Sustainability in the EU is mission impossible without cities

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Cities are leading the way when it comes to implementing environmentally friendly solutions, writes Anna Lisa Boni.

Over three quarters of Europeans live in cities, where 85 per cent of the continent's GDP is generated. We can't gloss over these figures: cities are the backbone of Europe's economy.

Although they have been shaken by the financial crisis, confronted by the prospect of ageing societies, and left in turmoil by the ever-changing political landscape, Europe's metropolitan economies have what it takes to become drivers of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth that benefits everyone.

Cities have the potential to be the most sustainable form of human settlement. Urban concentration is
known to make the best per capita use of natural resources, such as land, energy, and water.

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However, with cities also responsible for around 80 per cent of global carbon emissions, with transport and buildings among the largest contributors, sustainability remains one of the greatest challenges at urban level. Our cities must become greener if we are to meet the EU climate targets. Buildings and businesses must become more energy efficient.

Urban Europe is very diverse. There is no single model of a European city. They differ markedly in their economic structure and functions, social composition, size and geographical location, and these differences shape the challenges cities face.

Equally, national differences in economic performance, institutional arrangements and government policy have an important impact upon cities. The problems faced by global cities like London or Paris are different from those of smaller cities.

Declining industrial cities have different dilemmas to ponder than fast-growing cities with high-tech industries. Cities in the periphery face different economic, social and environmental challenges than those at the centre of Europe.

Yet, despite all these differences, cities are affected by common trends. They face common challenges and can all be part of their solution.

Sustainable growth is certainly the biggest one at this moment in time, and it will remain the most pressing challenge for city leaders and city managers as climate change is accelerating at a pace that is to a large extent still understated.

But cities and their leaders are dealing with this every single day. The issue is moving up on their agenda and many cities are already leading the way (look at Paris and COP mobilisation).

Many cities are leading the way through urban planning measures and regulations (think of congestion charges). Others do it very courageously through sustainable urban mobility policies: avoiding cars, shifting to soft modes, improving the energy efficiency of transport vehicles.

Sustainable growth is also ensured by cities through investing proactively in infrastructure and plans for climate adaptation to help them become climate resilient.

The emerging and highly innovative concepts of ‘circular economy’, where products are designed to last and can be repaired, reused or recycled, and ‘sharing economy’, which enables individuals to borrow or rent assets owned by someone else, are also being adopted throughout Europe by cities.

They are testing and promoting such new economic models and are best positioned to be the driving
force behind their uptake. Europe's cities are replete with policy practices that aim at promoting green jobs.

Cities are leading by example. That is why the EU needs its cities and that is why they should be on board when European policies to promote sustainability on our continent are discussed and developed.

The recently established Urban Agenda for the EU is a very promising start. It recognises the key role of cities in promoting a better quality of life for European citizens. It is both a practical framework for connecting policies across different sectors and levels of government, and a political commitment towards a stronger and more sustainable Europe.

Elected governments and leaders of major cities with a public mandate and democratic legitimacy should be around the negotiating table when investment decisions are taken that affect cities. Using the new urban impact assessment (UIA) procedure, cities can flag potential concerns directly to EU policy makers. This tool ensures smart investment and efficient integration of EU funding with other related actions.

The 2014-2020 priorities for EU cohesion policy have also recognised the need to invest in cities, namely to promote sustainable growth. Proposals include several innovations with the potential to deliver integrated development on the ground. This is a strong starting point, and cohesion policy must continue to prioritise the urban dimension to ensure an adequate level of investment in our cities across the EU.

Throughout this complex but highly rewarding process, the EU and cities have plenty to gain from the knowledge exchange that takes place in city-led networks and between cities and other levels of government.

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About the author

Anna Lisa Boni is Secretary General of EUROCITIES, the network of major European cities

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