Explorative Proposal
for an UAEU Thematic Partnership under the Ljubljana Agreement

Greening Cities

Challenge:

Cities are at the forefront of the interlinked climate change and biodiversity crises. They face more frequent flooding, drought, heatwaves, and intense rain events along with other climate-related hazards; at the same time, they suffer increased air pollution, water scarcity and growing food insecurity in part due to biodiversity loss driven by land-use change, for example.

Together, these challenges are increasingly impacting citizens' health, water quality and resources, built infrastructure, air pollution, and food security.

Connected green and blue infrastructures within and between cities contribute to addressing these challenges by providing carbon storage and sequestration, reducing air pollution, purifying water, and halting loss of habitats and species. Green and blue spaces can improve physical and mental health, lower stress, and provide space for recreation and exercise. However, poorer neighbourhoods often have lower rates of access to green space, and children from nature-deficient areas are more likely to experience health, social and academic performance problems. Moreover, not all green and blue space is created equal. Quality is important not only for the environment but also for socio-economic reasons.

While cities are already working to increase green infrastructure, blue infrastructure often takes a back seat; moreover, cities face several challenges including from lack of technical knowledge, space shortage, long-term funding for maintenance, and siloed action.

City administrations have been looking for ways to engage citizens, academia, and the private sector to support their greening efforts and create ecological corridors but they cannot do it alone. Collaboration with multi-level stakeholders is crucial to build broader partnerships for resilient and biodiverse green and blue corridors that can protect against increasing temperatures and extreme events while boosting biodiversity and enhancing the services it provides.

Opportunity:

Green and blue corridors can not only reduce the urban heat island effect but also connect larger areas of protected land providing vital migratory passages for species.

Stepping up efforts to green and blue cities in collaboration with local stakeholders and multi-level partners would support efforts to combat climate change and restore biodiversity. Technical knowledge is required to help cities understand which species would best support local ecosystems and build resilience. Sharing good practices on creating multifunctional areas through urban agriculture (such as community gardens) and waterbodies (such as canals and river banks) could help create links to other Thematic Partnerships, and break down silos.

Realising the potential of improved green and blue infrastructure for nature recovery and adaptation to climate change means co-creating coherent and long-term strategies with regional and national partners as well as with local stakeholders to ensure broader connectivity and the creation of larger ecological corridors.

Mission of the proposed Thematic Partnership:

Aim is to:

– Support cities in their challenge of increasing densification and the need for access to green and blue spaces for the health and wellbeing of citizens, as well as to restore nature and adapt to climate change.
– Develop recommendations for sustainable development planning policies.
– Develop guidance supporting improved collaboration between local, regional, and national stakeholders to ensure the development of connected, resilient, and biodiverse green and blue corridors, including more nuanced indicators for access to green space that consider the quality of the green space.
– Realise the potential of green and blue infrastructure for their cooling effect, restoration of biodiversity, and vital contribution to human health and wellbeing.
– Identify and promote spatial development planning instruments at different spatial levels that strengthen greening cities, considering also prevention of urban sprawl, urban open and green space preservation, quality design of open space.
– Find synergies between greening cities and different sectors, for example energy efficiency of buildings, digital and smart solutions.

Contributing to Green, Productive and Just cities and building on good urban governance:

In addition to absorbing emissions and sequestering carbon, trees and green areas have an impressive cooling effect and can reduce local surface temperatures, thus addressing the increasing challenge of urban heat island effects.

Aligning with and supporting EU priorities:

- European Green Deal
- EU Forestry Strategy
    o Sets out a roadmap for planting 3 billion trees by 2030
- EU Biodiversity Strategy (Urban Greening Plans / 3 billion trees by 2030)
- EU Climate Law: reduce emissions by 55% by 2030
    o Calls for MSs to enhance natural sinks
- Zero pollution action on air, water, and soil
- Territorial Agenda 2030
- Identify relevant EU Funding possibilities
    o Horizon Europe (e.g. Mission on Climate Neutral and Smart Cities)
    o Life Programme
    o European Regional Development Fund
- Identify relevant National (Urban) Policy Frameworks and Funding
- Find synergies with other EU initiatives such as Green City Accord

Green and blue infrastructure will additionally contribute to the EU's Zero Pollution Action Plan on air, water, and soil.

In a recent resolution[1], the European Parliament called for a Year of European Greener Cities in 2022, underlining the important role greener cities can play in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling the commitments of the New Urban Agenda, particularly when it comes to improving the use of water resources and improving biodiversity in the urban environment.

Addressing the challenges through an Urban Agenda Partnership:

Collaboration between local, regional, national and EU levels is crucial to developing a truly connected and coherent network of ecological corridors able to boost biodiversity, address climate change and provide resilience. Current efforts by individual actors have thus far failed to halt habitat fragmentation and the related decline in biodiversity. Only together, will these actors succeed in putting a halt to and reversing the trend in unprecedented biodiversity loss and tackling climate change.

City authorities have unique understanding of their local environmental context but rely on the European Commission and Member States for funding and policy and technical support.

This thematic partnership would work on all three pillars relevant for the Urban Agenda: Better Funding, Better Regulation and Better Knowledge. It would address better knowledge issues in regards to technical planting aspects, building capacity, expertise and guidelines on green infrastructure, as well as addressing better funding issues by providing understanding and access to EU funding opportunities and collecting data on funding needs in relation to a range of green and blue infrastructure possibilities. The Partnership would examine possible regulatory bottlenecks in EU legislation and propose concrete actions to overcome possible legal obstacles.

Building on previous Thematic Partnerships:

This thematic partnership would build on several previous partnerships. It would build on the partnership for **Sustainable use of land and Nature-based solutions** promoting liveable and compact city model and mainstreaming of nature-based solutions as a tool to build sustainable, resilient and liveable urban spaces.

It would build on the **Climate adaptation** partnership to continue improving data accessibility for EU municipalities in the framework of COPERNICUS.

It would build on the thematic partnership for **Air Quality** by building on the awareness raising of the health impacts of air pollution and linking this to the benefits of green and blue infrastructure for air quality to garner support from citizens and other stakeholders.

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[1] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0243_EN.html