local adaptations as necessary. The evaluation process must be independent to ensure objectivity and credibility, fostering trust in the democracy label among citizens and policymakers alike.

- **Allocate a budget:** Provide an independent budget for a dedicated team responsible for developing the criteria catalogue and issuing the democracy scores, ensuring that financial support is free from political strings.
- **Collect data:** Mandate the collection and dissemination of data regarding participation formats across different countries and cities, enabling informed assessments of their effectiveness.
- **Adopt and publish the democracy score:** Establish the democracy score as an accepted evaluation tool for participation formats, requiring regular assessments and public disclosure of the scores to inform citizens.

Policy recommendation 4

Improve labelling and consumer education for enhanced municipal waste management and recycling efficiency



Photo by: Unsplash /Jilbert Ebrahimi

Effective waste management and recycling practices are essential for reducing costs and improving environmental outcomes. This recommendation advocates for better labelling of recyclable materials and enhanced consumer education to facilitate more efficient municipal waste management, thereby addressing the challenges faced at the consumer level.

THE CHALLENGE: inefficiencies in municipal waste management

Municipal waste management faces big challenges when it comes to recycling at the consumer level, especially because of its costs. These costs are partly due to many people not knowing how to sort and recycle correctly, which leads to more waste contamination and higher processing fees. Another problem is the lack of clear, standardised labels on recyclable items, which makes it hard for people to know how to dispose of them properly. Recycling has to be easy and convenient. Simplification for the user is key. By improving public understanding and creating clear labels, municipalities could make recycling easier and less costly.

THE OBJECTIVE: enhance efficiency and cost-effectiveness in waste management

The main goals here are to make local, community-driven waste management systems work better and to encourage people to reuse items whenever possible instead of just recycling them. Another aim is to make recycling more cost-effective by making sorting easier, which would help reused and recycled materials compete better with new, raw materials.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: Anticipated impacts include a reduction in the volume of waste sent to landfills or incineration, as well as a decrease in recycling costs, which will make recycled materials more price competitive. These immediate effects will foster greater public participation in waste sorting and management, ultimately leading to improved efficiency within municipal waste systems.

Long-term: As cost benefits are realised over time, demand for virgin material extraction will decline significantly. Local communities will become empowered through increased awareness and active participation in managing their waste streams. Stakeholders can expect long-term profitability through reduced costs for recycling companies, municipalities, material companies, and ultimately, end-users. Moreover, the transition towards a circular economy, alongside advancements in new technologies (e.g. digital manufacturing and AI), will foster job creation and sustainable economic growth.

Who to involve?

Key stakeholders for implementation include academia, which will conduct research to identify material categories based on waste volume and ease of recycling or reuse. The EU will play a crucial role in establishing EU-wide standards that will influence international standards, alongside the dissemination and enforcement of legal definitions of material categories. National governments will need to embed educational

activities within primary school curricula to enhance citizen engagement in waste management. Municipalities must engage local governance to enforce regulations and manage waste collection and sorting processes. Furthermore, public-private partnerships should be created to develop effective communication strategies, with the private sector engaging in the implementation of these initiatives. Civil society and NGOs should also be involved to facilitate knowledge dissemination through workshops and participatory processes.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

National governments and the EU are mainly responsible for putting labelling regulations in place, following international standards. Local consumer education efforts should start at the community level, ideally supported by eco-friendly lessons in primary schools. Meanwhile, municipalities will continue to handle waste collection and sorting within their communities.

- **Form a commission:** Establish a commission, supported by academia, to develop expanded legal definitions of material categories and enforce uptake by industry.
- **Develop communication strategies:** Formulate strategies to raise consumer awareness and encourage efficient waste sorting, incorporating product and material life cycles.
- **Create public-private partnerships:** Facilitate collaboration between public and private sectors to enhance communication and dissemination efforts.

Policy recommendation 5

Governments should promote the integration of green infrastructure in urban development projects

The integration of green infrastructure in urban development is crucial for enhancing biodiversity and combating the adverse effects of climate change. National governments should adopt policies that support the implementation of green infrastructure in urban projects, addressing critical urban challenges that affect the environment and community well-being.

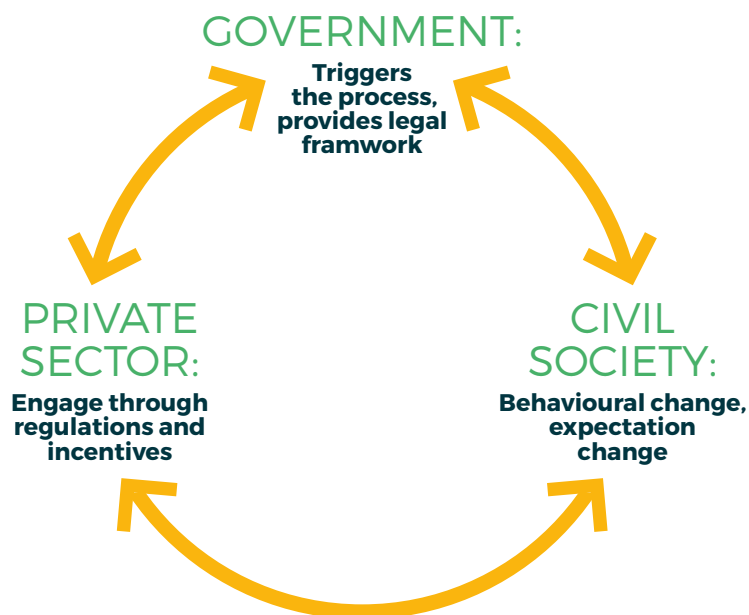
THE CHALLENGE: urban environmental issues and community well-being

Urban areas face a complex set of challenges, including rising temperatures from the urban heat island effect, poor water management, worsening air quality, and increasing rates of mental health issues like stress and loneliness.

Many residents also feel a lack of community, and cities are experiencing a loss of pollinators and biodiversity. These interconnected problems highlight the need for a more holistic approach to urban planning, one that integrates green spaces and infrastructure to improve environmental and social well-being.



Photo by: iStock



Three actionable steps to make change happen:

Implementation of this recommendation requires action at all three levels of governance—local, national, and international. National governments should initiate the process by providing a legal framework and ensuring access to funding and incentives. Local authorities will be responsible for direct implementation, issuing regulations tailored to specific contexts, and establishing measures to ensure the quality of the green spaces developed.

- **Provide a legal framework:** Establish comprehensive policies that facilitate the integration of green infrastructure in urban development projects.
- **Create a sustainable solutions database:** Set up an international, open, and easily accessible database managed by a trusted entity. This database will be responsible for curating sustainable solutions, ensuring content quality, and potentially issuing certifications. It will allow users to identify best practices, understand similar challenges, and learn how to apply effective solutions for both personal and organisational benefits.
- **Promote behavioural change:** Initiate workshops, public forums, and other activities to encourage good practices, with a particular focus on involving schools. The goal is to shift public expectations regarding urban development and to emphasise that green infrastructure should be an integral part of this process.

THE OBJECTIVE: addressing urban challenges through policy

The goal is to create policies that tackle the interconnected urban issues of heat, poor water management, air pollution, declining mental health, social isolation, and biodiversity loss. By prioritising green infrastructure, these policies aim to enhance urban resilience, promote environmental health, and improve quality of life for residents. A policy focus on sustainable, nature-based solutions can help transform cities into healthier, more connected, and climate-adaptive spaces that support both people and wildlife.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: Anticipated impacts in the short term include a reduction in the urban heat island effect, improved water management, increased biodiversity, better air quality, and an enhanced sense of safety and comfort within urban environments.

Long-term: Over the long term, expected outcomes encompass significant behavioural change, health benefits for communities, enhanced social sustainability, a shift in public perception regarding the quality of urban development, and support for the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 goals.

Who to involve?

The successful implementation of this policy recommendation requires collaboration among key stakeholders, including national governments, the private sector, and civil society. National governments will initiate the process by providing the necessary legal framework. Civil society must be engaged to foster behavioural change and public support for green infrastructure initiatives. The private sector will be involved through regulations and incentives that promote the development of high-quality urban projects incorporating green infrastructure.

Policy recommendation 6

Radically improve quality of life of urban citizens by embracing and investing in comprehensive, systemic, qualitative and creative processes and narratives

Cities today are more than just places to live – they are spaces where quality of life, community, and resilience should flourish. However, many urban development approaches remain stuck in simplistic, one-size-fits-all strategies that overlook the complex realities of urban life. To create cities that truly enhance well-being, we need fresh thinking and creative approaches that engage citizens and integrate diverse perspectives. This vision calls for a shift from quantitative checklists to meaningful, narrative-driven, and inclusive policies that can unlock the full potential of urban spaces.

The challenge: inadequate approaches to urban development

Simplified, quantitative, one-size-fits-all approaches to community and urban development are failing us. These methods do not address the complex needs and diverse realities of urban citizens, resulting in ineffective solutions that fail to enhance quality of life.

The objective: enhancing urban quality of life

The primary objectives are to encourage municipalities to adopt comprehensive and systemic approaches that genuinely improve the quality of life for urban residents. There is a need to normalise the professional use of social sciences, tools, strategies, and storytelling, moving away from simplistic, quantitative frames and methods.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

This recommendation falls primarily under the purview of local and municipal governments, involving both politicians and staff in its implementation. Policymakers can undertake the following concrete steps:

- **Reframe priorities** and approaches to focus on urgent well-being and quality-of-life improvements by utilising community narratives and storytelling.
- **Invest adequately** in development process management that is open and supported by holistic evaluation and learning.
- **Implement well-resourced pilot projects** to test these approaches, ensuring they are comprehensive and sustained, such as deep neighbourhood transformation initiatives.



Photo by: Unsplash / Inés Álvarez Fdez

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term impacts include reduced political backlash against sustainability policies, lower risks and costs of implementation, and increased acceptance of change among individuals and collectives.

Long-term impacts will involve enhanced opportunities to leverage emerging technologies for scoping and communicating potential futures.

Who to involve?

The successful implementation of this recommendation requires collaboration among key stakeholders, including NGOs and experts in community engagement and development. These stakeholders should be engaged through proper contracting and compensation for their skills and expertise. Additionally, local citizens and their community knowledge must be appreciated and effectively evaluated throughout the process.

Policy recommendation 7

Establish early warning and prevention mechanisms against heatwave hazards for vulnerable groups



The increasing frequency and severity of heatwaves pose significant hazards to urban populations, particularly vulnerable groups such as pensioners, the economically disadvantaged, the elderly, and the homeless. This recommendation calls for the establishment of effective early warning and prevention mechanisms that will protect these groups from the adverse effects of heatwaves, thereby enhancing urban resilience to climate change.

Photo by: Unsplash / note thanun

THE CHALLENGE: addressing heatwave hazards

Urban areas are increasingly facing the pressing challenge of heatwave hazards, which pose significant risks to the health and well-being of residents. The urban heat island effect intensifies these risks, particularly for vulnerable populations who may lack access to adequate cooling resources. Additionally, energy poverty compounds the issue, leaving many individuals unable to afford the necessary energy to keep their homes cool during extreme heat events. Addressing these interconnected challenges is essential for safeguarding public health and ensuring that all urban residents can thrive in a changing climate.

THE OBJECTIVE: enhancing urban resilience and supporting vulnerable groups

The primary objective is to address the risks posed by heatwave hazards in urban areas, focusing on preventing deaths and health problems associated with extreme heat. By fostering resilience in public spaces, the goal is to create environments that can adapt to the impacts of climate change while ensuring that vulnerable groups receive the necessary support and resources. Empowering these communities is essential for enabling them to better cope with heat-related risks and enhancing overall urban resilience. Through targeted strategies and inclusive policies, public health can be safeguarded, promoting a thriving urban landscape for all residents.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: In the immediate term, the implementation of these measures is expected to prevent deaths and mitigate health issues associated with heatwaves.

Long-term: In the long term, increased public awareness of climate change and its impacts will foster adaptability, resulting in urban areas that are more liveable and better adapted to the challenges posed by climate change.

Who to involve?

Key stakeholders in this initiative include central and local governments, civil society organisations, and public institutions such as health centres and schools. Local authorities will play a crucial role in creating local warning systems and enhancing urban resilience, while central governments will monitor casualties and develop the necessary educational frameworks. Civil society organisations will be instrumental in raising awareness, advocating for change, and identifying vulnerable groups. Public institutions can support these efforts by integrating heatwave education into their activities.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

Implementation of this recommendation involves collaboration at various levels of governance. Monitoring of health impacts and fatalities due to heatwaves should be conducted at the national level, while local authorities are responsible for establishing early warning systems. Both levels must work together to develop prevention mechanisms and promote education and awareness about heatwave risks and response strategies.

- **Monitoring:** Establish a robust system for monitoring deaths and health issues during heatwaves, ensuring that information is readily available and transparent to the public.
- **Education:** Develop an educational framework that includes prevention mechanisms for heat-related health risks. This should encompass integrating heatwave awareness into primary school curricula and training staff in healthcare institutions and local authorities to recognise the signs of heat-related health issues.
- **Outreach:** Identify vulnerable groups through collaboration with healthcare institutions, local municipalities, and civil society organisations (CSOs). Establish effective communication methods for early warning systems and provide dedicated public cooling centres during heatwaves.

Policy recommendation 8

Simplify the establishment of energy communities and facilitate participation of prosumers through a supportive framework

The emergence of energy communities plays a crucial role in enhancing renewable energy production and fostering localised electricity sharing. However, barriers to entry and complex processes hinder their establishment across various EU countries. Simplifying these processes, ensuring that all EU nations can facilitate electricity sharing among communities is key.



Photo by: iStock

THE CHALLENGE

Although energy communities can significantly contribute to achieving European goals and policy strategies such as the EU Green Deal, in some countries, electricity sharing is not permitted, while in others, the process for initiating energy communities are overly complex, discouraging participation and limiting potential benefits.

THE OBJECTIVE

The primary objectives are to implement electricity sharing in all EU countries and to simplify the process of establishing energy communities, ensuring minimal effort is required for participation.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: The emergence of energy communities and local electricity sharing projects, alongside the education of community members regarding energy efficiency and their consumption behaviour. This education will encourage consumers to utilise electricity during peak renewable generation times, thereby enhancing overall grid stability.

Long-term: A significant increase in renewable energy production, empowering citizens to participate actively in the energy transition and benefit from it.

Who to involve?

The successful implementation of this recommendation relies on the collaboration of several key stakeholders: NGOs, energy cooperatives, and energy communities should form an umbrella organisation to lobby for favourable legislation and conditions for electricity sharing. Distribution System Operators (DSOs) must facilitate the connection process and manage data effectively. National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs) should oversee licensing for renewable generation and ensure anti-discrimination measures are enforced. Local governments can provide administrative, financial, and technical support while aiding advocacy campaigns. Ministries play a crucial role in legislation and coordination efforts. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can contribute by participating in energy communities and offering private funding.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

The implementation of this recommendation falls primarily under the national level, involving various bodies such as the Local Regulatory Authority (NRA), the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Ministry of Energy, and the Ministry of Environment, as well as Distribution System Operators (DSOs).

- **Create a comprehensive online platform** that acts as a one-stop shop for initiating electricity sharing projects. This platform should streamline the licensing process, provide clear information, and offer various flexible energy sharing models to users.
- **Incentivise electricity sharing** by reducing grid tariffs for localised production and consumption. This includes ensuring that energy communities are not discriminated against through higher retail prices, which could deter participation.
- **Enable energy communities to access vital data** regarding their consumption, generation, and electricity sharing activities. This access is essential for optimising energy flows within the community and is crucial for the economic viability of energy projects.

Policy recommendation 9

Promote self-sufficiency and do-it-yourself approaches in climate communication for socially disadvantaged regions

In diverse and socially disadvantaged regions of Europe, there is a disconnect in understanding climate-related goals due to cultural misunderstandings and abstract terminology. The prevalent use of concepts such as environment, climate, and carbonisation often fails to resonate with local communities. To address this gap, it is essential to focus on communicating self-sufficiency and the DIY approach, ensuring that policies and actions align with the real needs and contexts of these communities.



Photo by: Unsplash / János Venczák

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge is to change the cultural misunderstandings surrounding climate communication in socially and culturally diverse regions of Europe. The use of technical language, often referred to as “Brussels-speak,” creates barriers that prevent local populations from engaging with climate policies. Many individuals find climate-related terms to be abstract and disconnected from their everyday lives, leading to fear and resistance towards proposed actions.

THE OBJECTIVE

Promoting self-sufficiency and DIY approaches aims to engage more individuals in climate policies and actions by shifting the focus towards self-sufficiency and self-reliance through participatory communication methods. Rather than adhering strictly to one established path, this approach encourages the exploration of multiple avenues that align with local contexts, giving voice to the peripheries and ensuring that diverse perspectives are included in the conversation.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term benefits include increased public support for climate policies, with even sceptics becoming more convinced as they develop a better understanding of how these policies address their local needs and challenges. This approach allows individuals to think about climate actions in their own vocabulary and contexts.

Long-term benefits involve better facilitation of research and development by local agents and communities, leading to more decentralised and locally adapted solutions and ideas that reflect the true needs of these regions.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

This policy should be implemented at the international level, with the European Commission and relevant institutions leading coordination across national, regional, and local levels. A top-down approach is essential to facilitate the expected outcomes, ensuring that climate policies resonate with the local contexts in which they are applied.

- **Conduct regional research:** Policymakers should coordinate regional-level research to gather feedback on the specific challenges and barriers to effectively communicating climate and energy-related policies. This research should aim to understand the unique cultural contexts of different regions.
- **Explore self-sufficient models:** An exploration of opportunities for self-sufficient and self-reliant models within these regions should be undertaken. Identifying existing local initiatives can help inform future actions.
- **Engage local stakeholders:** Throughout these processes, it is crucial to engage local stakeholders and employ community-led participatory methods, such as citizen science, to collect feedback and co-develop models for self-sufficiency. This engagement should focus on amplifying the voices of those who have historically remained silent in policy discussions.

Who to involve?

Collaboration is essential across all levels, including European policymakers, the European Commission and Parliament, national and local governments, and civil society. This communication strategy should engage stakeholders at every level. Central and local governments can utilise this recommendation to achieve their climate-related goals while empowering local actors to become active participants in developing self-sufficient models. By fostering this dialogue, the gap between institutions, governments, and local communities can be effectively narrowed.

Policy Recommendations no 10:

Establish independent organisations to support citizens and renewable energy communities



Photo by: Supergrätzl Lichtental

THE CHALLENGE: knowledge gaps and slow energy transition

The current energy transition is progressing slowly due to a significant knowledge gap among citizens, who often lack the necessary information to make informed decisions regarding renewable energy initiatives. Additionally, the scarcity of human resources, misleading lobbying groups, and urban challenges exacerbated by climate change, such as heatwaves, further hinder the transition.

THE OBJECTIVE: empowerment and support

The primary aim is to establish independent organisations that function as comprehensive knowledge centres. These organisations will provide education, technical and financial support to facilitate quick start-up phases and offer expertise for the consolidation of renewable energy communities. This initiative seeks to empower citizens, raise awareness, and ensure equal opportunities in the energy transition.

This recommendation is targeting policy makers at the European level, adapting policies to the national context and subsequently to the regional level. It is crucial to ensure that these organisations connect with specific localities while maintaining a broader regional focus.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: an increase in grassroots initiatives and improved self-organisation among communities, contributing to a more politically engaged citizenry.

Long-term: fostering entrepreneurship across Europe, resulting in a decentralised yet coordinated energy system that enhances the energy robustness of the continent.

Who to involve?

Key stakeholders in this initiative include citizens, NGOs, municipalities, and energy communities. The successful establishment of independent organisations requires collaboration among the EU, national, and regional levels. Engaging the target groups involves providing knowledge, highlighting financial benefits for municipalities, and demonstrating the political importance of energy independence as a strategic goal.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

Policymakers can take the following steps to implement this recommendation:

- **Create independent organisations:** Establish independent organisations responsible for providing comprehensive support, integrating both technical and financial assistance into a one-stop-shop system for citizen groups rather than individuals.
- **Develop accessible learning materials:** Produce educational resources in easy language, multilingual formats, and designed to be understandable without prior education, ensuring broad accessibility.
- **Facilitate project formation:** Assist in the formation of concrete renewable energy projects, providing guidance and support to citizen groups in their initiatives.

Policy recommendation 11

Enhance private sector participation in urban transitions through public-private partnerships and financial incentives to encourage innovation and agility



Photo by: iStock

THE CHALLENGE

The primary challenge is to ensure the rapid, efficient, and operational execution of urban transitions. Concerns surrounding the effectiveness of public-private partnerships and their impact on funding and execution remain significant barriers to progress.

THE OBJECTIVE: mobilising private investment

The main objectives are to facilitate the release of private funds while ensuring effective management of those funds. The recommendation also aims to promote public-private partnerships as a means to encourage private investment in urban transitions. By framing the urban transition process within a collaborative framework, it seeks to create an environment where private entities can contribute meaningfully.

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: accelerated urban transitions, increased innovation, and enhanced satisfaction with urban development processes.

Long-term: expected outcomes are clearer orientations in urban policy, sustained satisfaction levels, and more significant impacts on a broader scale.

Who to involve?

Key stakeholders include the private sector, joint enterprises for investment, local authorities, and civil society organisations. Engaging these stakeholders requires establishing transparent communication channels, incentivising investment, and fostering collaboration through shared goals and objectives.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

Implementation should be adaptable to the specific urban transition context, involving both national and local authorities. Governance structures must remain flexible, allowing for the nuances of each transition to dictate the involvement of various stakeholders. Policymakers can take the following steps to implement this recommendation:

- **Open tender project calls:** initiate open tender processes to invite private sector participation in urban transition projects.
- **Define flexible guidelines:** establish clear guidelines for projects while allowing the private sector the freedom to execute based on their expertise.
- **Encourage private investment:** actively promote and incentivise private investment in urban transition initiatives to foster innovation and agility.

Policy recommendation 12

Establish national protocols for standardised mobility data collection and analysis to enhance sustainable transport policy

THE CHALLENGE

The lack of a standardised framework for mobility data collection presents a significant barrier to cohesive policy development for sustainable transport. Currently, data on mobility is fragmented, inconsistent, and often incompatible across cities and regions, making large-scale analysis and informed decision-making difficult. Furthermore, limited transparency and restricted public access to this data hinder cross-sector collaboration and the potential for a data-informed approach to urban mobility challenges.

THE OBJECTIVE

This recommendation seeks to create a robust, accessible mobility data ecosystem by implementing standardised data collection and analysis protocols. By increasing the availability, consistency, and usability of mobility data, policymakers at all levels will be better equipped to develop effective, data-driven transport policies. Standardisation will allow cities and regions to benefit from shared insights and comparative analyses, leading to sustainable and targeted urban mobility solutions. Open data practices will foster collaboration and increase transparency for stakeholders and the public.

Three actionable steps to make change happen:

This recommendation requires a top-down implementation approach, starting at the European Union level. The Joint Research Centre (JRC) could lead the development of a cohesive framework, establishing common protocols to be adopted by national, regional, and municipal governments. Collaboration across governance levels will be crucial, enabling regions and cities to adapt standardised practices to local contexts while aligning with broader European goals. To operationalise this recommendation, policymakers can implement the following steps:

- **Define standardised indicators and formats:** Establish standardised indicators, methodologies, and data formats for mobility data collection to ensure user-friendly, actionable data. Avoid static formats like PDFs, focusing instead on dynamic, accessible formats for ease of use by policymakers and the public.
- **Develop living labs for testing and refinement:** Create living labs in multiple cities to pilot and refine the standardised protocols. These labs would engage local stakeholders through a bottom-up approach, fostering adaptability and relevance of the protocols to diverse urban environments.
- **Introduce open-data initiatives at local levels:** Implement open-data processes. Open access will also support public awareness and foster a culture of data openness that encourages community involvement and support for sustainable transport policies.



Photo by: iStock

What are the expected benefits?

Short-term: In the near term, this initiative will improve data coverage, accessibility, and transparency, encouraging greater engagement from cities and stakeholders. This collaborative approach will support sustainable mobility planning by enabling richer, more comprehensive data contributions.

Long-term: Over time, standardised mobility data will become a powerful tool for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, especially Scope 3 emissions from transportation. This data will enable cities to track progress and adjust strategies to move closer to net-zero goals, enhancing the quality of urban life and contributing to long-term sustainability targets.

Who to involve?

Key stakeholders include local governments, mobility service providers, research institutions, and the broader community. The establishment of living labs will allow for ongoing collaboration with these stakeholders, facilitating adaptation and refinement of protocols to fit various urban contexts. Open-data initiatives will enhance community trust and participation, ensuring alignment across sectors in pursuit of sustainable mobility goals and data transparency.

Annex

List of all submitted policy recommendations

In the preparation of the closing event of the first edition of the Urban Doers Community, the initiatives were asked to submit ideas for two policy recommendations that they would like to discuss and work on during the workshop in Lisbon. 12 recommendations were then selected by the editors of this paper and put forward for discussions in the workshop where some titles were changed, other recommendations combined, and the content of the recommendations were worked out in a joint effort among the urban doers. The following list is the “raw material” submitted by the urban doers:

- Establish a legislative framework that incentivises companies managing spaces in public infrastructures to allocate a percentage of investment or physical space to social entities through fiscal or economic incentives
- Promote legislation that encourages the utilisation of surplus products from establishments, prioritising initiatives that support the use of local (km0) and sustainable products.
- Democracy label for all instruments of direct democracy and participation formats in the EU countries. Like the nutri-score for food. Possible criteria: How much power is transferred from politicians to citizens or for how much creative decision making does the tool allow.
- Foster community engagement and collaboration with local advocacy groups to ensure that transport policies reflect the needs and concerns of diverse urban populations.
- Implement standardised mobility data collection and analysis protocols at a national level to ensure consistency, reliability and informed decision-making for sustainable transportpolicy development.
- Be open and eager about your work and field when engaging with activists – their ideas and initiative are a valuable additional resource for you when trying to advance towards your (organisational) goals.
- Superblocks should be part of a wider (ideally city-wide) plan for systemic change; the concept is most effective when understood as a replacement for the prevailing automobility-based status quo.
- Introduce a mandatory mobility labelling system to help organisations measure, evaluate, and reduce their transport-related emissions. Regular audits and financial or regulatory incentives should be implemented to ensure its effectiveness, encouraging compliance and motivating organisations to adopt sustainable practices.
- Engage with residents and city administrators early, at a high-level conceptual stage of the desired urban changes.
- Simplify and harmonise circular economy regulations into practical, technology-aligned guidelines to facilitate effective implementation by businesses and avoid over-regulating this transition.
- See the participation processes less as a unidirectional “stakeholder consultation” and more as a strategy to create long-term affiliation, belonging and empowerment by exploring with continuous participatory actions.
- At the local and national levels, facilitate collaborative public-private partnerships to involve communities, businesses, and educational institutions in urban sustainability initiatives, ensuring that local knowledge and resources are utilised effectively.

- Open the urban transition market to greater private sector participation through public-private partnerships and financial incentives to encourage innovation and agility.
- Experiment with more qualitative ways to evaluate municipally led initiatives, that can better describe impacts on topics such as quality of life, public health, gentrification or feeling of belonging or empowerment. (Reasoning: too often the municipality will only evaluate
- Encourage national governments to adopt policies that promote the integration of green infrastructure in urban development projects to enhance bio-diversity and combat the effects of climate change.
- Provide technical and financial support for the kick-start and consolidation of renewable energy communities by local governments, NGOs, and citizens.
- Focus on communicating self-sufficiency and the DIY approach towards the public rather than environmental benefits (as the only benefit). Applies to socially disadvantaged (deprived) regions.
- Establishment of early warning and prevention mechanisms against the hazards stemming from heatwaves targeting the vulnerable groups.
- Energy efficiency renovations: Have a grant system for energy efficient renovations on the national level that is accessible for all who need it, based on pre-financing and paired with a one-stop-shop system covering the whole country that offers know-how on a wide range of topics related to retrofitting.
- Energy communities: Create an energy sharing framework, which is easy and advantageous enough for residential prosumers to participate in (e.g., compatible with current supply contracts, local network tariffs, access to data, minimal bureaucracy and no increase in balancing responsibilities).
- Simplify licensing for low voltage renewable energy systems and facilitate the management processes of energy communities, including the entrance and departure of members and the establishment of energy sharing coefficients.
- Empower a suitable team to hold the big view and develop mission pathways for your community, so that everyone's efforts can be aligned in achieving the community's missions.
- Educate the public through independent organisations (e.g. NGOs) that are not linked to developers in any way. Conduct a referendum or survey on the attitudes of the population only after the education has been carried out.
- It is important to use already existing networks between twinned cities in different countries to address the challenges of shaping mobility.
- Policymakers should utilise the futuring phase to normalise narratives and visions of super-block-based futures in which systemic problems are resolved; they should use the institutionalising phase to establish superblocks as the new normal for traffic and public space planning.

