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ERRIN's contribution to the future EU Agenda for Cities

As we progress toward the implementation of the European Green Deal, with new EU priorities such as competitiveness rising on the EU agenda, alongside intensified discussions around the next Multiannual Financial Framework, [ERRIN](#) – the European Regions Research and Innovation Network – is pleased to contribute to the co-design of the future EU Agenda for Cities. Representing over 120 regional and local innovation ecosystems across Europe, ERRIN welcomes renewed attention to cities and Functional Urban Areas as critical drivers of the green and digital transitions.

Building on the network's long-standing expertise and recent input papers, this position outlines three core areas where the future Agenda must act:

- Empowering cities and Functional Urban Areas to implement EU strategic priorities on the ground
- Scaling mission-oriented and systemic approaches to urban transformation by embedding innovation, experimentation and citizen engagement in urban policy frameworks
- Strengthening the role of regions and local R&I ecosystems to support place-based innovation and further connect those ecosystems across Europe to enable transformations, enhance innovation and boost competitiveness.

ERRIN calls for a bold and integrated EU Agenda for Cities that supports all territories in shaping resilient, inclusive and competitive transitions, anchored in strong local leadership and territorial cooperation.

1. Empowering cities and Functional Urban Areas to deliver on EU strategic priorities

As the EU faces converging climate, economic and social challenges, cities, urban areas and metropolitan regions must be fully recognised as key enablers of transformation. This where EU strategic priorities are translated into action and implemented on the ground, and where investment, innovation and citizen engagement converge. They are also on the frontline of vulnerability, facing resource constraints, climate risks and socio-economic inequalities.

To effectively respond to these challenges, urban areas must be fully recognised as central actors in the EU's governance and investment landscape, not only because they deliver services but because they co-create and deliver solutions. The future EU Policy Agenda for Cities should ensure that cities are actively involved in the design and implementation of policies and funding programmes from the start. Moreover, it should ensure that the next MMF provides cities of all sizes with effective access to EU funds. Particular attention should be given to cities in widening countries, helping to reinforce territorial cohesion across Europe. As the primary recipients and implementers of EU policy and legislation, cities need more direct access to EU funding to meet the objectives of the European Green Deal and the Clean Industrial Deal.

Lastly, the Agenda must go beyond a sectoral view of cities and instead foster integrated, place-based and mission-oriented approaches that empower urban areas as innovation engines and territorial connectors. Functional Urban Areas should also be explicitly acknowledged, as many challenges and solutions transcend administrative boundaries and require stronger metropolitan-regional-rural coordination.

2. Mission-oriented approaches as driver of urban transformation

The [EU Missions](#) – especially 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030 and Adaptation to Climate Change – demonstrate how structured, challenge-driven innovation can create momentum for systemic change. The EU Missions offer a powerful model of multi-level, cross-sectoral cooperation that includes public authorities, citizens, academia and industry. They also bridge policy silos by embedding climate action within governance, technology and culture.

The Missions' alignment with the European Green Deal and EU competitiveness strategies illustrates their strategic significance. The EU Missions are crucial for addressing societal challenges, fostering innovation and creating sustainable growth in key areas such as climate neutrality, resilience and urban transformation closer to European citizens. Their alignment with the three pillars outlined by President von der Leyen – closing the innovation gap, achieving decarbonisation and ensuring economic security – further underscores their strategic importance.

ERRIN urges the integration of the Missions into the future Agenda as core vehicles for transformation. The Missions should not remain isolated instruments, but become catalysts embedded in broader urban and regional strategies. EU Missions have already succeeded in integrating R&I into sectoral policies, offering a replicable model for how urban policy can be guided by long-term strategic goals (directionality) and foster deep, structural transformation (systemic change) across multiple areas. By supporting experimentation, scaling and learning, the Missions can help steer urban transformation towards long-term, sustainable goals.

Equally, the New European Bauhaus (NEB) reinforces this systemic approach by connecting environmental sustainability with social inclusion and cultural values. ERRIN believes that NEB principles should be mainstreamed in city development initiatives to ensure inclusive and people-centred transformations.

To support a successful transition in urban environments, the future EU Agenda for Cities should also address the practical challenges that many cities and regions face when participating in EU-funded projects. In particular, small and medium-sized cities and regions often struggle with complex application processes and fragmented reporting obligations. These administrative burdens can become a barrier to participation, limiting the diversity of urban areas that can engage meaningfully in EU-level initiatives. It will be important to develop enabling frameworks that support participation across all territories. Providing technical assistance, peer learning opportunities and clearer guidance can also help less-experienced actors to take part and contribute effectively in shaping and implementing transformative urban policies. This is essential not only for fairness, but also for achieving the EU's overarching goals of cohesion, resilience and competitiveness.

3. Regions and local R&I ecosystems

Regions are more than administrative layers: they are facilitators and orchestrators of local innovation ecosystems. They offer spaces for experimentation and place-based innovation by investing in shared infrastructures (e.g. buildings, laboratory facilities), supporting businesses and fostering the development of new applications through public tenders and regulatory sandboxes. Local and regional governments play a pivotal role in enabling innovation, particularly

by creating conditions for applied research, supporting SMEs and start-ups and ensuring that the outcomes of basic research are translated into practical solutions.

Innovation also depends on people. Skills development must be a central component of the future Policy Agenda for Cities, as innovation can only thrive when we have the right talent to deliver it. Local and regional authorities are vital in this area as well, working closely with education providers and industry to bridge the gap between research and real-world application.

European cooperation between knowledge institutions, cities and regions is essential to achieve resilient, inclusive and competitive transitions. As ERRIN's recent [input paper on regional innovation ecosystems](#) highlights, well-connected, place-based innovation ecosystems require strong regional leadership and strategic alignment. ERRIN also calls for the future EU Competitiveness Fund to integrate a strong local and regional approach and to remain accessible to cities and regions of all sizes.

The future EU Agenda must explicitly recognise regions' roles in empowering cities, scaling innovations and embedding these efforts into European innovation, industrial and cohesion policies. Effective alignment of responsibilities and resources across all levels of governance, while respecting their competencies, is essential. This should be supported by a stronger partnership principle, which should be necessary for all strategic investments and reforms.

Regions are particularly well positioned to connect different layers of governance by aligning regional smart specialisation strategies (S3) with city-level ambitions and needs; they can also provide access to both cohesion funds and regional own-source funding.

Cities and regions must be seen as complementary actors within shared innovation ecosystems. Regional-level innovation strategies can directly support urban transformation when they are designed with city-level priorities in mind. For instance, in Helsinki-Uusimaa, smart cities, including the Cities Mission, are a core focus in the region's S3, aligning city-level goals with regional innovation pathways. In Hauts-de-France, the region is scaling up digital transformation efforts through a well-developed digital ecosystem that supports both urban and rural areas. These examples illustrate how collaboration between cities and regions enhances policy coherence, maximises impact and ensures that innovation reaches citizens across territorial contexts.

Finally, initiatives such as the European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) and Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs) further demonstrate the added value of coordinated regional action. By leveraging regional strengths, reducing innovation disparities and facilitating interregional collaboration, these efforts contribute to the EU's long-term competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

About ERRIN

ERRIN, a well-established Brussels-based network, gathers close to 120 regional ecosystems from more than 20 European countries. Since 2001, we have worked to strengthen the regional and local dimension in EU R&I policy and programmes through a bottom-up approach.

Through a co-creation process with members, ERRIN has developed a comprehensive series of input papers that assess key challenges and provide practical recommendations for how the EU can enhance support to research and innovation post-2027. The series includes four papers on [regional innovation ecosystems](#), [EU Missions](#), [Widening](#), [European Partnerships](#). ERRIN has also



developed key messages on [the next Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\)](#), highlighting 10 key recommendations to strengthen research, innovation and competitiveness.