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TO ACHIEVE GREENER CITIES AND A GREENER URBAN FUTURE, EUROPE SHOULD INVOLVE ITS CITIZENS

FRIENDS OF EUROPE GREEN WEEK SESSIONS:
TOWARDS GREENER CITIES AND INVESTING IN A GREENER URBAN FUTURE

REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

Reshaping cities to be greener and more sustainable is one of the more urgent responses needed to combat climate change in Europe and the rest of the world.

Buildings in urban areas account for 50% of emissions and energy consumption. Yet, most European cities lag far behind when it comes to the requirements for retrofitting and the construction of new urban environments to meet the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG11) on sustainable cities and communities, the participants heard at Friends of Europe's Green Week sessions on investing in greener cities and the role of citizens as drivers of change on 23 May 2018.

"The majority of buildings we will need to meet sustainability goals by 2050 have not even been built yet," noted moderator [Dharmendra Kanani](#), Director of Strategy at Friends of Europe. "There is an urgent need to address this."

Beyond Europe, population growth in China, India, and Africa has created enormous pressure on cities and urban systems, with many cities in developing countries unprepared for the logistics of keeping up with projected growth in urban populations.

While some countries have sustainability agendas going back 40 years, many have only recently begun legislating sustainable and green approaches to urbanisation. "We are looking at better forms of urbanisation that are greener and more environmentally friendly," underlined [Raf Tuts](#), Director for Programme Division at UN HABITAT, noting that "a better urban future should also be a greener urban future."

The main barriers to sustainable and green development are legislation, financing and human behaviour, noted [Piero Pelizzaro](#), Chief Resilience Officer of Milan.

In order to achieve a greener urban future, sustainability agendas need to focus on both national and municipal levels to produce lasting change. National urban policies with green entry points need to integrate planning systems, legislation, and financing systems with broad local capacity for implementation.

Throughout the world, there is an increase of issues in development and environmental problems such as congestion and pollution. Any vision of a sustainable urban future must be decided and shared by cities through cross-national and intercontinental cooperation, noted [Katarzyna Nawrot](#), Assistant Professor at the Poznan University of Economics, author of the 'Rise of Megacities: Challenges, Opportunities and Unique Characteristics', and European Young Leader (EYL40).

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“Big cities will have much more capacity to address problems in sustainable development if they partner with each other across the world,” she said, adding that “it is essential that citizens be involved in these processes and be drivers for change.”

Connecting citizens with governments and policymakers has become easier in recent years with the advent of new technologies in communication and social media. Even so, these technological advances are struggling to cope with socio-economic divides and the darker elements of human behaviour, such as selfishness, individualism, and tribalism.

Overcoming economic and behavioural barriers means more efforts from local governments to reach out to their constituents and ensure that poor and disenfranchised citizens’ voices are heard.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO GREENER CITIES - RETHINKING REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

Sustainable housing is an opportunity for climate mitigation but also a regulatory challenge that needs to be approached from different angles. On one hand, policymakers need to encourage excellence in innovative green housing while focusing investment on certain specific policy areas, such as social housing.

While this approach aims to lift the ceiling of sustainable housing, it is also essential that governments on all levels work to raise the legislative bar and increase the quality of regulations.

Building legislation tends to be silo-based, with multiple overlapping regulatory frameworks each concerned with one specific area – building practices, materials, design, health and wellbeing, water consumption, and so on.

“We are missing a link between the spatial qualities of a building, the health and wellbeing of the occupants, and the resources required to maintain the built environment,” stressed [Judith Kimpian](#), Chair of the Architects Council of Europe’s Sustainability Group, Architects Council of Europe.

Moreover, she added, existing regulations in Europe relate to a single point in a building’s life cycle and are based on theoretical, not real, performance. This is a major barrier to targeting productive changes in building legislation.

At the moment, there are no requirements for measuring how expectations match up with actual performance once the building is built and occupied. “Our concept of what performance is, is very limited,” she said. “If we want buildings to perform better, we need to define what this actually means because as it stands what we are regulating does not reflect real life.”

“Without serious reconsideration, legislators and investors risk targeting trillions of euros towards the construction of buildings to meet regulations and metrics that simply do not work,” she concluded.

The silo-based regulatory approach coming from European and global institutions also fails to take into account the specificities of individual cities. To address this, city planners and mayors are increasingly collaborating to share best practices and discuss different approaches to urban planning and sustainable cities through organisations such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40) or the Global and European Covenants of Mayors for Climate and Energy.

City planners need to reduce complexity and overcome the vertical approach to sustainable cities. “If we create a more resilient, holistic approach to our cities, we can have an impact not for the next five years, but for the next fifty,” noted Milanese resilience expert Pelizzaro.

The latest master plan for the city of Milan approaches the issues of sustainability and resilience from many perspectives, including brownfield developments and renovations, the creation of new greenspaces, sustainable infrastructure in peri-urban areas, and a more holistic approach to building regulations, integrating EU standards in energy consumption as well as green infrastructure, and water management.

“The new buildings we are going to design over the next 12 years will move beyond EU standards,” he said. “Cities themselves must set the rules and be drivers for change in the future. This is the vision that we are creating.”

One initiative that puts the city in the centre of the urbanisation process is the Urban Low Emissions Development Strategies (Urban-LEDS II) programme headed by UN HABITAT, in partnership with ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) and funded by the European Commission to provide support to cities in developing countries. The programme uses a holistic approach at city level to integrate national ministries and frameworks for climate action and identify the key areas that can trigger change in a city.

While it is generally becoming accepted that a more holistic approach to sustainable urbanisation is necessary, there remains a lack of tools to define what this approach should be.

Most public policy and industry initiatives on sustainability maintain a narrow focus on energy use and consumption and do not take into account other metrics such as lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions, resource efficiency, health and comfort, resilience, and lifecycle cost and value, noted [James Drinkwater](#), Director of Europe Regional Network at the World Green Building Council.

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“From an architect’s perspective, we need more coordination between the DGs and national ministries to outline exactly what is expected on the ground,” Kimpian said. “The mechanisms in the system to include architects and experts simply do not exist in any meaningful way.”

The Level(s) Programme , a recent initiative by the European Commission, adopts a collaborative approach between multiple DGs and industry stakeholders to create a voluntary reporting framework to improve the sustainability of buildings.

While promising, Level(s) remains a voluntary tool, Drinkwater said. “To scale up our understanding of better-performing buildings, we need to create political momentum to regulate sustainability requirements in public policy. With clear regulations in place, investors and professionals will follow.”

This political momentum is lacking in the EU, as the European Commission has run up against recalcitrant member states that are compromising some of the more forward-looking agreements as regards regulations in sustainable urbanisation, stressed Kimpian.

“The business case in Europe is strong for green urban development,” she concluded. “The problem is inertia and an absence of strong political leadership.”

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO GREENER CITIES - FINANCING GREEN INITIATIVES

Once regulatory barriers to sustainable urbanisation are addressed, the question of how to finance green initiatives will need to be answered, said Tuts of UN HABITAT.

The investment needed for sustainable urban development is estimated at \$4.5tn per year over the next 20 years. This investment will come mainly from the private sector and will take place regardless of sustainability goals. The challenge is how to increase the quality of these investments in the built environment to avoid massive green retrofitting efforts after only 10 or 20 years.

To finance green development, he noted, the clear departure point is to start by building up local resource mobilisation and then to look at transfers between national and local authorities to see how they can be improved.

Following this, a more detailed look at specific target groups – such as water operators, electricity and other service providers, and contractors associations – to determine how they can be made more sustainable.

On a global scale there are governments that are simply not rich enough to invest in green infrastructure. These governments can benefit from development aid in the form of grants and investments but any aid going to developing countries need to be handled by strong local administrations.

“There are a lot of untapped local resources in developing countries that need to be mobilised,” Tuts said. “There is no sustainable housing agenda without sound municipal financial systems.”

Pelizzaro stressed the difficulties that local financial authorities are facing, even in Europe. “In Milan, we are under pressure from the national government to limit our spending, so it is not so easy to create new financial instruments to fund green initiatives,” he said.

Nonetheless, the city has created a new fund in collaboration with private sector stakeholders, valued at €120m to retrofit private buildings. The fund uses graduated incentives as motivation to enhance green retrofits in heating systems (5% of the total cost), deep renovation (15%), and green infrastructures (20%), such as rooftop gardens.

By pushing supply-side actors to integrate environmental considerations in their investments, this local financing approach allows city authorities more input into the rules and funding for sustainable urban development beyond their control over public buildings.

On the demand side, the World Green Building Council has been working with governments, institutional investors, private companies, and other organisations to simplify access to, and understanding of, financing schemes for green and energy efficient construction and renovation.

“I think you can have too much innovation,” noted Drinkwater. “Consumers do not understand financing schemes that are too innovative.”

Mortgage lending, which in the EU is a market worth €7tn, is the perfect vehicle for funding green urban development. “The mortgage is not innovative. It is the most well-known, lowest cost form of property finance and for this reason, it is where we are focusing our efforts,” he added.

In Europe, many companies are interested in scaling up their activities in green renovation, and one of the major areas for funding is the provision of finance at good rates to consumers. To this end, institutional investors and public policymakers have a role in incentivising consumers to consider green mortgages and procure more efficient and sustainable properties.

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Targeted subsidies from the European Commission and the World Bank are being used to try to trigger more public and private investment but these need to be rethought to reduce the ‘hassle factor’ involved in public funding and grant programmes.

“We are pushing to reduce administrative barriers and receive more funding on the ground,” Pelizzaro underlined. “EU funding comes with barriers, as we have seen in international cooperation. What we need to do as we consider funding is not only to think about our cities can be greener but how they can also be cleverer.”

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO GREENER CITIES – CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

The behaviours, attitudes, and practices of citizens and different organisations are another obstacle to a greener urban future. As legislation and financing schemes catch up with the needs of sustainability, questions remain about how people and city institutions can adapt as well.

Take for example pollution and mobility. As is increasingly the case in developing countries, and already the case in European cities, personal motorised transport is the norm in cities, while less polluting mobility solutions such as public transportation, bicycles, and walking are considered secondary.

One part of achieving greener cities means understanding and meeting citizens’ expectations for efficient public transportation and non-polluting forms of mobility and reducing dependency on motor vehicles, noted Nawrot of Poznan University.

“How do we make citizens care about the environment instead of their basic needs? We need to make people understand that their actions can improve their cities and their lives and that they can have a huge impact on the environment,” she said.

Addressing this deferred gratification – knowing what one wants in the long-term but being unable to accept the necessary changes in the short-term – means reaching out to citizens and convincing them to shift their mentality away from individualist tendencies that block sustainability efforts.

To achieve this, it is important to have the correct data, noted [Giulio Quaggiotto](#), Director for Community Management at EIT Climate-KIC, Europe’s leading climate innovation initiative. However, he noted, “the assumption is that with the right data, you can lead people to action but if that were the case, none of us would be smoking anymore.”

An effective tool for changing an individual’s behaviour is peer group influence. Quaggiotto cited a campaign to reduce energy use by the government of California, whose most effective tool informed

homeowners about how much energy they were consuming in relation to their neighbours. Once they were made aware of it, those who consumed more than their peers reduced their energy waste.

“It is not always the rational part of a person that decides on their actions,” he concluded. “We need the data but we also need to accept that many of us act irrationally. This is difficult for institutions and organisations to confront.”

Changing systems to promote sustainability and green cities means accepting that these complex issues cannot be solved by single, centralised institutions brandishing ‘magic wand’ solutions, Quaggiotto stressed.

Instead, he said, it is a matter of distributed or collective intelligence – many actors working on myriad of solutions to different problems under a comprehensive, systemic model.

To create such a model, institutions, legislators, and experts need to tap into systems and solutions to problems in specific local contexts and to strive for better intelligence-sharing of lessons learned.

The existing mechanisms to create this distributed intelligence are weak. Institutional actors instinctively approach communities and ask what problems they have when they should be asking what solutions and assets they use to address these problems.

“Finding local solutions means listening to people and developing more interfaces to allow governments to follow what their citizens are doing, who they are, and what their interests are. If you do not ask the right questions in the first place, you do not find the right solutions,” he said.

Chief Resilience Officer Pelizzaro stressed the importance of citizen-government interface in Milan during a recent retrofit of public buildings that involved a successful process of co-design between the government and the community. The lesson learned from this process? “Once you create a vision with the people, the people take the risk with you. When you include them, they are implicated,” he said.

CONNECTING CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENTS

In order to make effective green and sustainable change in cities, governments and city authorities need to invest time and energy in their citizens and to create spaces for engagement.

“True solutions to climate change and sustainability typically come from bottom-up processes,” noted [Aline Muylaert](#), Co-founder of CitizenLab. “Citizens need to come together and develop their own ideas on how to adapt their lifestyles for a greener future.”

Institutions and organisations throughout the world need to fundamentally shift their systemic attitudes towards greening cities

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and develop processes to support citizens in defining problems and solutions in their own neighbourhoods and cities, be they investing in windmills, car-sharing programmes, rooftop gardens, or others.

Such bottom-up initiatives, require more cooperation between citizens, with governments in facilitating or supporting roles. “People tend to identify more strongly with their local identity than on a larger scale,” she underlined. “Even living in a big city, one tends to engage much more with their surrounding neighbourhood.”

Local governments need to personalise citizen engagement to a greater degree. Making green changes tangible for a community means meeting often with it and including citizens in the decision-making and implementation processes.

“Citizens live horizontally while governments operate vertically,” underlined Quaggiotto. “We must find interfaces between the two as the categories that governments use may not necessarily be of interest to citizens.”

The panel cited examples from Finland, where the government created an online portal for citizen experimentation; Bologna, Italy, whose authorities have updated meeting protocols with community leaders to increase engagement; and Vilvoorde, Belgium, whose leaders meet every quarter with citizens to discuss improvements to the city.

Steering policy on green and sustainable urban projects is one part of municipal governments’ role but they also have fiscal responsibilities, notably the power to subsidise and provide grants to associations for local initiatives.

A powerful criticism of the current state of affairs in many cities in Europe is the socio-economic divide between poor and often immigrant communities and comparatively well-off ones that is also often based on racial or ethnic divides.

“Subsidies are given away by politicians, who have their own biases,” noted [Xavier Damman](#), CEO and Co-founder of OpenCollective, and European Young Leader (EYL40). “So if you are an immigrant, good luck getting one.”

To level this playing field, he proposes that mayors and city leaders should allocate a part of their budget to matching funds, automatically doubling any funding that is collected by associations that want to have an effect on their communities.

“Associations spend half of their time writing grant proposals for the consideration of bureaucrats who may not sympathise or even understand their perspectives. We need to find ways to sidestep this administrative bottleneck and decentralise funding processes,” he said.

Settled in between governments and citizens are civil society actors whose importance to the engagement process is often overlooked, noted

Muylaert. Working with the Flemish government in Belgium, CitizenLab employed different modes of engagement to ensure that all voices were heard, with offline meetings with the Flemish Parliament, online meetings with citizens, and finally through smaller meetings with refugees, poor people, and non-Dutch-speakers through civil society associations who work to ensure that disenfranchised people's voices are heard.

"However it is done, it is important that citizens be aware that they can be involved to make change, that their voices will be heard, and that their governments are prepared to share power," Nawrot stressed.

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TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR CITIZEN EMPOWERMENT

In the last twenty years, technology has revolutionised citizen engagement in democracy, noted Damman. In the past century, citizens were passive because acting to change society required capital, planning, and access to mainstream media.

"New technologies have opened up the possibilities for changing one's society," stressed Nawrot. "Even in developing and poor countries, people have increased connectivity through their smartphones. They can interact with the world and see that their choices and actions can make a difference."

"We are only at the beginning of realising how much power we have because of the internet and our smartphones," Damman said. "No matter what we are passionate about, today we have the tools to pursue it."

While this new context brings along the old baggage of minority and poor voices going unheard, technology has gone a long way in levelling the playing field for democracy. All that remains is for citizens to decide what can be accomplished with these new powers.

Green citizen initiatives driven by connectivity and technology have been appearing all over Europe, he noted. Minimalism, zero-waste, bicycling, co-living spaces - all of these are examples of bottom-up initiatives started by citizens who have been able to spread their ideas from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and from city to city.

Being able to spread these ideas is as important as having them in the first place, and technology is central to their dissemination, Muylaert stressed, offering the example of Futureproofed Cities , a web portal that allows city planners access to a personalised toolkit to help develop, manage, and monitor a city's climate action plan. Through this tool, citizens can engage directly with climate plans to support and share specific actions.

"We citizens have to act locally and think globally," concluded Damman. "By scaling up our ideas and then sharing them with the world, we can truly have an impact."

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CONCLUSION

“Europe has made huge advances on climate change activity and proven the case that you can act on climate change while increasing growth,” Kanani of Friends of Europe concluded. “The business case is there but political will and investment are two key drivers to ensuring that we get a more sustainable housing future for Europe and beyond.”

Reducing regulatory obstacles and streamlining legislation on what green and sustainable goals are for urban built environments means moving towards a holistic approach that breaks down the silos between administrative bodies, contractors, architects, and other experts, and is part of a greater vision.

“We in Europe need a strong vision for sustainable development and greener cities and we need to learn how to promote it effectively,” Kimpian said.

In a similar fashion, financing sustainable urbanisation means creating simpler funding tools and finding ways to increase both understanding of procurement markets for supply-side actors, as well as simplifying green lending for consumers.

While policymakers wrestle with legislation and financing, more energy needs to be committed to increasing citizen engagement for climate action in local contexts. Institutions, the private sector, and civil society actors need to change the way they interact with citizens and strive to listen more to their needs and ideas for change in their own communities.

New communication technologies and social media are powerful tools for disseminating citizen initiatives aimed at greening cities and, when combined with more classic modes of democracy and citizen-government interaction, can give voices to those people in society who often go unheard.

“The ultimate goal of democracy is to level the playing field,” stressed Damman. “In the 21st century, democracy’s priority should be to ensure that every person has an equal opportunity to be an active, engaged citizen.”



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