



Sustainable cities: how to make them more inclusive? An eco-intercultural transition

Concept note



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Sustainable development is a concept that has been evolving over time. Usually defined as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need”, sustainable development was initially intimately linked to environmental sustainability concerns, referring to a commitment to achieve progress and economic welfare in a way which is compatible with the preservation of natural resources and of the services ecosystems provide.

Yet, “people” and the “society” have been gaining a central role in the scope of sustainable development until the latter became the foundation for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is a worldwide commitment to sustainability for everyone which builds on the Millennium Development Goals and tries to address their gaps.

In its preamble, the Agenda 2030 defines itself as a “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity”, bridging the economic, social and environmental agenda around the pledge to leave no one behind. The Sustainable Development goals therefore address global challenges linked but going beyond biodiversity conservation and climate change.

However, while there is extensive guidance, scientific knowledge, legally binding instruments, and relatively big funding for speeding up programmes, initiatives and actions aimed at biodiversity conservation, ecosystems restoration, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and fostering the ecological transition to more sustainable models both nationally and locally, there is a gap in dealing with sustainability in a way which is really inclusive.

Taking the core principles of the Intercultural Cities approach into account, sustainable development policies and actions should ensure equal rights and opportunities to all, build on the diversity advantage, and enable meaningful intercultural interaction, active participation, co-creation, co-development and co-evaluation.

So, how do we make this happen?

Why should cities work on inclusive sustainability?


Cities wishing to achieve the intercultural transformation of their cities have many reasons to try and bridge their environmental and inclusion agenda.

- The **SDGs** address many fields in which inclusion matters such as well-being (SDG3), access to quality education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), inclusive sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (SDG8), reducing inequalities (SDG10), promoting peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16). Further, SDG 11 targeting specifically urban environments by aiming to create sustainable cities and communities.
- Climate change, and more generally the environmental and health related crisis, have disproportioned negative impacts on socially disadvantaged groups, including migrants and minorities, who are further exposed to environmental stress factors because of urban segregation, unsatisfactory housing conditions, and job precarity. Left unchecked, these inequalities will grow, and there is a risk for already disadvantaged populations to not get access to an even share of the benefits produced by sustainable processes. The involvement of people with diverse background, including migrants, into the sustainable transformation of their city is indeed urgent and a matter of **equality and social justice**.





- **Engaging with diverse groups** could benefit and speed up the ecological transition in cities, in particular in those sectors that are experiencing a shift towards more responsible production and consumption (such as agriculture, construction, fisheries), where migrants are still overrepresented. Research shows that diversity boosts creativity as it confronts different opinions, know-how, approaches, and methods.
- **Acknowledging diversity** also means recognising the value of traditional knowledge on the basis of reciprocity among cultures. Applied to environmental planning and management, this approach allows to make the best possible use of traditional knowledge, migrants skills and know-how, in particular in the context of climate change adaptation and mitigation measures.
- The participation of migrants and refugees in activities related to the sustainable development of their cities could have bi-directional effects by promoting social trust, positive interaction, ownership, and sense of belonging, thus **enhancing their integration**.
- The recent Covid-19 crisis has brought evidence that public authorities who managed to involve their migrant populations at the earliest stages of the pandemic have achieved faster recovery. The diverse demography of our territories nowadays makes it indispensable to involve everyone in **crisis management**, as well as disaster risk prevention, reduction, and mitigation.
- The contribution of indigenous and local communities is already recognised [by art. 8\(j\) of the convention on biological diversity](#) which acknowledges the potential of traditional knowledge for the development of innovative solutions.

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Finally, in terms of **opportunities** for city departments, the services working on environmental issues and greening policies have much in common with those working on intercultural policies. Both are striving to mainstream their principles into holistic policies, strategies, programmes, and projects that will potentially change habits, power relations, and structures within the society. Both require adaptation to a changed world and promote the restructuring of society based on a fairer share of resources and opportunities. There are also examples of potential reciprocal benefits that the two domains can bring to each other. For instance, the development of public transports and cycling Infrastructure which is thriving in many European cities because it is proved to drastically decrease CO2 emissions, can reduce segregation and promote social inclusion if planned in a way to connect segregated neighbourhoods to the rest of the city, thus increasing the opportunities for intercultural interaction.

There is scope for aligning the respective agenda and join forces towards common objectives.

Green urban planning for intercultural cities

- Green urban planning is thriving in many cities in order to achieve more sustainable territories. But how can local green infrastructures become inclusive? Which policies must be put in place to ensure the greening of cities becomes a factor to reduce segregation and increase intercultural interaction? The ICC programme has collected and assessed experiences, challenges, needs, and practices from the local level with the view to produce guidance that can help policy-makers and practitioners design inclusive sustainable cities.
- The research has analysed information on the implementation of the relevant Sustainable Development Goals at local level, the methodologies and examples of green infrastructure models, measures and actions as drivers which encourage cross-cultural interaction.
- Based on that, and in cooperation with “[Working with the 99%](#)”, the ICC programme will issue a Policy brief to help local authorities engaging into a more sustainable social and spatial transformation of their territories.

Previous ICC work on sustainable cities

In 2021 the ICC programme worked on the topic of **circular and inclusive economic models**. Despite the proven positive economic impact of diversity on society and business, inclusion is happening at a very slow pace. The negative focus on migration continues to overshadow the opportunities migrants bring to host societies. On average, migrants are more exposed to exploitation, discrimination and have less resilience to economic shocks caused by events such as natural disasters (for example flooding, fires, drought) as well pandemics like Covid-19.

The circular economy is a sustainable economic model, developed as an alternative to linear economy. It is a model where value is generated through continuous circulation of resources with high utilisation and value retention. In a circular economy, the planetary boundaries for economic activity are taken into account and solutions are formulated from a systems and human-centric design perspective.

However, experience shows that a green and circular economy is not necessarily inclusive by design. To achieve inclusion, a green transition should incorporate the values of interculturalism. As circular economy promotes local and distributed regenerative products, it is a model that offers unique social opportunities to cities if implemented in the right way.

The challenges of modern society concentrate in cities but cities are also centres for change.

The [ICC Policy brief on circular economy](#) helps cities catalyse wider system transformation through inclusive policies for social innovation.

