

POLICY BRIEF

Greener and More Inclusive Public Spaces through Local Governance: Policy Recommendations from the BioBOND Project

Project Title	BioBOND - Bonding Cities for a Bio-Driven and Sustainable Urban Future
Project Number	101215653
Programme	Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) - Town Twinning Action
Coordinator	Institute for Promotion and Certification of Agri-Food Products (iAgroCert), Greece
Partner Countries	Greece, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria and Serbia
Event Dates	5-7 May 2026
Event Location	Cultural Centre of Alexandreia, Greece

1. Executive Summary

This policy brief presents the key lessons and policy recommendations emerging from BioBOND - Bonding Cities for a Bio-Driven and Sustainable Urban Future, a transnational Town Twinning project co-funded by the European Union under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.

BioBOND brought together five partner organisations from Greece, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria and Serbia to exchange knowledge, promote sustainable urban transformation and strengthen civic participation in local governance. The central event was a three-day international gathering held in Greece from 5 to 7 May 2026, with the main conference activities taking place at the Cultural Centre of Alexandreia.

The core message of BioBOND is clear: creating greener, more liveable and socially inclusive cities requires coordinated action at local level - action that genuinely engages citizens, incorporates the voices of underrepresented groups and builds lasting cross-border partnerships. This brief is addressed to local and national authorities, municipalities, policymakers, city council members, civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders with a role in shaping urban environments.

2. Policy Context

Climate change is the defining challenge of the 21st century, and its effects are felt most acutely in cities. Urban areas are already experiencing rising temperatures, increased flooding, loss of green spaces and growing social inequalities. Local authorities are on the front line of response, yet many municipalities - particularly smaller ones - lack the resources, interdisciplinary expertise and cross-border networks to act effectively.

BioBOND was designed in direct response to this challenge, and is firmly embedded within the following European policy frameworks:

European Green Deal - The EU's overarching strategy for climate neutrality by 2050, calling on cities to reduce emissions, increase resilience and integrate nature-based solutions into urban planning.



New European Bauhaus - An initiative promoting the creation of sustainable, inclusive and aesthetically inspiring urban spaces that respond to environmental challenges whilst enhancing community well-being.

EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - Calls on European cities of at least 20,000 inhabitants to develop ambitious Urban Greening Plans (now Urban Nature Plans), integrating biodiverse parks, green roofs, tree-lined streets and urban meadows.

Circular Economy Action Plan - Encourages municipalities to embed circular economy principles in waste management, energy use and urban development.

EU Climate Pact - Invites citizens, communities and organisations to take part in climate action, fostering a bottom-up approach to sustainable transformation.

Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the European Pillar of Social Rights - Emphasise inclusive participation in all spheres, including environmental governance, and call for active measures to close representation gaps.

Despite these ambitious frameworks, a persistent gap exists between EU-level ambitions and local implementation. Evidence from the European Environment Agency and the Urban Agenda for the EU consistently identifies limited technical capacity, insufficient funding, poor citizen consultation and lack of cross-border knowledge exchange as the main barriers to progress. BioBOND directly addressed these gaps.

3. Key Insights from BioBOND

The three-day BioBOND event in Alexandria produced a rich body of shared experience and practical learning. The following insights reflect the most significant themes that emerged from panel discussions, policy sessions and direct participant feedback.

a) Sustainable Urban Transformation Requires Local Ownership

The most effective green urban initiatives are those co-designed with the communities they serve. Participants consistently highlighted that top-down mandates, without meaningful local consultation, fail to create lasting change. When residents, local authorities and civil society organisations collaborate in designing public spaces, those spaces reflect genuine community needs and are more likely to be maintained and expanded over time.

b) Nature-Based Solutions Are Accessible and Effective

Case studies presented during the event demonstrated that nature-based solutions - such as urban greening, pocket parks, green corridors, biodiverse roof gardens and sustainable drainage systems - deliver measurable benefits in terms of air quality, temperature reduction, biodiversity and mental well-being. These solutions do not require large-scale investment and can be implemented incrementally by municipalities of all sizes.

c) Citizen Engagement Can Strengthen Environmental Monitoring

BioBOND highlighted the potential of citizen participation as a valuable tool for strengthening local environmental monitoring and decision-making. While the event focused on sustainable public spaces, EU policy frameworks, good practices and community well-being, the discussions also showed that municipalities can benefit from involving citizens and young people in identifying local environmental needs and challenges.

d) Inclusive Governance Produces Better Outcomes

A recurring theme across all the event was the need for genuinely inclusive governance. Data shared during the event confirmed that women hold only 26.8% of government ministerial positions responsible for environment and climate change across EU Member States, and that underrepresented groups - including ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and younger generations - are systematically excluded from urban planning processes. Participants agreed that tackling this structural inequality is not only a matter of social justice but a precondition for effective sustainability policy.

e) Cross-Border Knowledge Exchange Accelerates Progress

One of the most valuable outcomes of BioBOND was the establishment of a transnational network of municipalities, NGOs and regional development agencies. Participants from Greece, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria and Serbia shared models and practices that could be adapted and replicated in different local contexts. This exchange demonstrated the power of the Town Twinning mechanism in building mutual trust, reducing duplication of effort and accelerating the adoption of proven approaches.

f) Youth Leadership Is a Catalyst for Change

BioBOND also highlighted the importance of youth engagement in local environmental initiatives. Participants identified structural barriers - including limited institutional support, lack of funding pathways and inadequate civic education - as obstacles to sustained youth participation. Where these barriers are addressed, young people can become powerful advocates and implementers of sustainable change.

4. Policy Recommendations for Local Authorities

The following recommendations are addressed directly to municipalities, city councils, local decision-makers and civil society partners. They are grounded in the shared experiences and learning from the BioBOND project, and are designed to be practical, realistic and achievable within existing governance structures.

Recommendation 1: Develop and Implement Urban Greening Plans

- Adopt Urban Nature Plans (as required by the EU Biodiversity Strategy for cities of at least 20,000 inhabitants) and extend the ambition of these plans to all municipalities, regardless of size.
- Integrate green infrastructure - including parks, urban forests, green roofs, living walls, biodiverse meadows and tree-lined streets - into local development and land use plans.
- Prioritise nature-based solutions as cost-effective instruments for climate adaptation, heat island reduction, flood resilience and biodiversity protection.
- Map existing green and blue spaces, identify gaps and set measurable targets for increasing accessible urban green areas.

Recommendation 2: Embed Participatory Urban Planning in Local Governance

- Move beyond formal consultation to genuine co-design: involve citizens, community organisations, environmental NGOs and local businesses as active partners in urban planning decisions, not merely respondents to pre-determined proposals.
- Establish permanent participatory mechanisms, such as citizen advisory panels, neighbourhood forums and open planning workshops, to ensure continuous community input into public space development.
- Adopt citizen science approaches to enable residents to contribute to environmental data collection and monitoring, feeding community-generated evidence into local planning decisions.
- Publish clear, accessible information about how citizen contributions are used, and report back to communities on the outcomes of consultation processes.

Recommendation 3: Ensure Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Participation

- Set explicit targets for the representation of women, young people, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in local governance bodies and advisory processes related to urban planning and sustainability.
- Appoint a Gender and Non-Discrimination Officer (or equivalent) within municipal structures to monitor participation, identify barriers and implement corrective measures.
- Collect and publish sex-disaggregated and diversity-disaggregated data on participation in public consultations and governance processes to identify gaps and track progress.
- Design consultation processes to be accessible in terms of timing, location, format and language, removing practical barriers that disproportionately affect underrepresented groups.

- Ensure that gender-sensitive language and positive visual representations are used in all public communications related to urban sustainability.

Recommendation 4: Support and Empower Youth Leadership

- Create dedicated youth seats or advisory roles within local environmental governance structures, giving young people a formal voice in decision-making.
- Fund and facilitate youth-led green initiatives, including small grants, mentoring and access to expert support, with minimal bureaucratic barriers.
- Integrate civic education on sustainability, local governance and EU environmental policy into school and community education programmes.
- Establish partnerships with universities and educational institutions to bring research insights and student energy into local sustainability projects.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen Cross-Border and Inter-Municipal Cooperation

- Actively participate in EU Town Twinning and Networks of Towns programmes to exchange best practices, share resources and develop joint approaches to shared urban sustainability challenges.
- Establish formal peer-learning agreements with partner municipalities in other EU and candidate countries, enabling regular knowledge exchange beyond formal project periods.
- Document and disseminate successful local sustainability initiatives in accessible formats, making them available to other municipalities via shared repositories and digital platforms.
- Explore joint applications for EU funding (including CERV, LIFE, INTERREG and Cohesion Fund programmes) as part of multi-municipal or cross-border consortia.

Recommendation 6: Build Capacity and Raise Awareness

- Invest in the professional development of local government staff on sustainability, green infrastructure, participatory planning and EU policy frameworks.
- Develop accessible public awareness campaigns to increase community understanding of climate change impacts, sustainable practices and the role citizens can play in shaping greener cities.
- Promote behavioural change at household level by linking public awareness with practical local initiatives, such as community composting, energy efficiency schemes and green space stewardship programmes.
- Engage local media, schools and cultural institutions as partners in environmental awareness and civic education.

Recommendation 7: Align Local Action with EU Funding Opportunities

- Appoint a dedicated EU funding officer or team within the municipality (or share one with neighbouring municipalities) to identify, apply for and manage EU-funded projects relating to sustainability and urban development.
- Align local urban development strategies with the requirements of EU funding programmes, including the European Green Deal, Horizon Europe, LIFE, INTERREG and the Cohesion Fund, to maximise access to external resources.
- Explore public-private partnerships as a mechanism to leverage additional investment in green infrastructure alongside EU co-funding.

5. Integrating the Recommendations into Local Governance

Recommendations only deliver change when they are embedded in institutional processes. The following guidance explains how municipalities and local governance bodies can move from aspiration to action.

a) Revise and Align Local Strategies

Municipal sustainability strategies, integrated urban development plans and climate adaptation action plans should be reviewed in light of the BioBOND recommendations and updated to reflect explicit commitments to green infrastructure, participatory governance and inclusive participation. Where such strategies do not

yet exist, municipalities should prioritise developing them, drawing on the evidence base and partnership networks established through projects such as BioBOND.

b) Establish or Strengthen Participatory Mechanisms

Municipalities that do not already have structured mechanisms for citizen participation should establish them as a matter of priority. This could take the form of standing citizen panels, annual public forums on sustainability, digital platforms for community consultation, or neighbourhood-based green space stewardship groups. Existing mechanisms should be reviewed for inclusivity, ensuring they actively reach underrepresented communities rather than defaulting to the most engaged or vocal groups.

c) Develop Partnerships with Civil Society

Environmental NGOs, community organisations and local businesses are essential partners in sustainable urban transformation. Municipalities should formalise these partnerships through memoranda of understanding, shared action plans or joint project development agreements. Civil society partners can support outreach to underrepresented communities, co-deliver awareness activities and contribute voluntary environmental monitoring capacity.

d) Use BioBOND as a Springboard for Future EU Projects

The partnerships and networks established through BioBOND provide a ready foundation for future EU-funded projects. Partner municipalities and organisations are encouraged to maintain contact, document shared learning and explore joint applications under relevant programmes. The CERV programme, LIFE, INTERREG and Horizon Europe all offer opportunities for collaborative projects on sustainability, civic participation and urban development.

e) Monitor and Report Progress

Local authorities should establish clear baselines and measurable indicators for green space coverage, participation rates (disaggregated by gender, age and other relevant characteristics), and the number of sustainability initiatives initiated or sustained by communities. Reporting on these indicators in annual municipal reports, public consultations and engagement with national and European authorities helps maintain accountability and demonstrate progress.

6. Conclusion

The BioBOND project has demonstrated, through direct experience across five European countries, that sustainable urban transformation is both achievable and urgent. It requires more than policy ambition: it requires genuine cooperation between local authorities, civil society, young people and underrepresented communities; it requires practical investment in green infrastructure and nature-based solutions; and it requires a commitment to inclusive governance that goes beyond token consultation.

The policy recommendations set out in this brief are not abstract ideals. They emerge from workshops, forums and collaborative activities. They reflect what works - in different national contexts, at different scales and with different resources.

The path towards greener, more inclusive and more resilient cities is open. The challenge for local authorities is to take the next practical step - whether that is revising a local plan, establishing a participatory forum, planting trees on a neglected urban street, or joining a transnational network of municipalities committed to shared learning. Every step taken at local level contributes to the broader European vision of sustainable, democratic and cohesive cities.

BioBOND stands as evidence that when cities bond together for a bio-driven and sustainable future, change is possible. We invite all local authorities, policymakers and civil society partners to take up this challenge.