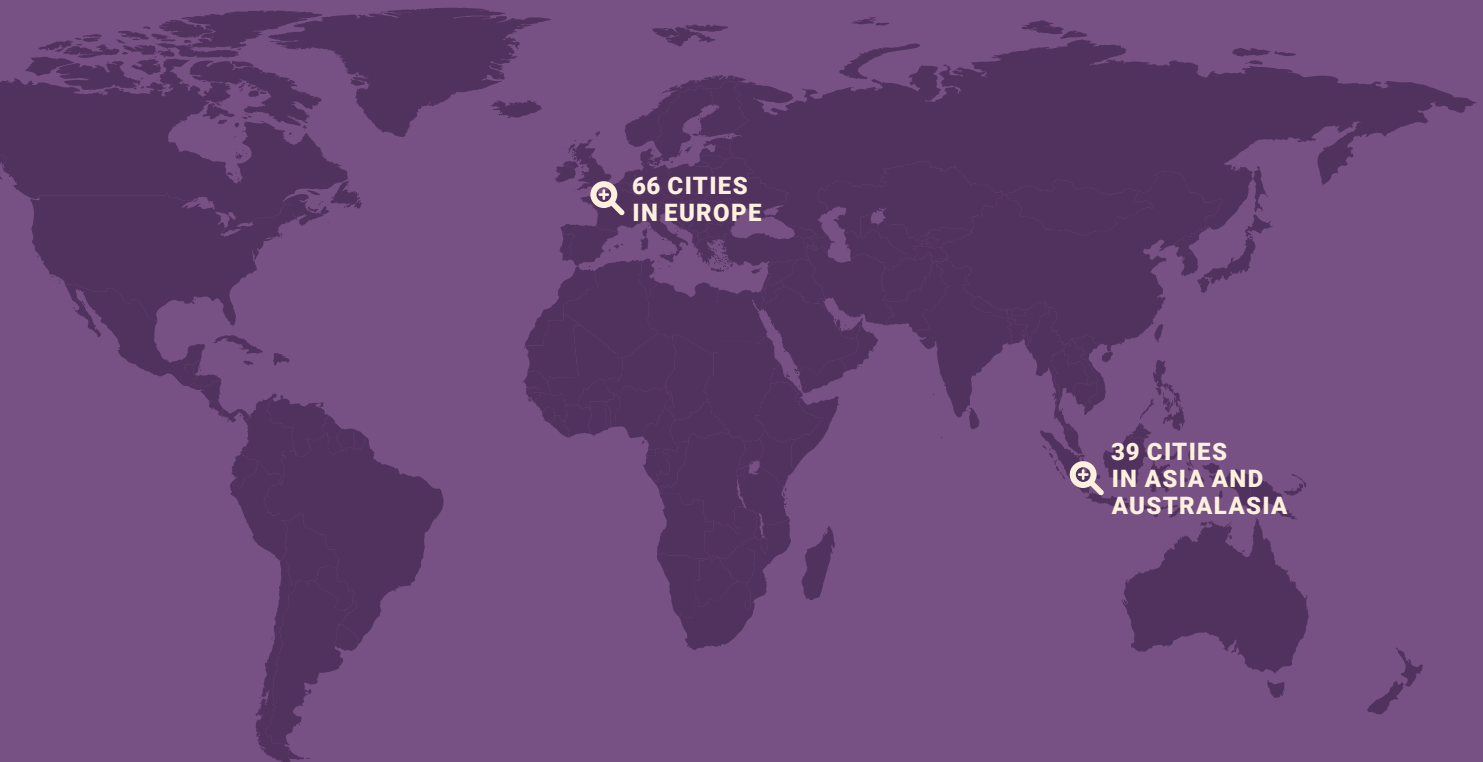


## GLOBAL | INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

# International Urban and Regional Cooperation Asia and Australasia (Phase 1): City-to-City Partnerships

Funded by the European Union (EU), the International Urban and Regional Cooperation (IURC) Asia and Australasia (AA) was implemented from 2021 to 2024. It supported cities and regions from the EU, Asia and Australasia to cooperate on several areas of sustainable urban development and regional innovation.



**Pablo Gándara, Team Leader, IURC AA**

For more than 20 years, Pablo has been leading international teams in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Australasia and Africa. He focuses mostly on promoting decentralised cooperation between European and non-European cities and regions as well as supporting local climate action.



**Jacqueline Chang, IURC AA Senior Expert**

Jacqueline's 21 years of experience across 19 countries includes global EU projects: International Urban Cooperation Asia, IURC AA, and Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. She is both Ambassador and Fellow at the Circular Economy Institute, London.

## || The IURC AA serves as a hub for knowledge exchange, policy dialogue, and capacity building, nurturing a vibrant community of practice for cooperation among cities. ||

### Aims and Objectives

Launched in 2021, the EU-funded IURC initiative promotes city-to-city and region-to-region cooperation on sustainable urban development and regional innovation, building partnerships between EU and non-EU sub-national entities on a global scale. Collaboration themes were aligned with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and relevant EU policies (Urban Agenda, Green Deal, Global Gateway). Using the Quadruple-Helix cooperation model, IURC AA encouraged the public and private sectors to work together with research, education and civil society institutions to develop pilot projects as proofs of concept.

Covering 84 cities, the first phase of the IURC AA regional project was the largest within the global IURC programme. Through a series of

cross-country webinars, workshops, networking events and study visits, city officials, policymakers, research, business and civil society representatives came together to address common challenges. These stakeholders engaged in dynamic discussions, sharing best practices and innovative solutions.

From 2021 to 2024, 42 pilot projects were delivered in diverse areas of urban development, such as post-COVID recovery, smart city, mobility, energy transition, circular economy, industrial transition, culture, education and tourism. The IURC AA thus served as a hub for knowledge exchange, policy dialogue, and capacity building, nurturing a vibrant community of practice for cooperation among cities. In addition, the experience fostered cross-cultural understanding among participating cities.

## The IURC AA programme delivered concrete results across three key areas: influencing urban policies, creating business opportunities and enabling stakeholder engagements.

### Impacts

Meeting its overall objective of leading and developing decentralised international urban cooperation, the IURC AA project resulted in:

- 35 Urban Cooperation Action Plans (UCAPs) that served as guidelines for project implementation. These were living documents that constantly updated the roadmap for cooperation and assessed how IURC project actions contributed to existing urban development strategies at local, national and international levels.
- Pilot projects that served as practical, hands-on examples of sustainable urban development cooperation.
- The enhancement of 48 cooperation partnership strategies via Memoranda of Understanding, Letters of Intent and Commitment Letters.
- Opportunities for local authorities to communicate their projects to a wider audience and forge collaborations with partners from research, business and civil society.

Besides ensuring coherence across different regions in the IURC programme, the UCAPs enabled the IURC Central Coordination Service to aggregate results and report them at international platforms such as the World Urban Forum 2022. Furthermore, the UCAPs contributed to the UN's New Urban Agenda and SDGs by referring to the National Voluntary Review and the Local Voluntary Review processes.

The IURC AA also showcased the key role played by the EU in the Asian and Australasian regions, with EU Ambassadors and European Mayors participating in online or on-site IURC events together with their counterparts. In addition, the IURC project actions were mostly implemented with the agreement or knowledge of the national authorities, increasing the vertical integration of sub-national sustainable urban development cooperation (in line with the EU and the UN Urban Agenda).

### City-to-City Partnerships

The IURC AA programme delivered concrete results across three key areas: influencing urban policies, creating business opportunities and enabling stakeholder engagements.

#### Influencing Urban Policies

Barcelona, Spain hosted the 1992 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which spurred urban transformation in the city. Through the IURC AA, Brisbane, Australia partnered with Barcelona to learn from their experience in preparation for the 2032 Brisbane Olympics and discuss how to make strides towards green sports.<sup>1</sup> Both cities also conducted exchanges on building innovative urban environments like the 22@ precinct in Barcelona and the Boggo Road Innovation Precinct in Brisbane.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the cooperation, the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Mr Adrian Schrinner, announced in May 2023 that "Brisbane should aim to be the Barcelona of the Southern Hemisphere".<sup>3</sup> In fact, *Brisbane's Inner City Strategy*, released in April 2023, refers to Barcelona's superblocks as an inspiration to implement walkable hearts.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Malaga and Vitoria-Gasteiz in Spain learnt from Christchurch, New Zealand's SmartView service—an easy-to-access portal for residents to understand, explore and engage with their city in areas like mobility, energy-saving green areas, incident alerts and urban play. The SmartView service served as a useful reference for Vitoria-Gasteiz's web tool known as GEO Vitoria-Gasteiz, for citizens to consult maps showing municipal services, facilities, infrastructure projects, cycleways and real-time traffic congestion.<sup>5</sup>

Bratislava, Slovakia and Tokorozawa, Japan cooperated on climate change adaptation using green infrastructure, with their exchange subsequently expanding to include renewable energy production. This exchange saw Bratislava learning from Tokorozawa's measures for solar power implementation, while Tokorozawa benefited from Bratislava's strategies for energy efficiency.

### Creating Business Opportunities

The IURC AA brought about a myriad of business prospects, especially for cities in Australia, Japan, India, the Republic of Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and New Zealand. The business opportunities also covered several areas under the EU Green Deal, ranging from circular economy and energy transition to mobility and sustainable agriculture.

For example, Grenoble, France and Essen, Germany joined forces with the Japanese cities of Toyota and Koriyama to build an ecosystem in the energy transition sector.



SmartView (top) and GEO Vitoria-Gasteiz (bottom).  
Image: IURC

The four municipalities involved their technology innovators and industry stakeholders in co-hosted business seminars and networking events. Notably, there was also an online pitching series for companies to present their offerings. Not only were synergies achieved with the local and regional economic development agencies, but bilateral business relations were also developed to create joint ventures.

Similarly, collaboration between Leuven, Belgium and Gwalior, India saw Indian start-ups and incubation representatives in sustainable technology pitching their ideas at the 2023 technological innovation festival And& Connect. These touchpoints helped companies to identify technology and financial partners in Europe.



French and German experts at Fukushima Hydrogen Energy Research Field (top) and Indian start-ups in Leuven (bottom).  
Image: IURC

### Enabling Stakeholder Engagements

The IURC AA project also encouraged cities to partner with the community.

To illustrate, Portuguese students from Vila Nova de Famalicão's Camilo Castelo Branco Eco-School participated in several virtual and in-person activities with counterparts from Seberang Perai, Malaysia. Joint community projects were developed in areas like e-waste, marine litter, energy saving and

school farms. Supported by municipal authorities and the IURC project, another group of students from Maia, Portugal produced a series of videos on circular economy initiatives to exchange best practices with their Malaysian peers.

Moreover, Turku, Finland and the Obuse town in Nagano, Japan engaged citizens and academia to promote climate resilience, territorial cohesion and a circular

economy. In 2021, youth and elderly representatives from both sides produced and presented videos on climate change at the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in 2021.



Students from Vila Nova de Famalicão and Seberang Perai collaborated on circular economy and waste management initiatives, including hands-on community clean-up sessions.  
Image: IURC



Delegates from Turku, Nagano and Obuse in front of Zenkoji Temple in Nagano.  
Image: IURC

Besides achieving results in the three key areas, the IURC AA's efforts spanned a wide spectrum of urban systems, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of sustainable urban development.

	Examples
<b>Energy Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sejong City, the Republic of Korea and Sofia Municipality, Bulgaria supported a partnership between their local companies on renewable energy.</li> <li>• Regional and local authorities in New Plymouth, New Zealand invited energy storage and waste management technology providers from Vilnius, Lithuania to collaborate with their local businesses. Both sides agreed to leverage Horizon Europe's funding opportunities to support this research and business cooperation.</li> <li>• The Trier University of Applied Sciences in Germany developed a sustainable campus concept together with the Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science in Chennai, India. This included the construction of a biogas pilot plant on the Indian campus.</li> </ul>
<b>Food Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Milan, Italy expanded the Urban Food Policy Pact to areas including the Rome metropolitan area (Colleferro) as well as Bangkok, Thailand and Seberang Perai, Malaysia.</li> </ul>
<b>Transport Systems</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rotterdam, the Netherlands cooperated with Busan, the Republic of Korea to promote innovative business technologies, such as the piloting of a high-speed transportation system hyperloop.</li> <li>• Dublin, Ireland and Seoul, the Republic of Korea jointly issued a publication, <i>On Digital Transition in Sustainable Mobility</i>, that includes possible business solutions to achieve climate neutrality in mobility through the use of digital tools.</li> </ul>
<b>Digital Solutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The University of Messina in Italy built Internet of Things water sensors as part of a flood management early warning system in Kochi, India.</li> <li>• The Sapienza University of Rome in Italy worked with the Bandung Institute of Technology in Indonesia on a summer school programme on geographic and building information technologies.</li> <li>• Experts from Hamburg, Germany shared digital twin solutions for urban planning and urban data management in Melbourne, Australia at the International Transportation Summit.</li> </ul>



A meeting between Sejong City and Sofia Municipality.  
Image: IURC

## Reflections: Tackling Urban Challenges and Key Learning Points

The outcomes of the IURC AA programme are far-reaching. Beyond facilitating peer-to-peer learning, the project has empowered cities to implement initiatives tailored to their specific contexts and make significant strides towards building resilient, liveable communities.

More importantly, the IURC AA has generated a rich array of outputs that underscore its impact and legacy. Through the publication of 24 case studies and 13 thematic reports, the project has captured and disseminated valuable insights and lessons learnt, serving as a knowledge hub for urban practitioners worldwide. Furthermore, the establishment of digital platforms and networking spaces like Christchurch's podcast series, "Smart(er) Cities—Conversations on Innovation", has facilitated ongoing collaboration and peer support beyond the duration of the IURC project, ensuring its sustainability and enduring relevance.

Through direct engagement and collaboration, European and non-European cities have transcended geographical and cultural boundaries, gaining deeper understanding of one another's unique challenges, perspectives, and solutions. This has laid the foundation for long-term partnerships and friendships. The IURC is in the middle of its second phase (2025-2027), with a new batch of 94 participating cities and regions, working in 24 Communities of Practice in Asia and Australasia and 12 in Latin America and the Caribbean. 🌐

### NOTICE

The information and views set out in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the EU. Neither the EU institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use of the information contained therein.

[1] Case Study Barcelona (ES)–Brisbane (AU), <https://www.iurc.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/IURC-Case-Study-Olympics-Barcelona-Brisbane.pdf>

[2] Delegations from Hamburg and Barcelona visit Australia, <https://www.iurc.eu/2022/07/28/delegations-from-hamburg-and-barcelona-visit-australia/>

[3] Olympic & Paralympic Games—Building a Better Brisbane, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoWjSA8GE3o>

[4] Brisbane City Council, <https://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/content/dam/brisbanecitycouncil/corpwebsite/building-and-planning/documents/brisbanes-inner-city-strategy.pdf.coredownload.pdf>, 26.

[5] Back to normal: Christchurch and Vitoria-Gasteiz experts meet online to define smart city cooperation – International Urban and Regional Cooperation, <https://www.iurc.eu/2023/02/01/back-to-normal-christchurch-and-vitoria-gasteiz-experts-meet-online-to-define-smart-city-cooperation/>