



# Fantastic creatures: Making European cities safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable

Tallinn European Green Capital 2023  
Opening Conference, 20 January 2023

CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS



# FOREWORD

**Cities function best if a holistic approach is taken, and no one is left behind.**

Cities also have an important role to play in advancing global goals and agendas. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provides a holistic framework that effectively unites and works across all countries, levels of government, sectors and actors, formal or otherwise. It has been estimated that 65% of the 169 global targets of the SDGs can only be reached with the proper engagement of and coordination with local and regional governments.

**As only seven years remain to 2030, there is an urgency for action at the local level to achieve the SDGs.**

"Localising SDGs" means making them real and useful - at the city level and for the people. But integrating the SDGs into local strategies requires deep transformations at the local level. New governance models and adaptive leadership are needed, as well as willingness to rethink budgetary processes and monitoring tools, transform opposing interests into synergies and turn policy silos into holistic collaboration to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges effectively.

**We know WHAT we have to do, but there is still a need to work out the HOW.**

Tallinn European Green Capital 2023 Opening Conference *Fantastic creatures: Making European cities safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable* brought together political leaders and representatives from European cities and institutions – as well as the broader field of sustainability opinion leaders and experts – to gather inspiration and guidance, share experiences and facilitate discussions on how European cities can strengthen local SDG efforts and achieve a just and green transition.

The conference has highlighted both opportunities and challenges for governments and institutions at all levels to make the SDGs a reality in Europe.

**We believe that sustainability governance lies at the heart of these efforts.**

The Conference Conclusions that follow highlight some of the key messages and calls to action that emerged from the conference. It is our hope that these will guide future collaboration among cities and other stakeholders.

**Mihhail Kõlvart**, Mayor of Tallinn





# THE CONFERENCE

Tallinn European Green Capital 2023 Opening Conference *Fantastic creatures: Making European cities safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable* was organised in Tallinn on 20 January 2023. It gathered over 200 participants from all over Europe, including the EU Commissioner for Environment Oceans and Fisheries, the Chair of the Board for the EU Commissions Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change, Mayors, Deputy Mayors and other city representatives, high-level experts and representatives from EU and other international institutions.

Some of the questions that the conference sought to answer were:

- How can **synergies** be created between different needs and functions for sustainable urban development and just and green transition?
- What are the tools of sustainability governance that create opportunities for people to thrive? Is it even possible **not to leave anyone behind**?
- How can cities cope with the **increasing complexity** of modern times and conflicting interests of stakeholders?
- Are cities ready to unleash **the power of co-creation** to foster innovation: the role of businesses and research institutions in **transformative changes** and addressing the urgent challenges of climate change?
- How do **politicians and officials collaborate to build commitment and momentum** around Agenda 2030 in all departments?

Drawing on the lessons learned and experiences from, among others, the [URBACT Global Goals for Cities](#) and [European Green Capital](#) Networks, the conference highlighted the opportunities and challenges ahead for governments and institutions at all levels to achieve the SDGs. Concrete examples of governance models, citizen engagement and participatory action planning showcased how cities of all sizes are making strides to achieve the SDGs and foster just and green transitions.

In the Conference Conclusions that follow, we provide some actionable insights for what is needed to put in place sustainability governance in cities, which can help to address [the “action gap” that seems to be persistent](#) in all countries that signed up for the 2030 Agenda.



# CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS:

## Making European cities safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable

The European Union is coming up with many good initiatives and tools to accelerate the green transition in cities, and local governments are trying to make best use of those. The Urban Agenda for the EU recognizes the crucial role of cities in achieving the SDGs and delivering the European Green Deal, and the European Commission's budget for 2021-2027 allocates a considerable amount to green investments and projects.

Yet, to achieve better policy coordination and the complementarity between the financial instruments, the opening remarks by **Mihhail Kõlvart**, Mayor of Tallinn, emphasised the need to talk about setting up Directorate General for Urban Affairs in the European Commission to coordinate all the strands of the EU urban policy, gather cities in a structured policy dialogue around the table, effectively and proactively facilitate a multi-level dialogue.

**Virginijus Sinkevičius**, European Commissioner of Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, highlighted that the Green Capitals award showcases the spirit of collaboration and that we need frontrunners like the Green Capitals to lead the way.

**Connie Hedegaard**, Chair of the Board for the EU Commissions Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change, provided a powerful reminder in her keynote speech that - having just experienced the nine hottest years on record in Europe - this is the world we need to plan our cities in.

But are our administrations fit-for-purpose to deal with both urgencies and long-term goals at the same time? How do we align democracy, inclusion, legitimacy, and efficiency when we plan our cities? How can we involve citizens before they end up only having the possibility to say “yes” or “no” to a project?

*“We need a holistic approach - we cannot continue just trying to solve one problem at a time. When we do something, it has to help us solve several challenges at a time” - **Connie Hedegaard**, Chair of the Board for the EU Commissions Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change.*



# 1. Thriving like an oak: Building eco-systems for green and healthy cities

The first panel session underlined that nature and human health need a firmer footing in urban planning, to address nested problems like pollution, congestion, poor air quality and the large negative environmental footprint of cities. Cities can magnify how such policies can go really right, but also, how they can go terribly wrong. Separating city functions and activities into different zones and departments often serve to exacerbate and displace rather than resolve these issues. Instead, we need synergistic relationships between needs and functions of urban space and create win-win scenarios.

*“It demands great courage to stay with our goals, to stay with our ambitions” - Madle Lippus, Deputy Mayor of Tallinn.*





Often, what is good for the environment tends to be good for people as well. Like reducing car use and create more pedestrian space and greenery. Yet, local residents need increased awareness and to be involved in the change needed in how cities function, to avoid popular rejection of new initiatives.

*“We will make things happen when people can test and see that it’s cool” – Eric Piolle, Mayor of Grenoble.*

**Just like natural ecosystems, cities provide arenas for different actors to play a role in the urban landscape.** By focusing on improving accessible green spaces in cities, new functions can be explored by its users and generate co-benefits across sectors, while helping to adapt to climate change. The 15-minute city concept, living labs, pollinator highways, micro forests, rainwater harvesting, low speed zones, and urban paths mixing cultural, educational and biodiversity goals are some examples of what cities are experimenting with to reach the SDGs through integrated actions. But before starting any changes in the city, an assessment of the social consequences of “who wins, and who loses” is needed, as underlined by Fedra Vanhuysse, Head of Division, Societies, Climate and Policy Support at Stockholm Environmental Institute



## 2. Learning from the wolves: Leave no one behind

Cities are often “twin-track”, as highlighted by Marie McLelland from the city of Glasgow. If you are on the one track, it is a wonderful city: multi-cultural, prosperous, diverse and cutting-edge. If you are on the other track, there are deeply engrained issues and health inequality and poverty. There is a disconnection between the places and the spaces that you live in.

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs offers a good reference for addressing these issues. However, [research from the European Commission's Joint Research centre](#) reported by Alice Siragusa has shown that even the frontrunners still risk not identifying and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable and that there is an untapped potential to use data more effectively in decision-making processes. But that is not enough: we also know that we must complement hard data with knowledge collected on the ground and involve vulnerable groups and communities directly in SDG strategy design and monitoring.

Human-centred service design principles, social entrepreneurship and gender-sensitive urban planning and quality criteria are some examples of how local governments are shaping more inclusive and just cities. By looking at the everyday experience of urban space through the eyes of different users, better policies and planning guidance can be provided.

*“Public areas and parks are owned, ruled and managed by the city, so it is quite an easy job to reshape it in a fair, shared place”  
– Eva Kail, Gender Planning Expert, City of Vienna.*



### 3. Thinking like the ants: Unleash the Power of Co-Creation

**Co-creation starts by enabling people to think and communicate together, using a shared language.** The SDGs provide a shared language for stakeholders on all levels: from local and regional to national and global. Translating SDG challenges into shared missions and goals can help collaboration across sectors and promote alliances with the private sector, academia and citizens, with local governments as key enablers.

*“Every city should work for what’s good for the many.  
That’s like by definition what it is to run a city” –  
**Jakob Trollbäck**, Founder and Chief Creative Officer  
at The New Division*





As the level of government closest to the people, cities are great arenas to test new governance and co-creation approaches. Unleashing this power implies new organisational development challenges for cities. City governments increasingly have to be self-aware, purpose-driven, highly skilled, motivated, open and emphatic organisations, with modern and digital tools to do their job. Initiatives like the [Inner Development Goals](#) are pioneering new approaches for people to deal with the complex challenges involved in sustainability transitions. We also need to think about the “handprint” of cities – how do we scale innovations and share lessons learned?



*“If you want really great things to happen, work with your community. The community is intelligent” – Ville Taajamaa, SDG Project Manager, City of Espoo.*

## 4. Leading like the dolphins: Re-thinking urban governance

**Making sustainability a reality demands leadership and vision, and translating complicated topics into understandable choices by those participating in the green transition.** As the green transition implies such an overarching change in cities, ranging from human behaviour, city space, mobility, energy, food, waste management, production, consumption, business models, synergies between different sectors and much more – it will need improved concepts of how to plan, implement, communicate and finance our actions in a more integrated and holistic way.

**Urban governance requires both short- and long-term leadership and integrated thinking.** The SDGs provide a framework that help to align short term priorities with long-term policy objectives. This requires deep transformations at the local level. The 17 SDGs must be integrated into every aspect of the municipality governance, which requires a transition away from a checklist mentality and towards the SDGs as a holistic disposition of administration.



*“The goal of being more sustainable, the goal of being Green Capital is about making a better city. It’s not about having city development over here, and a sustainability programme over there – it’s all the same!” – Pekka Timonen, Mayor of Lahti*



**Integrating the SDGs into city governance must go beyond strategy and planning processes; it has to focus on “doing” – including big and small things.** Building a track record of doing helps to mitigate resistance and facilitate a better understanding of how expert solutions and complex discourses can actually work for people. Giving a voice to opinion leaders from across society is another way to show positive examples and continue to spread awareness among a wider audience.

**Solving the SDGs starts at the local level, but requires adequate national and European support and legislation to succeed.** This means aligning goals and actions through multi-level governance, ensuring policy coherence. Implementing transformative urban strategies contributing to the SDGs also need continued cooperation and platforms for knowledge sharing and mutual learning. [Political leaders from the URBACT Global Goals for Cities network](#) have highlighted that learning together is key to tackle complex and interconnected challenges like the SDGs and have raised the importance of supporting cities in this journey, whether through dedicated EU level, national or regional funding and other supporting mechanisms.

# Realising Sustainable Development Goals in European cities

The SDGs provide an unprecedented opportunity to align global, national, regional and local agendas, promoting policy coherence for sustainable development, as enshrined by SDG 17. Yet, as highlighted by Ricardo Rio, Mayor of Braga and rapporteur of two opinions by the Committee of Regions, until recently the EU had been lacking a strong commitment towards the SDGs in its narrative and governance, as well as in supporting cities to localise the SDGs. 2023 will therefore be an important year for the EU to push this agenda further, with the preparation of the EU Voluntary Review reporting progress on the SDGs in Europe to be presented at the UN 2023 SDG Summit. As the growing movement of cities preparing Voluntary Local Reviews shows, more and more cities are raising their voice to showcase their important role in contributing to the SDGs. The opportunity to amplify these voices and make European cities' accomplishments visible globally must not be missed.

*“We see more and more cities doing their work, including the SDGs not only in the management of their territories, but in reporting and monitoring of its services. And I think it is very important to use the SDG tool, because it’s the single tool we have right now that has a holistic and integrated approach that allows us to work with all the issues at the same time – and not one issue at a time!” – Ricardo Rio, Mayor of Braga.*

**Networks of cities both within and across national borders are deepening and strengthening their work on SDGs and green transition on local, regional, national, and global levels.** This is indeed a great step forward and a major attempt to overcome interconnected challenges in the social, economic, environmental, and administrative sectors, by adopting a holistic approach to sustainability. Cities are testing new governance mechanisms to achieve this, rethinking strategic planning, leadership approaches, urban planning frameworks and methods, budgetary processes, monitoring, tools for citizen engagement, partnership models and much more. Yet, a more systematic approach to understanding how cities are reshaping urban governance is needed and lessons need to be shared between cities in order for everyone to benefit.



*“Not all the cities are moving at the same pace. And if we are talking about inclusiveness, we are also talking about moving together, not forgetting those that are a little bit behind” - **Filipe Araújo**, Vice Mayor of Porto Municipality and Chair of the Eurocities Environment Forum.*



As cities, we are grateful, that the EU is coming up with so many good initiatives and tools to accelerate the green transition. And we are trying to make best use of those. But is this enough? Shouldn't we be aiming at a more strategic and integrated approach? To achieve better policy coordination and the complementarity between financial instruments, we need to talk about setting up a Directorate General for Urban Affairs in the European Commission to coordinate all the strands of the EU urban policy, gather cities in a structured policy dialogue around the table, effectively and proactively facilitate a multi-level dialogue to accelerate the green transition and implement sustainability governance at the local level?



“The number of green initiatives on the EU level initiated in the last years is impressive, and we commend the EU for that. The next step is to bring about strategic, high-level coordination of urban affairs and provide for structured involvement of cities in the EU policy discussions. The reason is simple: The cities are implementing the EU Green Deal and SDGs locally. It is the local level that brings about the most imminent change in people’s well-being and contributes significantly towards achieving the EU’s ambition of a first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Therefore, one of the strategic priorities for Tallinn, as the European Green Capital 2023, is to launch debates on the new forms of governance that support sustainable urban transitions and local green deals.”

– *Mihhail Kõlvart, Mayor of Tallinn*



It is our hope that the Tallinn European Green Capital 2023 Opening Conference *Fantastic creatures: Making European cities safe, inclusive, resilient and sustainable* has provided impetus to continue exploring how sustainability governance in cities can help to accelerate action to achieve the SDGs.

We invite all participants to join the active year of 2023 in Tallinn to collaborate in this quest!

For all the photos of the opening conference, please [CLICK HERE](#)





# See you in Tallinn!

[greentallinn.eu](http://greentallinn.eu)

