



Europe's Urban Answer to a Fracturing World: How a Strong Co-Funded Partnership on Cities will Position Europe Globally

Europe's role in the world is shifting. Over the past few years, we have witnessed some of the most profound geopolitical changes in decades, unfolding alongside accelerating climate and biodiversity crises. Europe is navigating this turbulence at a moment when economic uncertainty, political fragmentation and external pressures are reshaping the global order.

Much of the current debate focuses on the role of the EU and its nation states in responding to this "new world". Yet Europe's real strength lies in the unique histories, creative capacities and lived freedoms of and in its cities: **European urban areas offer a powerful pathway for positioning Europe as a globally competitive and genuinely creative region**, one grounded in democracy, culture/cultural heritage, equity and social cohesion.

European cities have long functioned as laboratories: places where new technologies, governance models and forms of collective organization are tested, adapted and contested in response to the global challenges, while safeguarding the conditions for freedom as a lived reality for residents (Snyder, 2023). Building on this legacy, **a strong, co-funded European partnership about cities can reinforce Europe's ability to respond to global challenges:** an urban model unique to Europe that turns diversity, experimentation and solidarity into lasting strengths.

Europe's cities are among its strongest global assets: they attract talent, investment and innovation, they anchor industrial value chains, and they are places where people want to live, work, and build businesses. The European cities allow for a deepening of the very idea of "Europeanness" as a way of living together, respecting differences and diversity. Getting urban transitions right is therefore not only a climate necessity, but a strategic imperative for positioning Europe in a rapidly geopolitical landscape.

If cities are where Europe's ambitions are ultimately delivered, then Europe's ability to collaborate across borders is what determines whether those ambitions can be realized at scale. **No single city, country or region can solve urban transitions alone**, and Europe's strength lies in its capacity to pool knowledge, align investments, learn collectively and scale solutions across diverse urban contexts.

This is why **the partnership mechanism is essential to reinforce the transformational potential of urban areas in Europe** in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. It is the collaborative format through which Europe turns diversity into advantage, fragmentation into coordination, and experimentation into impact. Against this background, urban transitions emerge clearly as a natural thematic domain for a European partnership.

Driving Urban Transitions (DUT): From Legacy to Systemic Impact

The **Driving Urban Transitions (DUT) Partnership** stands on more than a decade of European cooperation on urban transformation. It positions cities as key actors in Europe's response to climate, economic, and geopolitical pressures. At the same time, it consolidates fragmented efforts into a coordinated framework for learning, experimentation, and scaling across diverse urban contexts.

Building on the legacy of JPI Urban Europe (2012-), DUT represents a shift from strategic coordination to mission-oriented delivery at scale. Since 2022, DUT has operationalized the JPI UE legacy through challenge-driven calls, establishing itself as Europe's leading transnational platform for urban transition research, innovation and implementation.

Since its launch under Horizon Europe, DUT has delivered consecutive annual calls (2022–2025), funding over 130 projects and mobilizing a broad innovation ecosystem. Beyond funding, DUT has established a diverse portfolio of impact and engagement formats, designed to accelerate uptake, replication and policy learning across Europe:

1. Mobilizing funders, countries and actors at scale

DUT brings together 70+ research- and innovation-funders and policy partners from more than 30 countries, aligning national, regional and European priorities into a coherent co-funded R&I program. As a transnational partnership, DUT functions not only as a funding instrument but as a multilevel governance platform, anchoring European objectives nationally towards city-level implementation. In this capacity, it operationalizes coordinated support across the current and future multiannual financial frameworks as called for by the EU Agenda for Cities (European Commission, 2025).

By combining EU strategic direction with national funding commitments and local experimentation, DUT reduces fragmentation, strengthens ownership among Member States and enables policy coherence. **The partnership currently engages 261 cities and over 500 organizations across research, industry and civil society**, to tackle EU's most pressing challenges, from the housing crisis to climate resilience. Moving away from traditional project-based financing, DUT acts as an experimental lab for funders to develop a program portfolio of integrated approaches needed for deep, structural urban transformation. DUT operates as a delivery platform to test approaches and collectively learn how to accelerate transitions at scale across Europe's diverse urban territories.

2. A core contributor to European and global urban missions

Through its three Transition Pathways on **Positive Energy Districts, 15-minute Cities, and Circular Urban Economies**, DUT provides a mission-oriented framework that aligns closely with the objectives of the EU Cities Mission while reflecting the integrated nature of urban transformation. The Transition Pathways serve as strategic entry points for cities and funders, aiming to achieve impact across thematic domains such as resilience, digitalization, cultural values, social inclusion, governance, business models and technological development.

DUT is a **key implementation partner of the EU Cities Mission, with 53 Mission Cities already engaged in DUT projects**. DUT also directly supports the **objectives of the EU Cities Agenda**, which calls for integrated, place-based and multilevel approaches to urban development, and for stronger alignment between EU policies, funding instruments and city-level implementation.

DUT's thematic framework provides the partnership with a pipeline structure in which solutions are developed and tested in cities, creating a strong basis for subsequent scaling and replication through other EU funded initiatives and mission-related instruments. DUT's supporting activities explicitly aim to facilitate mainstreaming, replication and policy uptake, positioning **DUT as a key enabler for translating mission objectives and Climate City Contracts (CCC) into implementation pathways for cities**, while contributing to broader EU priorities on competitiveness, clean transition and strategic resilience.

Furthermore, **DUT co-leads the Urban Transitions Mission (UTM) under Mission Innovation**, strengthening internationalization, global integration and mutual learning. Through UTM, knowledge and solutions generated in DUT projects are embedded in a **global city knowledge and learning hub**, enabling replication and exchanges between European and non-European cities, and allowing European approaches to be continuously enriched through global experience and diverse urban contexts.



3. Strengthening competitiveness through private sector innovation

The EU Cities Agenda (European Commission, 2025) frames cities as pivotal for economic convergence and competitiveness, and as engines of innovation where new solutions can be developed, tested and scaled. DUT operationalises this vision by embedding private sector innovation, especially SMEs, at the core of urban transitions, directly supporting Europe's Competitiveness Compass and Clean Industrial Deal. **Across DUT calls, more than 300 businesses participate in over 75% of funded projects. Around 80% of these businesses are SMEs**, and more than two-thirds receive direct funding as project partners or coordinators. This strong SME participation aligns directly with the central role of SMEs across the four policy windows of the European Competitiveness Fund, reinforcing their contribution to innovation, scaling, industrial transformation and market uptake in cities.

By aligning urban research and innovation with industrial, clean-tech and circular-economy priorities, DUT helps cities act as launchpads for strategic technologies produced in Europe. Thereby, **DUT fosters strategic city–industry partnerships**, particularly in areas such as decarbonizing urban mobility, transforming the built environment, and deploying clean and circular solutions. In doing so, urban transitions become not only a climate imperative but also a driver of European competitiveness and strategic resilience, reducing dependencies on external energy and resource systems.

DUT is a transition-ready, place-based and mission-aligned partnership: capable of renewal, deeper integration or structural evolution, while safeguarding our legacy and continuing to support Europe's cities as engines of innovation, competitiveness and sustainable transformation.

Building on the experiences of almost 15 years of joint programming, **we call for a strengthened, co-funded partnership on urban transitions in FP10 with:**

- a standalone thematic scope on urban transitions,
- explicit recognition of cities as societal transformation systems,
- reinforced public–private–city innovation pipelines,
- and a mandate to scale solutions across Europe.

References:

- 1 European Commission. (2025, December 3). *An EU Agenda for Cities: Driving Growth and Prosperity* (COM(2025) 739 final) [PDF]. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/communication/2025-cities-agenda/2025-cities-agenda-communication.pdf
2. Snyder, T. (2025). *On freedom*. Vintage Publishing.