

This text is based on Chapter 8 of the book “Higher Education and SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities”, edited by Julio Lumbreras and Jaime Moreno-Serna, published in Emerald Editorial. The chapter is authored by Jaime Moreno-Serna, Olga Kordas, Julio Lumbreras, Åsa Minoz, Nayla Saniour and Harald Rohracher (Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain; KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden; Linköping University, Sweden) and analyses the unique role of universities in the creation and consolidation of national platforms of cities working to become healthier, more liveable places while achieving climate neutrality.

“National Platforms to Transform Cities Using Collective Experimentation and Scale: The Case of Sweden and Spain”.

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SINTHESYS

Cities are key to achieving climate neutrality, but realizing this vision requires coordinated, mission-driven action that engages diverse stakeholders across sectors. This strategy demands measurable goals, inclusive governance, and long-term collaboration between public, private, and civil society actors. While traditional city networks have enabled learning, they lack a rooted connection with the national context. In response, National Cities Mission Platforms are emerging to facilitate collective action within countries, enabling shared learning, regulatory alignment, and strategic coordination.

Universities often play a key role in supporting these platforms, valued for their neutrality, convening power, and institutional stability. They are particularly well-positioned to initiate National Cities Mission Platforms in their early stages, aligning shared goals with the interests of diverse urban stakeholders and fostering trust and collaboration. Leveraging their resources and networks, universities can attract attention, engage early participants, and ensure broad-based involvement. From the outset, they embed legitimacy and knowledge into the platform, making learning processes informed and evidence-based. Through research, training, and analytical expertise, universities help guide the platform's strategic direction and contribute to long-term, systemic urban transformation.

National platforms represent a crucial shift toward scalable urban transformation, offering a more effective model for addressing complex sustainability challenges and advancing the EU's climate goals.

Case Study: Viable Cities & citiES 2030

Viable Cities (Sweden) and citiES 2030 (Spain) are leading national programs advancing urban climate neutrality through mission-oriented approaches. Both foster collaboration across cities, government levels, and sectors, emphasizing systemic change and learning.

Viable Cities uses tools like the Transition Lab, a structured space for trust-building, shared learning, and strategic alignment among its 23 cities. Another key innovation is the Climate City Contracts (CCCs), which secure political commitment and outline concrete, financially grounded plans for climate action, reviewed annually and adapted iteratively.

citiES 2030 adopted the CCC model in 2021, supporting Spanish cities in aligning with the EU Cities Mission. It provides services including networking, training, and implementation support. A flagship training initiative is its summer course, bringing together city stakeholders to build trust, leadership, and collaborative skills in a dynamic, multi-city learning environment.

A notable implementation project involves seven major Spanish cities jointly advancing energy-efficient housing rehabilitation, aiming to renovate one million homes. This initiative applies a portfolio approach to overcome regulatory, financial, and organizational barriers while promoting social equity, local capacity, and innovation.

The Viable Cities (Sweden) and citiES 2030 (Spain) programs showcase mission-driven approaches to urban climate neutrality, with universities playing a central role in fostering collaboration, providing expertise, and enabling systemic change.

In Sweden, the Transition Lab builds trust and cross-city learning with support from KTH, while in Spain, UPM contributes through educational innovation and action research, particularly in advancing just transition principles.

Conclusions

In pursuit of climate-neutral cities by 2030, the EU's mission-driven approach highlights the importance of collaborative city networks and the emergence of **National Cities Mission Platforms** as a shift from isolated local efforts to coordinated, country-level action. These platforms promote shared learning, joint transformation, and systemic change, with universities playing a critical reinforcing role. Programs like **Viable Cities** and **citiES 2030** demonstrate how partnerships with universities can strengthen intermediary structures through their convening power, interdisciplinary expertise, and educational innovation.

The following outlines the key functions of these national platforms, along with the potential contributions of universities in enhancing and supporting each of them: (1) fostering communities and interpersonal connections through their legitimacy and emerging role as active unifiers; (2) supporting ambitious commitments and strategic planning with interdisciplinary expertise in fields such as urban planning, finance, and stakeholder engagement; (3) advancing capability building through experience-based learning and innovative pedagogy; (4) enabling transformative action by shifting from isolated research to applied, city-driven knowledge; and (5) promoting multi-level alignment by serving as stable spaces for dialogue and long-term cooperation among diverse actors.

These functions allow national platforms to embody systemic approaches, applying tools like **Climate City Contracts (CCCs)** and multi-city programs to address regulatory barriers, improve energy efficiency, and build local capacity. In turn, universities benefit by aligning their missions with societal needs, fostering socially focused research and training, and evolving their institutional role.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, including the absence of established models, funding systems focused on short-term execution, fragmented institutional structures, and coordination difficulties across governance levels. Emphasizing knowledge exchange, just transitions, and organizational learning is vital to overcoming these obstacles and fostering urban transformations that integrate social, ecological, and economic sustainability. Unlocking collective intelligence across these platforms represents a powerful opportunity to reshape the future of European cities.