



EUROCITIES SDG - Taskforce

Policy Briefing –

The Role of Cities in Achieving the SDGs

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Introduction

With more than half of the world's population living in urban areas — and this number expected to rise — cities are at the forefront of addressing global challenges and implementing solutions that directly impact people's daily lives.

As the Eurocities SDG Task Force, we are increasingly concerned that, due to ongoing geopolitical crises and conflicts, both EU member states and the European Union risk deprioritizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Shifting political priorities, security concerns, and economic pressures threaten to divert attention and resources away from sustainable development.

According to the latest Sustainable Development Report 2025 by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), global SDG progress faces major challenges. The report highlights that no goal is on track to be achieved by 2030, with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) particularly off track.

At the next UN High Level Political Forum (6-15 July 2026, New York), SDG 11 will be one of the goals under in-depth review, calling for a strong presence of local voices. The Eurocities SDG Task Force recognizes that cities are not merely implementers but essential co-creators of sustainable development solutions. Strengthening their role, resources, and capacity is therefore crucial for achieving the SDGs both globally and within the EU.

Through a formal seat at the table in multilevel governance processes, local accountability mechanisms such as Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), strong city networks, and practical cooperation, we can accelerate progress towards a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient future.

This policy briefing outlines key recommendations from the Eurocities SDG Task Force to strengthen the role of cities globally and within the EU framework.

1. Maintaining SDG commitment

Cities in the Eurocities SDGs Task Force urge the EU and Member States to uphold their commitment to the SDGs despite geopolitical and economic challenges, recalling the internationally negotiated Pact for the Future adopted at UN level in 2024 to speed up progress on the SDGs. The Pact places strong emphasis on global peace and security and reaffirms that sustainable development cannot be achieved without peace and respect for international humanitarian law and human rights.

Amid growing inequalities, conflict, civic space restrictions, anti-rights rhetoric and tightening resources, the 80th anniversary of the United Nations and the 10th anniversary of the SDGs are a timely opportunity for both reflection and renewed determination to protect hard-won gains and accelerate action over the next five years.

Recommendations:

- Reaffirm the EU's and Member States' unwavering and explicit commitment to the SDGs, regardless of geopolitical crises.
- In a context where the new EU leadership has recently been established for the 2024-2029 period, being the last mandate period before reaching the 2030 landmark year, the Eurocities SDG Task Force urge all leaders to pursue efforts to promote the 2030 Agenda and raise the level of ambition and implementation mechanisms to support the achievement of the SDGs.
- Integrate SDG targets into the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2035 to ensure that short-term responses do not undermine long-term sustainability by 2030 and beyond.
- Strengthen the role of cities as stable, resilient anchors of sustainable development even in turbulent times.

2. Cities are crucial for achieving the SDGs

Although they have been adopted by national governments, the likelihood of the SDGs being successful is considerably greater if cities and local governments are sufficiently empowered. Not all cities and local governments work at the same speed or have had the same starting point, however they are uniquely positioned to drive progress across all SDGs through integrated policies, local leadership and action. They translate global goals into concrete solutions, foster innovation, and directly engage citizens and local stakeholders. As the Eurocities SDG Task Force, we are committed to highlighting this central role in global, EU, national and regional forums.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen global and EU-level recognition for cities' leadership in SDG implementation, including stronger incorporation of local governments in international, European, and national policy frameworks and funding instruments.
- Ensure that cities have a formal seat at the table in defining and monitoring SDG progress at national, EU and UN levels. As the Eurocities SDGs Task Force, we support the efforts by the Global Taskforce and the Advisory Group of the United Nations Secretary-General on Local and Regional Governments to strengthen the formal engagement of local and regional governments in intergovernmental processes at UN level.
- Strengthen how the EU Agenda for Cities explicitly addresses the SDGs as part of EU's international commitments.
- Ensure that cities form part of the preparations and negotiations of the beyond UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the next set of goals, harnessing the unique voice of local governments. As the Eurocities SDG Task Force, we are committed to share realities and lessons learnt from leading European cities addressing the SDGs.

3. Multilevel governance is essential

Achieving the SDGs requires effective multilevel governance that integrates city, regional, national, and European levels, as well as global multilateral governance structures. Coordination and shared ownership are vital to ensure coherent policies and efficient resource allocation.

Recommendations:

- Urge Member States, which remain at the heart of the multilateral system, to strengthen and come up with more effective governance mechanisms to underpin the achievement of the SDGs in Europe and globally.
- Promote institutionalized cooperation among all levels of government to align SDG strategies and actions. Cities of the SDG Task Force wish to see strengthened national level coordination of 2030 Agenda work, including support to municipalities to localize the SDGs, in all EU countries.
- Encourage integrated monitoring systems, including Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSNRs), and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), to provide comprehensive and complementary data.
- Advocate for the EU to prepare an ambitious second EU Voluntary Review presented ahead of the next and final SDG Summit at Heads of States level in 2027, building on extensive involvement of the local and regional governments in its preparation and its drafting to make sure that the local dimension of the SDGs and the contribution of cities and regions are included in the report.

4. Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) as tools for accountability and learning

Localization of the 2030 Agenda, through mechanisms like VLRs and integrated policy frameworks, coupled with multi-stakeholder collaboration, is a proven and critical enabler for SDG progress. VLRs enable cities to transparently track, communicate, and improve their SDG performance. They strengthen local accountability and foster citizen engagement and provide a rich evidence base for national and EU level policy priorities.

Recommendations:

- Encourage all cities to prepare and publish VLRs regularly, to be presented and discussed annually in City Parliaments and Councils to promote transparency and collective ownership.
- Support EU funding and technical assistance for VLR development and dissemination.
- Use VLRs as basis for multi-level policy dialogue, with global stock-taking and feedback mechanisms to fully valorize the work done by cities on VLRs. This includes, as mentioned under point four, extensive engagement with cities in the next EU Voluntary Review.

5. City networks as central hubs advocating for the SDGs

City networks play a pivotal role in connecting urban actors, facilitating knowledge exchange, strengthening their work on SDGs and amplifying cities' voices at regional, national, European, and global levels. In this context, city diplomacy plays an important role in advocating for and advancing the SDGs globally, by strengthening local leadership, fostering international partnerships, and showcasing concrete urban solutions. The Eurocities SDG Task Force was started on the initiative of leading cities working on SDGs in Europe and plays an important role in advocating for the SDGs, particularly in EU urban policies, programmes and processes.

Recommendations:

- Utilize and strengthen city networks such as the Eurocities SDG Task Force, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), and UN-Habitat SDG Cities as central hubs for policy coordination, peer learning, and joint advocacy.
- Encourage the EU to formally recognize and support city networks as strategic partners in achieving the SDGs. A Multi-Stakeholder Platform was set up in 2017 to support and advise the European Commission on the implementation of the SDGs at EU level and provide a forum for exchange of experience and best practice on the implementation of the SDGs across sectors and at local, regional, national and EU level. Its mandate came to an end in 2019 and it was never renewed. Cities of the SDG Task Force call on the EC to renew the mandate of the multi-stakeholder platform.
- Support the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) in promoting the role of cities in implementing the 2030 agenda on the ground and in disseminating local practices.
- Encourage Member States to consider the UNECE Forum of Mayors as an effective body for cities to exchange knowledge, best practices and local solutions and to strengthen the engagement of cities in UN intergovernmental bodies and processes, including through the provision of a formal status for local and regional governments in the work of the United Nations on the localization of SDGs.

6. Promoting practical city-to-city learning

Cities face similar challenges and can benefit greatly from sharing practical experiences, tools, and innovations. The growing role of international cooperation between cities deserves to be accompanied by professional development opportunities and peer learning resources.

Recommendations:

- Increase support for structured city-to-city learning programs and pilot initiatives focused on how cities can deliver on the SDGs.
- Support and provide training for cities aiming to effectively translate the SDGs at the local level, encourage cities to share and exchange on their experiences and issues and replicate it with other colleagues or stakeholders in the European context.

- Allocate EU and national funding to facilitate exchanges, study visits, and joint projects among cities within Europe and beyond.

Shaping the path forward

Cities are vital partners in achieving the SDGs. By empowering them through strengthened governance, robust monitoring mechanisms, strong networks, and practical cooperation — while maintaining an unwavering commitment to the SDGs despite crises — we can accelerate progress towards a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient future for all.

As Eurocities SDGs Task Force, we look ahead to the next UN High Level Political Forum with a strong demand that the space for cities in global agendas and forums will be gaining in size and importance. With the review of SDG 11 in focus for the 2026 HLPF, the need to fully and directly involve local governments in the HLPF and associated processes has never been stronger.

Consideration at the UN level on how sustainable development will be advanced post-2030 will officially commence during the September 2027 meeting of the 2027 HLPF under UN General Assembly (UNGA) auspices, as mandated by the Pact for the Future. In the lead up to this meeting, we, cities of the SDG Task Force, expect to see cities and local governments formally contribute to the discussions and negotiations of the next framework. We are eager to provide our contribution as a task force reflecting the realities and lessons learned from European cities working on SDGs.