

# UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2030

## Cities together for a sustainable Baltic Sea region

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## I. Introduction

The Union of the Baltic Cities Sustainability Action Programme 2030 is the guiding document for the whole UBC network in the work for sustainable development in the Baltic Sea Region.

The Union of the Baltic Cities Sustainability Action Programme 2030 is adopted as an annex to the UBC 2030 Strategy by the UBC XVI General Conference in October 2021 and it gives a strategic direction to fulfil the UBC's vision for sustainable UBC cities and a sustainable Baltic Sea region.

The Union of the Baltic Cities Sustainability Action Programme 2030 has been drafted in close cooperation with UBC member cities, UBC commissions, and strategic partners identifying together signals, challenges, and goals for the next decade in our region for creating sustainable Baltic cities.

### **Our ambition for sustainable UBC cities until 2030 and beyond**

The Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) has during its existence been focusing on making the Baltic Sea Region more sustainable, attractive, and more resilient to challenges in the environment. UBC mobilizes the shared potential of its member cities for democratically, economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally sustainable development of the Baltic Sea Region. UBC envisions the Baltic Sea Region as a dynamic, innovative, and attractive global growth centre, where success is based on smart, green, resource-efficient, and sustainable economic and social development.

### **Global challenges, regional cooperation, local action**

Climate change is affecting every region worldwide. Natural disasters like floods, storms or heat waves are increasing in all regions in the world, including the Baltic Sea Region and we can already see and feel the tangible consequences of climate change affect our cities, ecosystems, and environment. Climate change related effects and consequences travel across borders and their interconnected nature is evident, which calls for more structured response from all sectors of society.

According to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report, scientists are observing changes in the Earth's climate across the whole climate system and the report highlights the urgency of immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>1</sup>

Cities are key actors in making a change in the region, among other things by influencing national-level policies, implementing sustainable solutions in city development and raising awareness among citizens. Even though many UBC cities are already forerunners in sustainable solutions, more ambitious climate goals and concrete actions are needed from UBC cities.

### **Main approach in the UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2030**

Climate change and our regional and local response to it, is the main driver in UBC lead activities on urban sustainability and the central approach in this new UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2030 – together we strive to decrease our impact and increase the quality of life of our present and future citizens.

Closely connected to the global challenge of climate change, UBC commits to implement the [UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) through its activities. The global policy framework of 17 interlinked sustainable development goals (SDGs) focuses on balancing social, environmental, and economic development. This agenda highlights sustainable development and actions towards protecting our common planet and improving the lives and prospects for everyone in our cities and countries.

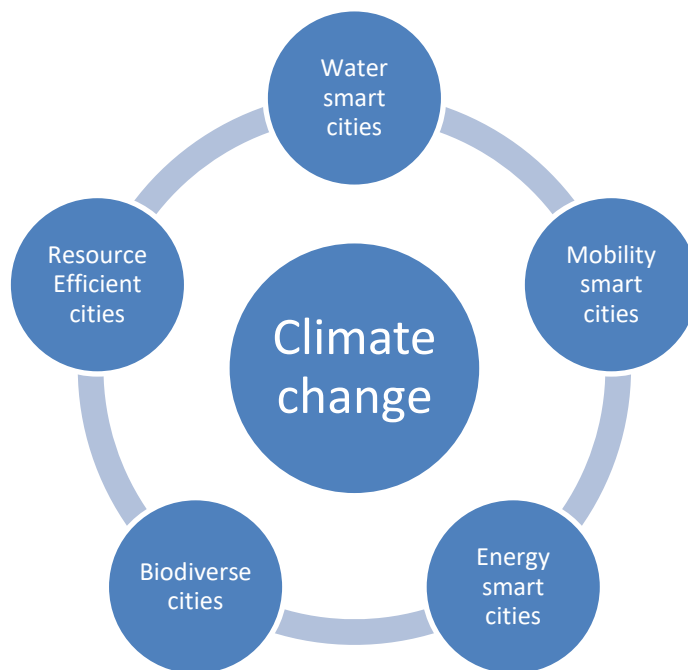
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>

This global framework has a very tangible local dimension as local and regional authorities worldwide play an important role in the implementation of the SDGs. The UN 2030 Agenda is integrated in this UBC Sustainability Action Programme and in the overall work of the seven thematical UBC commissions dealing with different dimensions of our Baltic societies' well-being.

The overarching focus in this UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2030 is on climate actions and the SDGs which are integrated in the five central topics this UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2030 discusses in detail, with concrete proposals on how to continue working together.

- “Water smart cities” - focusing on sustainable and efficient (urban) water management
- “Mobility smart cities” - promoting sustainable mobility and reducing emissions in transport
- “Energy smart cities”- endorsing low carbon and clean energy
- “Biodiverse cities”– increasing environmental protection, conservation and restoration
- “Resource Efficient cities” – building green growth, responsible & sustainable use of resources



Focusing on these five topics, the UBC aims to set an example for the rest of the world on how to become leaders in the battle against climate change, in building a resilient region, and reaching the UN 2030 Agenda.

## II. Topics we work with

### Water smart cities

Sustainable urban water management plays a crucial role in cities' development and the way they adapt to the impacts of climate change. Growing challenges in the form of population growth, urbanisation, excessive water use, pollution, and increased occurrence of climate-induced emergencies often disturb the stability of the water flow cycle forcing cities to cope with severe water uncertainties. The adaptation to extreme weather events such as storms, floods, droughts, and heatwaves requires a holistic, integrated and knowledge-based approach to urban water resource management.

The existing EU and regional HELCOM water policy frameworks provide a solid base for slowing down deterioration of water status and reducing pollution in the Baltic Sea Region, but implementation of these frameworks must be strengthened on local level in order to achieve good environmental status of the Baltic Sea and water bodies. Less than half of Europe's surface water bodies are in good ecological status and 97% of the Baltic Sea is still affected by eutrophication. Further joint efforts in addressing pollution by nutrients and emerging hazardous substances from wastewater, industrial and stormwater streams are needed.

UBC network provides guidance and support on sustainable and efficient urban water management incl. stormwater and wastewater, concrete measures to prevent surface water pollution as well as tools strengthening cities resilience and adaptive capacity to water related disasters.

The following actions underpin the UBC efforts in reaching a zero-pollution ambition for healthy and sustainably managed water ecosystems in the Baltic Sea Region:

- cities pledge their **commitment to reduce pollution and restore water quality in the Baltic Sea**,
- cities **strengthen implementation** of the [HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan](#), Nutrient Recycling Strategy, and other relevant recommendations, as appropriate and further defined during the preparation of the above-mentioned documents.
- cities **protect the ecological health of receiving water bodies** (rivers, streams, wetlands, groundwater),
- cities apply **integrated management principles** and intensify **cross-sectorial cooperation** connecting water services with other urban services (health, transport, food production, waste, or energy) to create more liveable and inclusive urban environments,
- cities increase application of **integrated stormwater management approach**,
- cities **recognize an urban relationship to water** with a more sustainable connection to the environment and the hydrological cycle as well as recognize the benefits and implement the blue-green infrastructure and water centred urban planning,
- cities **leverage stakeholder's participation** to halve freshwaters abstraction, leaving more water in the environment with minimal disturbance to natural water cycles (reduce, reuse, recycle principle) – to ensure water use on a more sustainable level.
- cities **develop and actively exchange** tools, best practices, and innovations on sustainable water resource management.

### Closely connected SDGs



## Energy smart cities

To reach carbon neutrality goals regarding energy-related targets – the reduction of consumption of fossil-based energy on both public and private sectors is needed. Energy efficiency should be increased in all fronts – production and consumption for individuals, public and private sectors, by city's own operations as well as community and district levels.

UBC cities will take a range of approaches to promoting energy efficiency, both in their own operations and in their communities, for example by supporting the work with Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAPs). Using energy more efficiently is one of the fastest, most cost-effective ways to save money, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, create jobs, and meet a growing energy demand. Cities should focus especially on areas that they can directly influence, such as energy efficient renovation of buildings, increasing share of renewable energy, heating and cooling, urban lighting and sustainable transportation, among others. To reach the carbon neutrality targets, citizens also need to be engaged. One way is to increase citizen's knowledge on energy efficiency and on how to save energy in private households.

Energy smart actions UBC cities strive for:

- to strengthen UBC cities' role as **forerunners in smart energy planning** by **strengthening the topic within the network**
- **to become forerunners in piloting, adopting, promoting, and exchanging new solutions** such as local energy production including renewable energy production, positive energy districts, energy storage, heating, and cooling, building automatization etc.
- **to prepare sustainable energy and climate action plans** (SECAPs) allowing more integrated approach for planning energy solutions and have clear monitoring mechanism in place to follow whether carbon neutrality targets have been reached.
- **to involve and engage of end users** in planning different solutions.
- **to be role models** in including **life cycle assessment** as part of **public building projects** and strive for use of different **sustainability certificates** (such as BREEAM, LEED, DGNB).
- **to build up and promote energy positive districts in line with the EU goals.**

### Closely connected SDGs



## Resource-efficient cities

Rapidly growing human population overconsumes natural resources and overconsumption is the root cause of major environmental problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss. To prevent these problems, natural resources need to be used more efficiently by moving from a linear economy model towards a circular economy.

Cities have a significant role in advancing the transition to resource-efficient policies and circular economy. City administrations can set an example of sustainable consumption in many sectors for example through their procurement activities. Resource-efficient cities make sure that they decouple their social and economic development from resource exploitation and ecological impacts. Resource-efficient cities, having transitioned from linear to circular economy facilitate technological innovation, create new sustainable opportunities for the economy and the job markets and help to promote health and wellbeing for their citizens.

UBC cities are taking a leadership role in Europe as well as globally by actively engaging in different initiatives and networks such as [ICLEI](#) and [European Circular Cities Declaration](#) among others and implementing main European frameworks like for example the [new circular economy action plan \(CEAP\)](#).

UBC cities implement resource efficiency principles through:

- **a strategic approach for sustainable public procurement** as well as good waste management as enabler of the permanent secondary raw material flow.
- proactive approach to **enable an operating environment for circular economy** by removing barriers of an international material flow and to strive cities towards resource efficiency.
- **developing and implementing holistic strategies or roadmaps for the circular economy**, including cooperation plans and hierarchy for actions and promote region-wide policies and a common line of action
- addressing the **barriers** to the regional use of resources by promoting cross-border cooperation in waste material reuse and treatment.
- committing to **adopt circular economy supporting principles** in all activities.
- **actively reinforcing knowledge and distributing know-how in the region** by joint training and close collaboration.

### Closely connected SDGs



## Biodiverse cities

Biodiversity is essential for life - a healthy ecosystem filters the air and water, helps keep the climate in balance, converts waste back into resources, pollinates and fertilises crops and much more.

Biodiversity loss and the climate crisis are interdependent. Restoring forests, soils and wetlands and creating green spaces in cities is essential for climate change mitigation. Protecting and restoring biodiversity and well-functioning ecosystems in urban areas is key to boost cities' resilience.

The [EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030](#) sets ambitious targets to protect nature, to restore ecosystems and to step up governance, monitoring and global efforts. The urban dimension is well recognised, and cities are encouraged to develop urban greening plans, incl. measures to create biodiverse and accessible urban forests, parks and gardens; urban farms; green roofs and walls; tree-lined streets; urban meadows; and urban hedges as well as helping to improve connections between green spaces. Initiatives like the [European Commission Green City Accord](#) help to facilitate this work in cities on the European level. UBC has a supporter status in the Green City Accord and encourages its member cities to join the initiative.

The need to communicate about the importance of biodiversity, climate and resilience is emerging and a holistic approach including urban planning and all urban activities, respecting biodiversity is needed. UBC is taking global, European, and regional goals and frameworks into account, when facilitating the cooperation, exchange, and capacity development of member cities in biodiversity and climate related activities.

UBC cities need to take action to mitigate biodiversity loss and adapt to the changing climate, including:

- **actively increasing and strengthening of biodiversity in urban areas**, e.g. planning ecosystem services, implementing compensation mechanisms, ensuring diversity of protected areas as well as high quality of green areas, adequate level of maintenance, etc.
- assuring necessary **political commitment, resources, and level of knowledge** on the issue of biodiversity recognizing its linkages to other high prominence topics such as climate change, wellbeing, air quality, eco-tourism, etc.
- acknowledging **importance of strategic communication on the topic of biodiversity** and related measures taken up by the local authorities in order to raise awareness of the issue and thus influence higher levels of political and administrative commitment, allocated and prioritized funding, as well as public interest and acceptance.

### Closely connected SDGs



## Mobility smart cities

While mobility and transport, including daily commuting and tourism, global supply chains and industrial production, brings many benefits to its users it is not without costs for the society. Greenhouse gas emissions, air noise and water pollution, accidents and road crashes, congestion, and biodiversity loss – all of these are also affecting health and wellbeing. At present, measures and policies have not yet sufficiently addressed these costs in a comprehensive and interconnected way, greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector are still increasing and represent now a quarter of the EU's total.

The success of the [EU Green Deal](#) depends strongly on the efforts made to make the transport system sustainable as a whole - and here cities and municipalities are at the core to take active measures locally.

UBC has been actively involved in numerous projects and initiatives to progress and promote Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan concept in the Baltic Sea Region and in Europe and together with its member cities contributed significantly to the update of the current guidelines by the European Commission.

For UBC cities, the strategic approach to sustainable mobility at local level is key to anchor and integrate this topic in overall urban local planning practices, resulting in concrete measures to tackle the challenges. Important changes and transitions towards a sustainable and resilient mobility and transport system are needed in UBC cities, including:

- the implementation of **Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP)** in UBC cities as strategic tool to address sustainable mobility comprehensively in the whole functional urban area and also across municipal borders
- **integration of mobility and climate strategies** and objectives as well as other urban plans
- UBC cities increasing the **inter- and multimodality** options in urban areas and increasing the modal share of **active modes – walking and cycling**
- **de-carbonization of public transport** in UBC cities and overall support for e-mobility
- **digitalization and smart mobility**, Mobility as a Service
- making mobility **inclusive and accessible** for different user groups
- cities that are built from a series of **15-minute neighborhoods - complete communities or walkable neighborhoods to reduce the need of commuting**

### Closely connected SDGs





### III. Goals and ambitions for 2030

#### Goals and ambitions for UBC cities

The UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2030 maps out and guides the network on sustainability activities for the rest of the decade. It gives direction and concrete measures and goals to jointly work for in order to ensure a prosperous, sustainable, and thriving Baltic Sea Region and at the same time it aims to set an example globally of the importance of regional cooperation in sustainability.

With the Sustainability Action Programme UBC commits to awareness-raising and partnership, actively reinforcing knowledge and distributing know-how in the region by providing tools for better communication, joint training, close collaboration and dissemination of information on sustainability.

Through the implementation of the UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2030, UBC strongly wishes to identify and leverage the different methods in use in UBC cities to monitor the progress on sustainability activities in the region.

UBC strives to strengthen member cities' role as:

- **role models** in restoring water quality in the Baltic Sea and in knowledge-based approach to urban water resource management – more on *Water smart cities*
- **trend setters** in smart energy planning and in piloting, adopting, and promoting new solutions – more on *Energy smart cities*
- **forerunners** in implementing resource efficiency and adopting circular economy principles in all activities– more on *Resource-efficient cities*
- **influencers** in increasing knowledge on the significance of biodiversity and its linkages to climate change among others – more on *Biodiverse cities*
- **leaders** in sustainable mobility increasing the connections between mobility and cities climate objectives – more on *Mobility smart cities*
- **examples** worldwide in ambitious climate action
- **a source of inspiration** in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals on a local level
- and to **lead the way** in sharing knowledge and best practices, promoting sustainability education and learning in all levels of society and to foster an open, inclusive and participatory approach in its activities

On a concrete level UBC will support and encourage member cities to strive for common goals and take concrete measures to advance sustainability actions in the region:

- more UBC cities will apply **sustainable urban water management principles** (including drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater) recognizing the connection between services, urban planning/design and the basin.
- more UBC cities will prepare and implement **Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans** (SE-CAPs) allowing more integrated approach for planning energy solutions and have **clear monitoring mechanism** in place to follow whether carbon neutrality targets have been reached

- more UBC cities will prepare and implement **biodiversity action plans**
- more UBC cities will have a **working circular economy ecosystem**
- more UBC cities will implement **Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans**
- a growing number of UBC cities will continue to **report their climate data to CDP** and to strengthen the Baltic Sea Region as a forerunner region in benchmarking the performance.
- more UBC cities will report on the progress of the UN 2030 Agenda by taking part in **the Voluntary Local Review** process.

### **Goals for cooperation on regional, European, and global level**

UBC strives to be an active and reliable network and cooperation partner on a Baltic Sea Region, European and global level:

- UBC actively works to create our common goal – a sustainable and green **Baltic Sea Region**, together with other actors in the region.
- UBC will be actively involved and promote its member cities in **European** initiatives like the [Covenant of Mayors](#) and the [Green City Accord](#). UBC will showcase member cities and provide them with good examples from other cities in Europe.
- UBC actively follows relevant policy developments on regional, European, and **global level** to bring them to the local level of the member cities, building a bridge from the local level to other levels of governance.

## IV. Working together to reach the goals

The core activity of UBC is to network – with member cities, internally with UBC bodies, as well as with external partners and stakeholders. Common efforts are needed in the region and also beyond, to ensure a sustainable future. UBC processes and activities are transparent and open to interested partners. UBC offers a variety of possibilities to join the efforts of making the Baltic Sea Region cities economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally sustainable.

### Internal cooperation in UBC

UBC is a network organisation with seven thematic commissions. The Sustainability Action Programme 2030 is a strategic document for the whole organisation, concretized by the commissions' yearly action plans. The implementation of the UBC Sustainability Action Programme is led by the UBC leadership and coordinated by the UBC Sustainable Cities Commission in cooperation with all UBC Commissions. The document will be included in the General Conference documentation.

Every UBC Commission has its own ways of working towards the objectives. Networking through commission meetings and partnership-based cooperation for example in project applications and project implementation, is at the core of all UBC activities.

### Involvement of external partners

UBC's work towards a smart and sustainable Baltic Sea Region is based on knowledge-based development of the organisation and a well-established network of stakeholders and external partnerships. UBC has built up long-lasting partnerships with many organisations and actors in the region, both in Europe and globally, and aim at intensifying those as well as exploring possible, new useful partnerships.

### Regional cooperation – for a sustainable Baltic Sea region

The [EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region](#) is naturally the guiding strategy for activities and actions. The [New Action Plan of the EUSBSR macro-regional strategy](#) for boosting resilience and recovery in the Baltic Sea Region mainstreams climate change and cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries as essential elements into all of their 14 policy areas. UBC actively liaises with these strategy policy areas coordinators as well as the communication partners providing the basis for cooperation and partnership. UBC has a long tradition of working closely with the [Council of the Baltic Sea States \(CBSS\)](#), [the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation \(BSSSC\)](#), [VASAB](#) as well as [the Nordic Council of Ministers](#). UBC also has an official observer status to [the Helsinki Commission \(HELCOM\)](#).

With some actors UBC actively collaborates in projects and activities, with others the partnerships are build more on a strategic policy level. At the core is regular exchange and communication, to shape our region together.

### European cooperation – bridging the Baltic Sea region with the rest of Europe

The EU is fighting climate change through ambitious policies at home and in close cooperation with international partners by implementing the ambitious [European Green Deal](#) climate action package, and by aiming to become the world's first climate-neutral continent and a climate-resilient society by 2050. UBC is a respected partner also on European level, both in projects as well as on policy level. UBC actively cooperates with the European Commission and European city networks like [Local Governments for Sustainability \(ICLEI\)](#), [Eurocities](#), [Energy Cities](#) and [Polis](#).

UBC is an active support partner for the [Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy Europe](#) as well as for the [Green City Accord](#) and among other initiatives supports the implementation of the overarching EU policies, like the European Green Deal, [New European Bauhaus](#) and EU missions, in particular the [EU Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission Area](#).

## **Global cooperation – contributing local activities to a global effort**

UBC also follows global policy towards sustainable development – the global [UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) are guiding UBC activities. All UBC commissions take the SDGs into account in their work and a growing number of UBC member cities have engaged in bringing the SDGs into their city strategies and plans. Many UBC cities are also forerunners internationally by having joined the global movement of working with the 2030 Agenda and reviewing the progress of the SDGs on a local level through a [Voluntary Local Review](#) process. UBC encourages its member cities to join the movement and report on the progress of the UN 2030 Agenda.

In 2017, UBC started a strategic cooperation with the world's leading organization on voluntary climate reporting, [CDP](#), and several UBC member cities have shown climate leadership by disclosing their climate related data through CDP and thus contributing to a more sustainable future of the region. UBC is promoting the initiative and campaigns each year to include more member cities to join the disclosure efforts. The Memorandum of Understanding with CDP is renewed every two years based on mutual negotiations and discussions.

## **Implementing the UBC Sustainability Action Programme**

Our operative and practical work to implement the UBC Sustainability Action Programme is built on four pillars and will be under continuous development following closely the emerging needs in UBC cities.

### **Networking and cooperation**

- networking with member cities through regular commission meetings and specific conferences and seminars and thematic working groups - online and offline
- further developing digital and distance online working, such as climate smart meeting points and platforms, such as the UBC led [Baltic Smart Water Hub](#).

### **Project development and implementation**

- project development and implementation on sustainability related topics together with UBC member cities and UBC Commissions including capacity building and trainings.

### **Exchange and dissemination**

- exchange of good practices and information by providing a learning environment that fosters on sustainability related issues through the network
- disseminating with UBC cities tools and methods developed in the sustainability related projects

### **Policy work**

- representation of the UBC member cities in sustainability matters on e.g., the EU level

### **Evaluation of progress**

- the UBC Sustainability Action Programme should be evaluated by the UBC Sustainable Cities Commission Advisory Board after 4 years and reported to the UBC Executive board and General Conference in 2025.

## **V. Our outlook on the future**

Our region is identified as a region of utmost strength to fulfil its regional and global responsibility by cooperating, raising awareness, sharing good practices and effective actions. The Baltic Sea Region has a long tradition in taking ambitious and pro-active initiatives and responsible steps.

During the years up to 2030 our region and the UBC cities will face a lot of large scale and demanding challenges. Many of these challenges are known and we need to find a path and solutions to these challenges. Time, knowledge, resource and dedicated political leaders as well as employees in cities will be needed for finding best possible solutions.

The role of cities is clear as the cities implement most of the legislation to practise on the local level in our societies. For UBC member cities, it will be important to see the role, mandate and responsibility clearly and try to take a pro-active approach in order to prepare ourselves for upcoming needs and decisions.

The UBC will follow closely the global and EU goals and priorities for the upcoming years and continue to enhance active multi-stakeholder partnerships and find new dynamic steps for successful cooperation within the region but also in Europe and globally. The digital transition, boosted by the circumstances caused by Covid-19 pandemic, has been extremely fast and will further develop and provide UBC with more cooperation and operations opportunities.

We trust in our work, working together!