STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON EU URBAN DATA GOVERNANCE

THE ROLE OF DATA ACCESS FOR ACCELERATING URBAN CLIMATE ACTION

Stakeholder Consultation Panel (SCP)
#2 Report on Urban Data Governance Panel

This document summarises discussions from the two dialogues organised by NetZeroCities with the support of Living-in-EU and the Smart Cities Marketplace. One dialogue took place online and the second in-person with pan-European actors from business, research and civil society reflecting on challenges and opportunities for the EU to support the transition to climate neutrality in cities via policies, directives and funding.

NetZeroCities is a consortium consisting of 34 partners from 27 European countries, managing the Mission Platform for the EU Cities Mission "100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030". The Cities Mission involves local authorities, citizens, businesses, investors as well as regional and national authorities to deliver 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030 and ensure that these cities act as experimentation and innovation hubs to enable all European cities to follow suit by 2050. The EU Cities Mission contributes to the European Green Deal in building a low-carbon, climate-resilient future through research and innovation.

Living-in.EU is an EU initiative for local and regional leaders who believe that technology can help them make their town, city, or region a better place to live. It enables cities and regions to up-scale and re-use proven digital solutions, share smart city strategies, and access support and tools available at EU level.

The Smart Cities Marketplace aims to engage cities and towns of all sizes to deliver more sustainable urban environments and offers all the information needed to explore solutions, shape sustainable urban projects, and successfully close a deal for financing them. It offers a complete catalogue of support such as calls for free technical assistance, 1-to-1-consultancy services for city-led consortia close to the financing stage, financing masterclasses and fine-tuned assistance/matchmaking for the financing of sustainable urban projects.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises discussions about challenges faced by Mission Cities around **accessing the data they need to advance and accelerate their climate actions**. Feedback from Mission Cities has highlighted problems in accessing data, notably in the context of developing and implementing smart city solutions, establishing data spaces and monitoring climate actions. A lack of available data or inaccessible data can limit their progress towards climate neutrality and smart city objectives.

Cities are at the forefront of implementing the European Green Deal, including its provisions on urban data governance. Therefore, difficulties in accessing data slow down their transition to climate neutrality and limit progress to national, EU and global emissions reduction commitments.

Cities operate in a complex system of actors and collective climate action is essential for meeting their climate goals. Therefore, it is vital to understand multiple perspectives on data governance in the urban context to inform an effective EU policy agenda prioritising overcoming the regulatory and policy barriers that Mission Cities face.

A major part of the discussions focused on how policymakers need to consider integrating climate and social dimensions in data governance policies. Numerous examples shared by participants highlight that stakeholder and city practitioner engagement can provide references and inspiration for policymaking in this space.
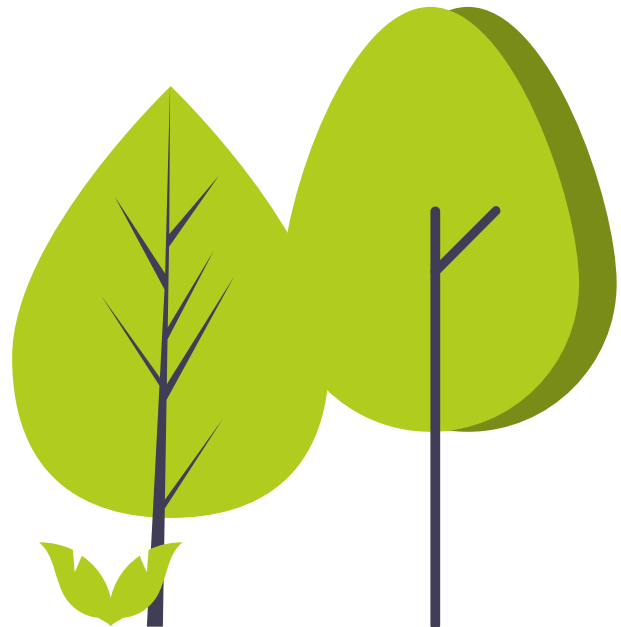
THE ROLE OF DATA IN THE TRANSITION TO CLIMATE NEUTRALITY IN SMART CITIES

Evidence-based decision-making is key to accelerating and scaling the transition to a climate-neutral, resilient and just future. Data increases the effectiveness of climate solutions - it supports effective planning, implementation and learning-oriented monitoring of climate transition efforts. It improves coordination between different sectors and levels of government with enhanced transparency – which simultaneously strengthens trust if done coherently and plausibly. Cities need access to various data, for example, to develop data platforms to inform their citizens and enable citizen-led activities. Data is needed for setting up efficient, low-emission public transport because city planners need to know where transportation hubs are located (or need to be) and how passenger use varies throughout the day. Similarly, in the case of increasing numbers of "urban heat islands", the need for data on where they occur and who the most vulnerable citizens in these areas are, will help to inform appropriate measures to alleviate and adapt to the risks.

FOCUS OF THE DIALOGUES

The SCP#2 focussed on Urban Data Governance and how limited access to data often hinders climate action implementation. This challenge relates to experiences from Mission Cities when trying to set up or implement projects or measures around digital climate solutions (e.g. Smart City Solutions, Data spaces and Monitoring efforts).

In general, a multitude of different data sets is collected in a municipality but this data is not centrally stored and not all data sets are accessible for the public administration. In addition to data collected by the city, other types of data are collected by e.g. the private sector, such as electricity consumption data. Even if data is collected in the same administration, it sometimes sits in silos, and cross-departmental cooperation and access to data is not straightforward due to differing methods of data collection.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLE FROM A MISSION CITY

The city of Kranj in Slovenia set up a public data platform to be used as a tool for communicating with citizens and facilitating the city's green transition. It presents traffic data, for example, and uses surveys and suggestion boxes to interact with citizens. They also developed a Smart City Card (CeKR) which combines different services for citizens, e.g. ID functions, payment options and loyalty programmes. It is the product of efficient collaboration between the public and private sector while at the same time being inclusive and focussing on fair pricing. Different factors enabled this development, including the pilot nature of the project which meant it attracted a lot of attention and interest, so business actors supported it both financially and with expertise. Collaboration with a local research institute, a strong business background of involved city actors and the proactive engagement of the mayor was also key to setting it up.

Perceived challenges relating to data access and management include:

- Bureaucratic hurdles and restricted data provision by companies: the need to add specific clauses to agreements and lengthy negotiations caused delays in the implementation of the project.

- Inadequate knowledge of how to use data.

- Limited access to financial support (EU funds remain at the ministerial level).

- GDPR (while different interpretations around GDPR exist and slow down processes, it is perceived as an enabling opportunity overall).

RELEVANT EU REGULATIONS

Several EU acts are linked to the topic of data access. Different scenarios are described as the data can be public or private and different stakeholders are entitled to request access to data or to exchange data. For municipalities, an EU regulatory framework for Business-to-Government (B2G) data-sharing that creates a safe and structured environment based on cooperation and mutual value creation that respects data privacy and security and complies with the GDPR is important and needed.

Currently, the overall framework for data-sharing in the EU is defined through the **European Data Strategy,** which aims to make the EU a leader in a data-driven society. It aims to create a single market for data to flow freely within the EU and across sectors for the benefit of businesses, researchers and public administrations. The EU Data Governance Act and the EU Data Act are the main pillars in the implementation of the Data Strategy.

- The **Data Governance Act (DGA),** applicable since September 2023, is a cross-sectoral instrument that aims to regulate the reuse of publicly held, protected data by boosting data-sharing through the regulation of novel data intermediaries and by encouraging the sharing of data for altruistic purposes. Both personal and non-personal data are in scope of the DGA, and wherever personal data is concerned, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) applies. It defines key terms such as "data altruism", among others, and establishes the European Data Innovation Board (EDIB) with representatives from Member states.

- The **Data Act,** applicable from September 2025 onwards, complements the Data Governance Act. While the Data Governance Act regulates processes and structures that facilitate voluntary data-sharing, the Data Act clarifies who can create value from data and under which conditions. The Data Act is particularly relevant to local public authorities as it sets an obligation for private actors to share data with public authorities in case of emergency situations. However, this falls short of the need for cities to have access to data from private companies in a broader context to improve public services and design preventive policies and measures.

- The **Interoperable Europe Act** aims to ensure technical, organisational and semantic interoperability of data and systems, especially when designing public services with a cross-border element. It defines the benefits of interoperability in terms of enabling data-sharing and use and developing efficient and interoperable platforms and systems. It is particularly relevant for public authorities as it foresees mandatory interoperability assessments.

STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

ONLINE DISCUSSION

To start the dialogue about how to improve data access in the urban context, the online panel set the scene by defining common challenges that participants (who work actively with cities) are facing. A first input was delivered by Living-in-EU on the work of data spaces, followed by an overview of policy activities on the EU level by DG CNECT. Mission City Kranj provided insights into their experiences with smart city applications and concrete requests arising from their work on the ground.

The main questions for the three break-out group discussions were: **"Who owns the data; how can ownership, business models and privacy rights be balanced with the need for data-sharing, and how can EU policies address data challenges and opportunities regarding the Twin Transition?"**
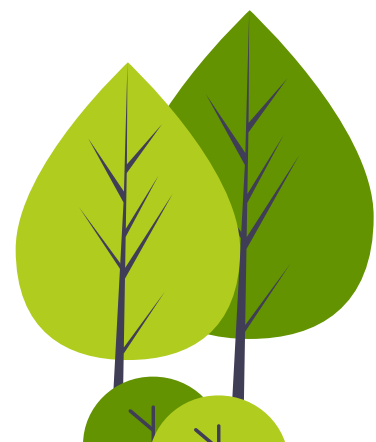
Main topics of discussion:

• How might a **strategy for data-sharing** that distinguishes between different levels (e.g. citizen to city, business to city) support access to data? There is a need for incentives and EU policies and regulations to focus more on what requires support and empowerment (and not just limits or bans). Governance and software tools are required, plus better **communications** to ensure the awareness and trust of citizens, industry and government. Access to data is well-addressed in various legal acts, but it seems there is little knowledge of existing data-related policies. We need to **communicate** about key issues, who is affected, how to overcome silos and involve stakeholders in an equitable way.

• How might national initiatives **support standardisation** regarding legal ownership and practical management? How do national data warehouses with expertise and resources serve industry and data requests? Are centralised hubs effective in data collection, providing templates to guarantee data quality? Can they reduce the need for municipalities to govern data? How can data and tools be consolidated within dataspaces, and what new, actionable tools, like standards and open licenses for all (not just commercial use), are needed?

• How might **upskilling** and **learning in cities contribute to improved data access?** How can **barriers be overcome**, so data-sharing becomes easier (it needs to be convenient, as well as trusted). The quality of data needs to be improved, and silos need to be broken down concerning accessing data sets.

• The **Data Act** (entering into force in September 2025) will make a lot of data accessible (also metadata). How might the quality of the metadata be ensured and help cities build up know-how for using it? There is a general lack of understanding of how big the impact of the Data Act may be

for cities.

• **GDPR** is perceived as a barrier to data collection and sharing since all data is to some degree personal data. On the other hand, GDPR can also be perceived as an enabling opportunity to improve trust and enhance data security.

IN-PERSON DISCUSSION

The discussions of the online panel informed the in-person meeting. The in-person panel used the opportunity the Smart City Expo World Congress in Barcelona presented and included stakeholders from business and research. The focus of the second meeting was to formulate policy recommendations for EU decision-makers. Several participants took part in both panels.

The questions in the in-person panel were: **What kind of difficulties related to data governance do you experience in your day-to-day activities? And how can these be addressed at the EU level?**

Main topics of discussion:

• Perceived **lack of understanding** in cities of opportunities and management of data. How can better data governance improve the city administration internally, esp. in smaller cities? This impacts cooperation and access to data collected by companies. How can EU policies support the upskilling and confidence of local authorities using data for the Twin Transition?

• Public companies face difficulties accessing data, which can hinder their operations and decision-making. In terms of effective data

exchange, there is often **no common baseline for policies and practices at the local level**. There is a need to encourage both cities and businesses to exchange data. This cooperation can be fostered by understanding each other's needs and finding mutually beneficial solutions. Cities may need more leverage to mandate data-sharing with specific policies in place. Therefore, they need to be convinced of the benefits of data-sharing. This can be achieved by demonstrating how data exchange can meet their needs and improve their operations.

• Why do **companies** not share data with cities? Due to the costs of sharing and the risks included. The value that data-sharing can generate cannot be calculated before the data is used. Therefore, both trust-building and enforcement mechanisms to enable data-sharing are essential.

• The current data policy landscape is a combination of **many standards and different policies** that need consideration and clarification at multiple levels. New policies do not reduce the number of existing regulations. Instead, a minimal **interoperability of policies** is needed, so they complement each other and add up. For this, we need to think about what the foundation is that we do not want to give up and how to build trust and coherence via transparent communication.

• There's a significant reluctance to change due to **fears of potential risks**. Public utilities tend to be conservative, which slows down the adoption of new technologies and processes. The financial implications of adopting new technologies need to be carefully assessed.

• **Privacy concerns** were mentioned by several participants. Trust-building in the

context of data-sharing and an aligned understanding of GDPR rules are essential, enabled by better information provision on GDPR.

SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussions showed that the following issues need closer consideration in the EU policy landscape for urban data governance (in the context of improving access to data for public actors):

• **Capacity-building:** a clear need to focus on upskilling, especially on the city level, and improve information-sharing about existing policies addressing data access. Specific focus should be on the Data Act and existing data governance frameworks, such as the blueprint of the Smart Communities Data Space. There is not necessarily a requirement for more policy but more practical support for cities.

• **Communications:** clear and transparent communication about the use of personal data enables trust-building, and citizens can better understand for what purpose the data is collected and what benefits it brings them. Further dialogue is required on how policy can reduce barriers for stakeholders to interact with regulations and to create a common understanding of how

policies are interpreted and implemented. In particular, various definitions of GDPR make navigation in this area complex and potentially legally challenging for all urban stakeholders. To improve the regulatory landscape, it is important to stress that when local entities face problems on the ground, highlighting these challenges to EU decision-makers can contribute to more effective policy development.

• **Leadership and strategy:** an identified need for improved strategies for data-sharing. Other types of leadership are needed to enable cooperation among different stakeholders, e.g. citizen to city, business to city or national level. Also enhanced standardisation was viewed as beneficial.

• **Technical and legal requirements:** a particular need to address issues of data quality (metadata, silos, open standards), consolidation of tools, as well as implications and opportunities related to GDPR. A minimal interoperability of policies is needed. Bringing actors who face the challenges on the ground together with those who have the legal knowledge to support the application of policies would be welcome.

The EU could potentially support the facilitation of a long-term process of city-level initiatives, such as working groups, communities of practice, workshops and/or training programmes to upskill local authorities (and other stakeholders) on data use. The main objective would be to bring together and facilitate collaboration among city officials, data experts, legal advisors and technology providers to exchange knowledge and solutions for improving urban data governance. They should be focused on specific topics, such as data-sharing, GDPR compliance, data security, standardisation and interoperability, which were discussed during the two dialogues. This would help to bridge the gaps between experts and practitioners across tech, policy and legal fields in cities. Together with an improved enforcement of existing regulations, this would improve data access/governance and enhance the effectiveness of urban climate solutions.

OUTLOOK

Given the depth and breadth of conversation in these Stakeholder Panels, NetZeroCities is eager to ensure the productive exchanges are continued with our partners and across the Cities Mission.

Some opportunities to highlight conclusions and support further engagement include:

• Results will be integrated and further addressed in the NetZeroCities White Paper to be published in late summer 2025, as well as at the Cities Mission Conference in Vilnius (May 2025). Findings may also be used to feed into collaboration activities with Cluster Projects, such as TIPS4PED, BIPED and Urbreath. The report will also be shared with National Platform initiatives to understand to what extent the issues of city data collection, sharing and re-use are being addressed at multiple governance levels.

• NetZeroCities will assess how to engage further in the rollout of the Common European Data Spaces and look specifically at the ones for the Green Deal, Mobility and Smart Cities and Communities.

• In the framework of its legal working group, the Living-in.EU community will continue to follow the implementation of the relevant legislative acts and accompany local and regional authorities. The annual work plan of the legal working group will be published in January 2025. One of the first activities of 2025 will be in collaboration with the Interoperability Unit of DG DIGIT of the European Commission on presenting the guidelines for carrying out interoperability assessments by public authorities, where cities and regions will be able to ask questions on the guidelines. More info in January 2025. For the upcoming activities, please consult Living-in.EU events page Events | Living in EU.

•Bruegel - Overview of EU Legislations in the Digital Sector: https://www.bruegel.org/system/files/2024-06/Bruegel_factsheet_2024_0.pdf

•Connect Europe - Shaping policies to support investment:https://www.connecteurope.org/insights/reports/shaping-policies-support-investment-very-high-capacity-networks

•Data4pt: Unlocking the power of data for sustainable mobility: https://data4pt-project.eu/

•DUET Digital Twins: https://www.digitalurbantwins.com/

• ePlanet: https://zenodo.org/records/12580204

•Gaia-X - Position Paper on data-centric Government: https://gaia-x-hub.de/en/position-paper/pp-gx-data-centric-government/

•Interreg Europe - Digital transformation of public services: https://www.interregeurope.eu/sites/default/files/2024-03/Policy%20brief%20on%20digital%20transformation%20of%20public%20services.pdf

•European Data Space for Smart Communities - Multi-Stakeholder Governance Scheme: https://inventory.ds4sscc.eu/multi-stakeholder-governance

•OECD (2023), Smart City Data Governance: Challenges and the Way Forward, OECD Urban Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e57ce301-en.

•SPARCS - Sustainable energy positive and zero carbon communities: https://sparcs.info/en/

• The New Hanse project: Governing open data for the public interest:https://thenew.institute/media/pages/documents/529e984d02-1698245881/the-new-hanse_blueprint_governing-urban-data-for-the-public-interest.pdf

Stakeholder Consultation Panels (SCP) are organised once a year to bring together different pan-European stakeholders to discuss policy recommendations on EU level in support of cities´ just transition to climate neutrality. The topic is based on cities' experiences, as well as the influence of the EU policy context. The discussions with participants from business, academia and civil society are designed to lead to a more integrated problem-framing and spark new ideas on what needs to change (in broad policy terms). Outputs are intended to improve the enabling environment for Mission Cities. By integrating a broad range of stakeholder perspectives relevant to Mission Cities, these discussions can contribute to strengthened trust, greater knowledge exchange and better cooperation among Mission Cities and their wider ecosystem of actors across Member States.

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