

Explorative Proposal for a Thematic Partnership under the Ljubljana Agreement

Greening cities

Challenge:

Cities are at the forefront of the interlinked climate change and biodiversity crises. They face more frequent flooding, drought, heatwaves, and intense rain events along with other climate-related hazards; at the same time, they suffer increased air pollution, water scarcity and growing food insecurity in part due to biodiversity loss driven by land-use change, for example.

Together, these challenges are increasingly impacting citizens health, water quality and resources, built infrastructure, air pollution, and food security.

Large, healthy, and diverse forests contribute to addressing these challenges by providing carbon storage and sequestration, reducing air pollution, purifying water, and halting loss of habitats and species. Urban forests - commonly reported under the broader concept of green infrastructure or green space – additionally provide benefits to human health and wellbeing.

Green space can improve physical and mental health, lower stress, and provide space for recreation and exercise. However, poorer neighbourhoods often have lower rates of access to green space, and children from nature-deficient areas are more likely to experience health, social and academic performance problems. Moreover, not all green space is created equal. Quality is important not only for the environment but also for socio-economic reasons.

While cities are already working to increase green infrastructure, they face several challenges including from technical knowledge, space shortage, long-term funding for maintenance, and siloed action.

City administrations have been looking for ways to engage citizens, academia, and the private sector to support tree planting efforts to green cities and create ecological corridors but they cannot do it alone. Collaboration with multi-level stakeholders is crucial to build broader partnerships for resilient and biodiverse forests that can protect against increasing temperatures and extreme events while boosting biodiversity and enhancing the services it provides.

Opportunity:

The cooling effect of urban trees can range from 2-8°, reducing the demand in energy use for air conditioning, while an increase in canopy cover by 10% reduces surface temperatures on average by 1.4°¹.

Stepping up efforts for tree planting in collaboration with local stakeholders and multi-level partners would support efforts to combat climate change and restore biodiversity.

Realising the potential of urban tree planting and green areas means co-creating coherent and long-term strategies with regional and national partners as well as with local stakeholders to ensure broader connectivity and the creation of larger ecological corridors.

Mission of the proposed thematic partnership:

To realise the potential of urban forests for their cooling effect, restoration of biodiversity, and vital contribution to human health and wellbeing.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/forests/swd_3bn_trees.pdf p.17

To build the capacity of cities to plant and grow the “right tree in the right place”, to reduce the urban heat island effect, restore biodiversity and ensure connectivity.

To develop a governance structure in support of partnerships between multi-level stakeholders to ensure the development of connected, resilient, and biodiverse forests and green areas enhancing ecological corridors spanning local and national levels.

To develop more nuanced indicators for access to green space that consider the quality of the green space.

Contributing to Green, Productive and Just cities and building on good urban governance:

In addition to absorbing emissions and sequestering carbon, trees and green areas have an impressive cooling effect and can reduce local surface temperature thus addressing the increasing challenge of urban heat island effect.

Trees in forests form part of complex ecosystems provide home to biodiversity. The more diverse the ecosystem, the more diverse their services it can provide, multifunctionality (air and water purification, emission absorption etc). Green areas additionally have a social value promoting recreation and wellbeing.

This multifunctional role of trees, urban forests and green spaces will require an increased skill set including, for example, experts in enhanced sustainable forest management, ecotourism facilitators, engineers and designers, food experts, and data specialists.

Aligning with and supporting EU priorities:

- EU Forestry Strategy
 - o Sets out a roadmap for planting 3 billion trees by 2030
- EU Biodiversity Strategy (Urban Greening Plans / 3 billion trees by 2030)
- EU Climate Law: reduce emissions by 55% by 2030
 - o Calls for MSs to enhance natural sinks
- Zero pollution action on air, water, and soil
- European Year of Greener Cities
 - o Proposed for 2022 by EP but DG ENV suggests it'll be in 2023

Forests are recognised for their central and multifunctional role in achieving the 2050 climate neutrality target in the European Green Deal. The EU Forestry Strategy aims to unlock the potential of forests for our future and contribute to the EU's greenhouse gas emission reduction target of at least 55% by 2030, as set out in the European Climate Law. It also sets out a framework for delivering growing, healthy, diverse, and resilient EU forests that will contribute to significantly boosting biodiversity.

Reforestation, afforestation, and tree planting in urban and peri-urban areas are recognised in the EU Forestry Strategy as some of the most effective climate change and disaster risk mitigation strategies with the potential to create substantial job opportunities as well as providing broad socio-economic benefits to local communities.

The EU Forest Strategy sets out a roadmap for planting 3 billion trees by 2030 – a pledge set under the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy. This roadmap highlights the importance of planting trees in the right place, avoiding, for example, land that is of high value for climate and biodiversity, while ensuring wider connectivity. It underlines the importance of setting up good governance to facilitate collaboration between citizens, and public authorities at all levels.

Tree planting will additionally contribute to the EU's Zero Pollution Action Plan on air, water, and soil.

In a recent resolution², the European Parliament called for a Year of European Greener Cities in 2022, underlining the important role greener cities can play in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling the commitments of the New Urban Agenda, particularly when it comes to improving the use of water resources and improving biodiversity in the urban environment. Tree planting – when carried out in full respect of ecological principals – addresses both challenges.

Addressing the challenges through an Urban Agenda partnership:

Collaboration between local, regional, national and EU levels is crucial to developing a truly connected and coherent network of ecological corridors able to boost biodiversity, address climate change and provide resilience. Current efforts by individual actors have thus far failed to halt habitat fragmentation and the related decline in biodiversity. Only together, will these actors succeed in putting a halt to and reversing the trend in unprecedented biodiversity loss and tackling climate change.

City authorities have unique understanding of their local environmental context but rely on the European Commission and Member States for funding and policy and technical support.

This thematic partnership would work on all two of the three pillars relevant for the Urban Agenda. It would address better knowledge issues in regards to technical planting aspects, building capacity, expertise and guidelines on urban tree planting, as well as addressing better funding issues by providing understanding and access to EU funding opportunities and collecting data on funding needs in relation to urban tree planting.

Building on previous TPs:

This thematic partnership would build on several previous partnerships. It would build on the partnership for **Sustainable Land Use and Nature based Solutions** promoting liveable and compact city model and mainstreaming of nature-based solutions as a tool to build sustainable, resilient and liveable urban spaces. It would build on the **Climate Adaptation** partnership building knowledge on tree planting and the development of urban forests for climate resilience.

It would build on the thematic partnership for **Air Quality** by building on the awareness raising of the health impacts of air pollution and linking this to the benefits of tree planting and urban forests for air quality to garner support from citizens and other stakeholders.

² https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0243_EN.html