



GREEN TOGETHER: COMMUNAL URBAN GARDENS ACROSS EUROPE

POLICY PROPOSAL
2025

PÉTER JÓZSEF BORI Central European University • **MICHELE COLLAZZO** University of Bologna
AMÓS DEL CASTILLO PETIDIER Universidad Complutense de Madrid
IHOR MOSHENETS Central European University • **FILIP SCHERF** University of St Andrews
BEATRIZ SERRA Universidade Católica Portuguesa
EVA TE DORSTHORST University of Luxembourg/Leiden University

Teaching Fellow
CHIARA LOVOTTI

WHO WE ARE/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

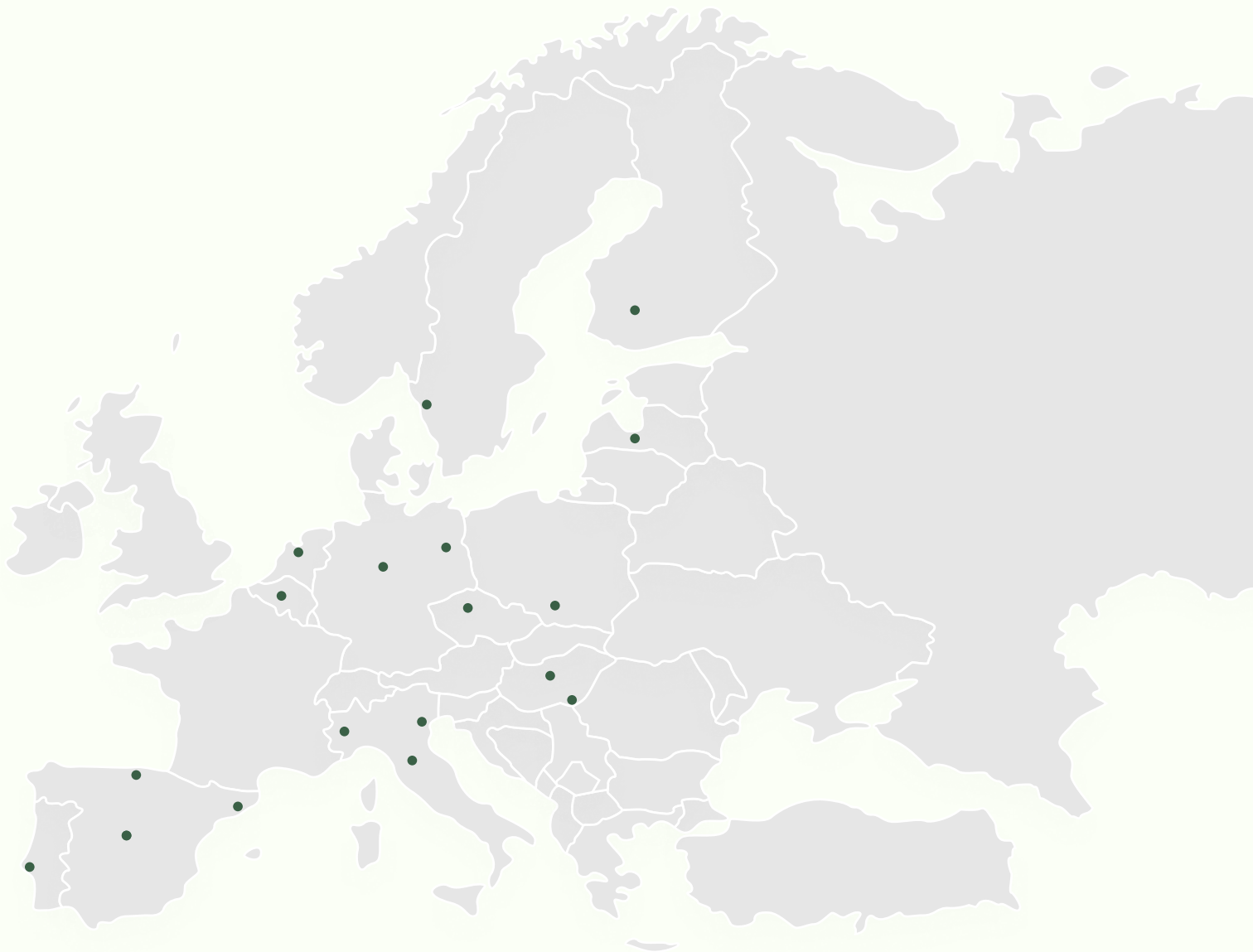
We are a group of seven PhD candidates from six different European universities, coming together as part of the Europaeum Scholars Programme.

In the creation of this report, we drew on our rich variety of disciplines and expertise, including International Law, Political Science, International Relations, Environmental Policy and Modern History. Our diverse academic, professional and cultural backgrounds have allowed us to approach the broad challenge of urban greening and regeneration from a comprehensive and heterogeneous perspective.

We are grateful to the Europaeum for providing the opportunity to develop this policy proposal and thereby contribute to some of the solutions most needed in our rapidly changing world.

We are eternally grateful to Chiara Lovotti for her skilful and kind guidance as a Teaching Fellow.

Finally, we would like to thank the Europaeum Alumni network for their feedback in the development of the report.



- Selection of communal gardens across Europe, visited and researched by the team.



TABLE OF CONTENTS



TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	5
COMMUNAL URBAN GARDENS	6
Why CUGs matter	6
What CUGs are	8
DEFINING THE PROBLEM	9
Lack of awareness	9
Lack of sustainable funding	10
RECOMMENDATIONS	11
European Communal Urban Garden Observatory: Providing the tools for widespread awareness	11
GrowValue: Pricing the benefits of CUGs	13
Coordinating EU funding policy for long-term financial support	15
CONCLUSIONS	17
REFERENCES	18
ANNEXES	19
Documentary	20
List of conducted interviews	21



TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPS	Basic Payment Scheme
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CPR	Common Provisions Regulation
CUG	Communal Urban Garden
DG	Directorate-General
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
EC	European Commission
ECUGO	European Communal Urban Garden Observatory
EPRS	European Parliamentary Research Service
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
EUI	European Urban Initiative
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
URBACT	Urban Agenda Partnership and Cooperation





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European cities face mounting environmental, social, urban planning, and food-system pressures. Green Together proposes expansion and support of Communal Urban Gardens (CUGs) as a low-cost, adaptable, flexible, and inclusive solution aligned with EU objectives. To achieve this, we advance a **three-pronged approach**: a European Communal Urban Garden Observatory (ECUGO), a GrowValue: Communal Urban Garden Cost-Benefit Tool, and strategic coordination of CUGs in EU financial frameworks.

ECUGO is a platform with the strategic vision of creating a supportive ecosystem for CUGs across the EU. It enables practitioners and policymakers to monitor, promote, and connect European CUGs and addresses the overall lack of awareness surrounding the potential hidden in CUGs.

The **GrowValue Tool** translates the extensive, yet often intangible, benefits of urban gardens into clear economic terms, addressing the fact that CUGs remain undervalued as public officials and CUG planners do not have easy access to quantifiable data on the real value of CUGs. Its primary function is to conduct a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis that assigns monetary values to critical outcomes such as: environmental improvements, including carbon sequestration and air quality enhancement; public health benefits, like reduced mortality and morbidity, and well-being for participants; socio-economic gains, such as augmented surrounding property values and avoided costs associated with site neglect.

By presenting these figures in a clear and quantifiable manner, the tool transforms a funding request from a perceived expense into a demonstrable public investment.

Finally, we propose a practical **framework to incorporate CUGs** across EU policies and financing schemes, to address the lack of recognition in financial frameworks leading to fragmented and inconsistent access to funding.

In the short term, we suggest creating a dedicated **CUG category of intervention** under the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) - currently under review as part of the broader multi-annual financial framework revision. A dedicated category facilitates access to Cohesion Policy-based funds, increases CUG visibility, and aggregates CUG project data.

This data can be used to create momentum for our longer-term recommendations, such as the creation of an EU Strategy on CUGs (via Commission Communication) and the establishment of an EU-wide area-based financial scheme dedicated to CUGs (**Single Urban Area Payment**).

The former could enshrine the ECUGO and the GrowValue tool, as well as existing financial schemes that could be applicable to CUGs. The latter would enable the EU to provide stable, secure payments for converting neglected urban land into green, community used spaces.

Overall, expanding and supporting CUGs delivers multi-benefit urban infrastructure; cooler, greener neighbourhoods; improvements in public health and social cohesion; the productive reuse of underused land; stronger local food literacy; and measurable environmental benefits at low cost. Mainstreaming CUGs across city strategies enables predictable investment and broad community participation, strengthening resilience and equity while generating clear, quantifiable value for residents and budgets.



CUG BENEFITS



Revitalize neglected spaces by turning abandoned land into vibrant, productive green areas.



Strengthen climate resilience by cooling cities, absorbing carbon, and supporting biodiversity.



Foster stronger communities through inclusive spaces that foster trust, connection, and social capital.



Boost local sustainability with urban food production and cultural shifts toward greener living.

European cities face mounting environmental, social, urban planning-related, and economic pressures. The climate crisis is no longer a distant forecast but a lived reality.

Heatwaves strain public health systems, while neighbourhoods lacking air conditioning or tree cover become hazardous in the height of summer. Intense rainfall overwhelms drainage networks, and air quality declines under the combined effects of pollution and stagnant, overheated air.

Simultaneously, economic inequality, rapid demographic change, and the disappearance of accessible public spaces have eroded social cohesion, leaving many residents increasingly isolated and reducing opportunities for meaningful interaction across cultural and generational lines.

The physical landscapes of cities often reflect these deeper environmental and socio-economic strains. Across Europe, there are increasing numbers of underutilised and neglected spaces – vacant lots, derelict industrial sites, abandoned parks, and other “leftover” urban areas that remain idle despite their latent ecological, social, and economic potential. These spaces are the legacy of deindustrialisation, shifting economic patterns, unplanned urban expansion, or gaps in municipal planning.

Left unattended, they can become sites of decay and disinvestment; yet, with vision and resources, they can serve as catalysts for urban regeneration, transforming into vibrant, productive spaces that contribute to the overall health and appeal of the city. Compounding these pressures is the growing fragility of urban food systems and a general lack of awareness on the need to transform these systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent global conflicts have revealed cities’ dependence on long, easily disrupted supply chains, highlighting the need for more diverse, local, and resilient food sources. While no city can be entirely self-sufficient, expanding knowledge and experience on sustainable urban food production is increasingly seen as a vital safeguard against systemic shocks. These interlinked challenges demand new forms of collective action to strengthen stability, safeguard public well-being, and build cities capable of withstanding future shocks.

Communal Urban Gardens (CUGs) offer one such action, addressing environmental and socio-economic objectives in tandem, while giving second life to neglected spaces. The CUGs introduce green areas that cool cities, absorb carbon, and support biodiversity, enhancing climate resilience. They provide inclusive, shared zones that foster interaction across communities, rebuilding trust and social capital.

By reclaiming abandoned or underused land, they drive neighbourhood renewal and urban regeneration.

By enabling local food production, they bolster food system resilience while promoting a cultural shift towards more sustainable practices. This report promotes the idea that CUGs, when backed by effective policies and governance, can play a pivotal role in building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable European cities.

It aims to place CUGs firmly on the agenda of municipal, national, and EU policymakers, encouraging integrated measures that address interlinked urban challenges holistically.

The following chapters expand on the concept of CUGs, the multiple benefits and challenges associated with CUGs, and, finally, we propose three original measures that advance CUGs within the existing EU policy framework.



COMMUNAL URBAN GARDENS: WHAT THEY ARE, WHY THEY MATTER

Communal Urban Gardens provide an inclusive approach to urban greening using several models: climate gardens that reforest urban areas for added greenery and carbon capture; communal gardens that transform city spaces into shared environments beyond traditional allotments; and the integration of nature-based solutions into existing public green spaces like parks and greenways.

CUGs are distinct from other urban greening and food production models, such as vertical farms, aquaponics systems, and similar high-tech ventures.

While these also show promise, they remain resource-intensive, demanding substantial agricultural inputs, irrigation, and electricity (Langemeyer et al., 2021; Caputo, 2022).

These projects often yield small quantities of expensive food and can accelerate gentrification, benefiting wealthier residents while sidelining underserved communities (Helmer, 2019). CUGs provide a significantly more comprehensive model: the following paragraphs outline the added value of CUGs in four distinct urban challenges, before moving on to a more detailed taxonomy of CUGs.



WHY CUGS MATTER?

CUGs profoundly contribute to addressing environmental, social, urban regeneration, and food security challenges associated with today's European cities

Challenge	Definition	CUG contribution
Urban resilience & Climate Change	A city's ability to stay stable during disruptions while being able to adapt quickly to future changes (Shimpo, 2024). Cities are responsible for 70 percent of global CO2 emissions (IPCC, 2022).	CUGs help capture carbon and thus support broader climate goals. They also function as vital community refuges during heatwaves, offering shaded, cooler, and healthier spaces for residents.
Community Building	Social fragmentation, community disintegration and economic marginalisation are increasingly characterising urban areas (Andersen, 2001).	CUGs promote social cohesion by bringing together individuals from different backgrounds, ages, and cultures to work towards a common goal (Cumbers et al., 2018; Interview 9; Interview 12). They enable marginalised groups to participate in local initiatives, contribute to and benefit from communal resources, and enhance social inclusivity (Ohmer et al., 2009; Interview 10, 11 and 12)
Urban Regeneration	Neglected urban areas such as vacant lots, abandoned spaces, previously developed land (brownfields), and former industrial sites often remain unused despite their ecological, social, or economic potential (Kailash & Banu Chitra, 2025; Anestis & Stathakis, 2024).	CUGs transform such neglected spaces into green areas, making the neighbourhoods attractive and liveable. These initiatives promote social and economic activity, attracting local business and other community-led development (Interview 13).
Food Security	Most cities depend entirely on imported food. Compounded with growing populations, increasing global demands and vulnerable, long supply chains, food insecurity is a real threat for urban populations. Additionally, urban residents – especially youth – have limited knowledge of how food is produced (Milica, 2014; Hess & Trexler, 2011).	CUGs can help address food security in major cities, and reduce citizens' reliance on vulnerable, long supply chains. Although their limited scale prevents them from meeting the food security needs of large populations, the implementation of organic and sustainable practices such as permaculture and agroecology helps lower the environmental footprint of food production through education and raising awareness (Interview 9).



WHAT ARE CUGS?

CUGs succeed by embracing diversity and adapting to the specific needs and conditions of their local environment, which vary according to geography, social and political context. Nevertheless, each CUG typically shares certain commonalities with its peers elsewhere across Europe.

Our taxonomy below, based on interviews and literature reviews, respects each CUG's uniqueness while identifying minimal classifying criteria:



Funding

Funding is usually derived from municipal budget, various EU funding schemes, local development grants, private funding, and membership fees.



Operating

CUGs are generally operated by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), conglomerates of NGOs and municipalities.



Objectives

CUGs generally pursue two main sets of objectives: social goals, such as fostering intergenerational bonds and inclusive communal spaces, and sustainability and urban development goals, such as education, food production, and the productive use of urban land.



Ecology/Production

Food-related functions are highly localised, with certain commonalities: the focus is often on producing in sustainable means, such as permaculture, agroforestry and organic farming. CUGs tend to grow traditional products, which is often a combination of herbs, fruits and vegetables, with composting for environmental impact and education.



Land use

Three types of land are typically used for CUGs: land that was previously abandoned or underdeveloped, existing public parks and newly constructed residential projects.



Participating

CUGs are supported by a diverse group of people, including volunteers, local residents (such as the elderly, youth, families, and single parents), as well as paying members.

CUGs enrich urban life by fostering community engagement and ecological diversity. While each is shaped by its local context and community needs, they share common benefits — and common challenges — that affect their success across Europe. The next section outlines these challenges, with Section 3 offering recommendations to address them.



Despite their clear contribution to a number of urban challenges, the expansion of CUGs is significantly hampered by two overarching obstacles:

1. a lack of awareness about their existence and benefits,
2. and a lack of financial resources providing long-term sustainability.

LACK OF AWARENESS

Lack of awareness among citizens, within municipal administrations, and in EU institutions is consistent across Europe (DG Environment, 2023). Residents are often unaware of nearby gardens and participation possibilities; local officials tend to underestimate their relevance for environmental, social, urban, and food-related objectives; and at EU level, CUG-relevant measures are little reflected in policy and programming.

From our analysis, only around a quarter of cities cooperating with the European Commission on Climate City Contracts have mentioned CUGs in their plans. These deficits lead to slow uptake, undermine funding decisions, and weaken strategic planning.



At community level, lack of awareness depresses participation, narrows the participant base, and limits social legitimacy. Interview-based lessons from Kraków highlighted a lack of knowledge, low community trust and relationship issues, which prompted a basic education campaign to normalise the concept and invite wider involvement.



Local authorities: Within local government, awareness typically rises only after pilot projects demonstrate visible co-benefits (interim use of vacant land, cooling during heatwaves, social connection). Before that point, gardens often sit outside core planning and budgeting routines, with unclear ownership and responsibilities. Without an explicit place in municipal strategies, CUGs rely on ad-hoc champions and one-off grants, face short permitting horizons, and encounter administrative friction (e.g. insurance, maintenance liabilities).



At EU level, awareness gaps are reflected in marginal integration across cohesion, environmental, health, and research policy families. Parliamentary briefings highlight both the lack of consolidated knowledge and the absence of systematic best-practice exchange, leaving cities to navigate a patchwork of short-term opportunities and overlapping pilots (EPRS, 2025). This generates a significant financial barrier, which is further explained in Section 2.2.



Multi-level challenges: Lack of awareness is linked to five recurring issues. First, CUGs are only sporadically referenced in EU strategies and regulations, leading to fragmentation and reduced clarity. Second, uncertainty over leadership persists, particularly regarding planning, management and clear communication. Third, knowledge exchange is patchy: there is no mechanism to share best practices or integrate lessons learnt. Fourth, data collection and evaluation remain fragmented and siloed. Finally, supranational advocacy is comparatively underdeveloped, meaning CUGs often drop off the policy agenda when competing priorities intensify. The result is structural under-recognition.



LACK OF SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

Despite the variety of funding schemes that CUGs rely on, including EU Cohesion Policy programmes, a lack of dedicated financial resources and the long-term financial sustainability of these gardens is a significant challenge (Diaz et al., 2018). We have found that there is both a short term immediate financing and a broader institutional financing barrier.

The former includes difficulty in securing funding for on-the-ground costs, such as equipment, resources, and personnel.

The latter relates to the ability of the gardens to ensure uninterrupted and long-term functioning, such as land use costs (leasing and/or acquiring property), management costs (see next section) and raising awareness.

Ensuring integrated and comprehensive financial support is crucial. Yet, the institutional complexity at both the local and EU levels is a serious complicating factor.

Firstly, as CUGs address a variety of interrelated, but independent issues (environmental, community building, urban regeneration, and food security), there is no single existing coherent policy instrument to provide funding.

For example, the food production aspect of CUGs might suggest a potential involvement in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but as indicated by interviews with policymakers, the CAP budget is already under heavy pressure, limiting the possibility of it covering novel areas such as CUGs.

Similarly, funding schemes that for example target high-tech food production in urban settings risk neglecting other key pillars of CUGs such as social inclusivity.

CUGs often also compete for funding under the Cohesion Policy. That means they must apply through existing programmes and categories of intervention in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR)—the EU rulebook that sets out how Cohesion Policy funds (like ERDF and others) are managed and disbursed. This competition can be complex since CUGs end up competing against many other, unrelated projects within the same intervention codes.

CUGs are therefore forced to rely on a multitude of funding schemes and compete with other urban development initiatives.

The fact that various EU programs have different application rules, stringent ownership and land-use requirements and are generally very difficult to navigate, means that many CUGs are unable to access these funding sources.

Interviews with EU experts suggest that integrating CUG priorities into EU financial frameworks is increasingly possible, providing support for the long-term sustainability of these initiatives.

Nevertheless, a persistent lack of policy commitment remains, largely because policymakers often lack awareness of the long-term advantages these projects offer for communities and cities across Europe.

This is further compounded by limited advocacy support: the niche and diverse character of CUGs affects the formation of sectoral representation and the extent to which advocacy networks are able to express and defend the interests of CUGs.

The fact that these organisations often focus on lower levels of governance and rely on various insecure funding mechanisms creates additional levels of dependence, hampering the organisation and their financial survival.



RECOMMENDATIONS

We propose a three-pronged approach: the establishment of a European Communal Urban Garden Observatory (ECUGO), the implementation of our GrowValue: Communal Urban Garden Cost-Benefit Tool, and the strategic coordination of CUGs in EU financial frameworks.



I. ECUGO: PROVIDING THE TOOLS FOR WIDESPREAD AWARENESS

We propose establishing the **European Communal Urban Garden Observatory (ECUGO)** as a central EU platform to collect, harmonise, and disseminate data, tools, and best practices. The Platform would enable practitioners, policymakers, and communities to monitor, promote, and connect CUGs across Europe. ECUGO acts as both a digital instrument and a coordination platform, ensuring long-term sustainability and accessibility of resources.

I. PROVIDE RELIABLE AND ACCESSIBLE DATA

ECUGO functions as an integrative platform where scientific, institutional, and practical knowledge of CUGs is collected and organised. This includes academic publications, EU-administered knowledge platforms (e.g. Copernicus Land Monitoring or Portico) and tailored guidance on practical aspects such as funding access, land use and community engagement. ECUGO aims to demonstrate the measurable benefits of CUGs through both quantitative and qualitative data. It builds on internationally recognised initiatives to provide natural accounting standards for environmental, social, and food production dimensions such as the System of Environmental Economic Accounting and the Ecosystem Valuation Database.

Reliable and accessible data



2. MAP AND MONITOR CUGS ACROSS EUROPE

ECUGO hosts an interactive, open-access map of European CUGs, continuously updated with geospatial and operational data. Each garden entry includes key indicators such as funding type, governance structure, main objectives, and status. The map is built by combining administrative data with self-reporting by operators, incentivised through favourable funding criteria and public recognition.

Map and monitor



3. COMPILE EU FUNDING MECHANISMS

ECUGO serves as a repository of EU funding programmes relevant to CUGs (e.g., URBACT, Interreg) providing clear guidance for applicants. It also promotes innovative financing and cost-benefit instruments, such as the Coordinated Financing Framework and the Shadow Pricing Tool.

Compile funding



4. ESTABLISH A EUROPEAN CUG NETWORK

ECUGO integrates a digital platform where stakeholders can exchange best practices, form partnerships, and access EU policy updates. The platform supports cross-border cooperation, the replication of successful models, and integration of CUGs into broader EU urban sustainability agendas.

Establish a network



Implementers: Relevant units within DG REGIO; European Urban Initiative (EUI)

POLICY OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS



Increased Visibility: Makes the social, economic, and environmental contributions of CUGs visible to policymakers, funders, and the public.



Strengthened Policy Integration: Positions CUGs within EU urban, environmental, and social policy agendas with robust evidence and shared practices.



Enhanced Funding Access: Connects CUG practitioners to EU-level instruments and provides clear guidance to unlock financial opportunities.



Stronger Community Networks: Facilitates cross-border learning, replication of successful models, and durable partnerships.



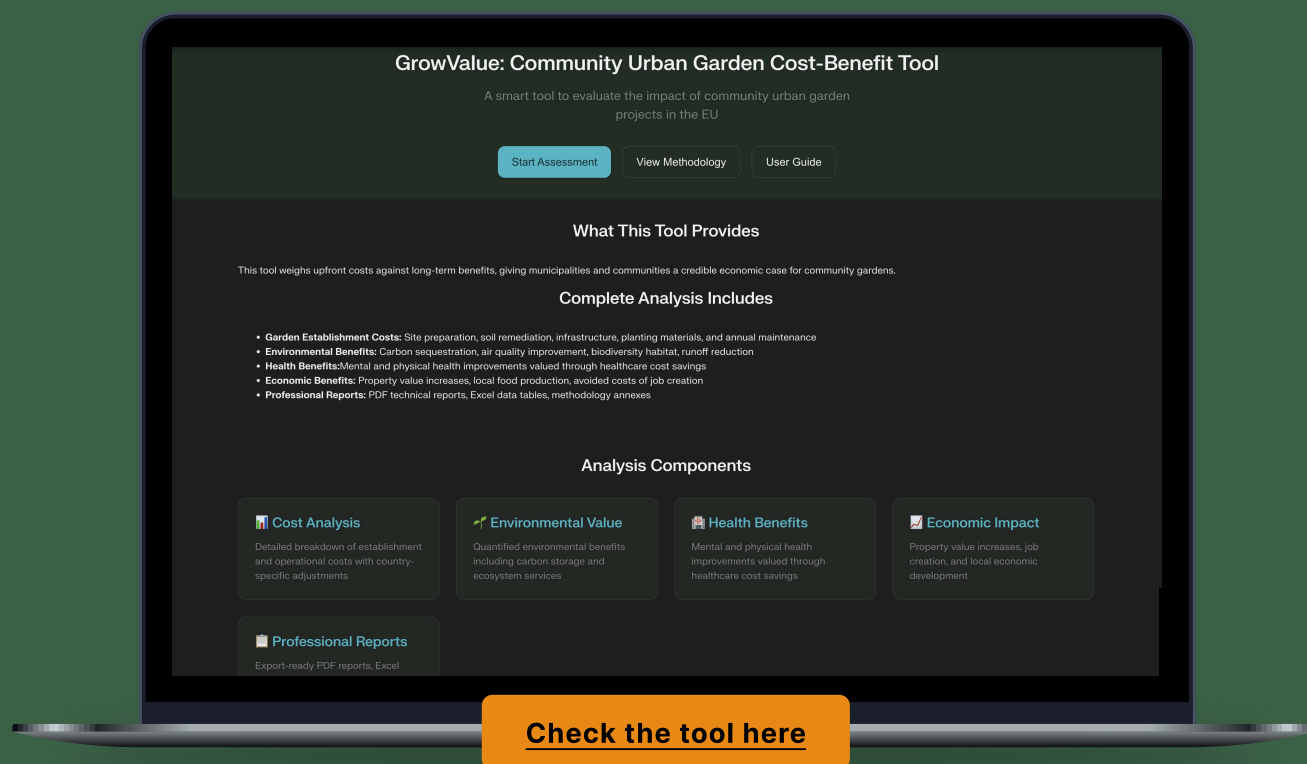
Informed Decision-Making: Empowers municipal planners, civil society, and EU institutions with transparent, reliable, and comparable data to support scaling of CUGs across Europe.



II. GROWVALUE: PRICING THE BENEFITS OF CUGS

To expand access to the resources needed to launch and sustain CUGs, we propose the development of the GrowValue: **Communal Urban Garden Cost-Benefit Tool** - an innovative digital instrument that makes their economic and social value visible and measurable.

Grounded in established economic evaluation studies of ecosystem services, the tool converts the extensive, yet often intangible, benefits of urban gardens into clear economic terms. We have developed a proof-of-concept for this digital tool that is ready for testing and initial deployment in collaboration with local authorities and community leaders. In the future, the tool could be integrated with ECUGO's mapping functions and the collection of geospatial and operational data on CUGs, including indicators such as governance structure, funding type, and status. Combined with valuation outputs, the map would offer policymakers, funders, and communities a powerful visual instrument to understand the distribution, scale, and potential of CUGs across Europe.



Custom Value Inputs

Users can input their own local data or draw on reference values, with guidance on data collection protocols to enhance comparability.



Comprehensive Analysis

Assessment of environmental, health, economic, and avoided cost benefits in an integrated framework.



Downloadable Outputs

Results in accessible formats (PDF, Excel) to support development of funding requests, planning documents, and climate resilience strategies.



Sensitivity Testing

Scenario modelling with varying confidence levels to strengthen the robustness of findings.

Together, these features will equip policymakers, funders, and communities with compelling data-driven evidence to inform investment, strengthen policy cases, and empower local advocacy.



To ensure the effective uptake and long-term scaling of the GrowValue Tool, implementation should follow a phased approach that begins with practical testing and capacity building at the local level, before moving towards deeper policy integration and wider replication across Europe.

0-2 years

The priority will be to establish credibility and demonstrate practical value. Pilot projects with selected local authorities and community leaders will test the tool under real-world conditions and refine it based on user experience. These pilots should be paired with data collection protocols to ensure accuracy, comparability, and credibility across contexts. Municipal planning, finance, and sustainability teams can begin applying the tool to support budget justification, inform land-use decisions, and strengthen climate adaptation reporting.

Capacity building will be critical. Training and clear user guidance should be provided to local authorities, community groups, and civil society organisations. Civil society actors, in particular, can use the tool's reports and visualisations in fundraising, planning, and awareness campaigns. Equipping communities with robust valuation evidence will help strengthen bottom-up influence in policymaking, ensuring urban gardens are recognised as valuable social and ecological assets.

3+ years

The focus should shift to embedding the tool within strategic and policy frameworks. At European level, this includes integrating it into urban planning guidance, Cohesion Policy, and Green Deal initiatives. Incorporating tool outputs into EU funding evaluation criteria will create incentives for adoption, encouraging policymakers to treat urban gardens as essential infrastructure for climate resilience, public health, and sustainable growth.

Scaling will also depend on knowledge sharing and standardisation. EU-level training, technical guidance, and open datasets will ensure consistent application across regions.

Piloting in multiple Member States will generate comparable case studies, while civil society networks can disseminate evidence and foster cross-border learning. Through these mechanisms, the GrowValue Tool can evolve into a trusted framework, reshaping how policymakers, funders, and communities value and invest in green urban infrastructure.

Implementers: Local governments, Covenant of Mayors, civil society.

POLICY OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS



Enhanced Investment Appeal: Transforms funding requests from perceived expenses into demonstrable public investments, with studies showing €2–6 return for every €1 invested.



Strengthened Policy Case: Provides policymakers and stakeholders with credible, data-driven evidence that withstands scrutiny from budgetary and urban planning committees.



Empowered Advocacy: Equips communities, civil society, and municipal planners with compelling business cases for sustainable land use.



Informed Decision-Making: Delivers robust, quantifiable data to support scaling and championing of urban garden initiatives across EU and municipal policy frameworks.



III. COORDINATING EU FUNDING POLICY FOR LONG-TERM FINANCIAL SUPPORT

To improve CUGs' fragmented and inconsistent access to EU funding, we propose a practical framework for incorporating CUGs across various EU policies and financing schemes. The framework is comprised of short term and long-term steps that the European Commission can take to support and incentivise CUGs more effectively and cohesively.

Short term

The rules for how EU Cohesion Policy funds are spent are set out in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR). As the EU is now revising this framework in preparation for the new multiannual financial framework, there is a timely opportunity to make suggestions.

We suggest creating a specific category of intervention in the CPR that is dedicated to CUGs. A category of intervention is a classificatory label that helps describe and track funded activities across the main policy objectives set out in the CPR. This dedicated CUG-category would facilitate CUGs' access to Cohesion Policy funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), as it allows calls to be made for CUGs only.

This way, CUGs would not have to compete with unrelated projects under the existing, broader codes of intervention.

It also increases visibility of CUGs, as it allows the EU to aggregate CUG-specific data – serving as a data-gathering pilot for the long-term steps suggested below. The category of intervention would be most effective if also applied at the local and regional level – i.e. through the regional innovation plans (Smart Specialisation Strategies). Additionally, it could be incorporated by regional or local stakeholders through different mechanisms of EU cohesion policy delivery (Community-Led Local Development, Integrated Territorial Investments, Sustainable Urban Development).

Long term

The aggregated data of the CUG intervention category may then guide the long-term path towards coordinating EU financial support for CUGs. To make such future developments more tangible, we propose two possible long-term approaches: a streamlining of the EU policies for CUGs (through an EU Strategy on CUGs) and a streamlining of financial schemes (through, e.g., a Single Urban Area Payment scheme).

(1) EU Strategy on CUGs

The Commission could adopt a Communication specific to CUGs, ensuring that CUGs, despite their relevance to a multitude of EU portfolios, enjoy a degree of coordination across different policies.

This Communication could enshrine policies such as the ECUGO, implement tools such as the GrowValue tool, and streamline the various funding schemes that can be applicable to CUGs (e.g. the ERDF, the European Social Fund+, Horizon Europe).

(2) Single Urban Area Payment (SUAP)

Alternatively, we propose a dedicated CUG financial scheme preliminarily called the 'Single Urban Area Payment' (SUAP) - an EU-wide, area-based support program integrating the best practices of the CAP, such as the Single Area Payment Scheme and Basic Payment Scheme. SUAP could offer stable annual payments to projects that convert vacant or neglected urban land into green, community-used spaces. This scheme would give CUGs steady and long-term financial support through a more straightforward application process.

Implementers: Relevant units within DG Regio.



POLICY OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS



Immediate Actionability: In the short term, embedding CUGs as a dedicated category of intervention within the CPR would help raise awareness for the concept and facilitate their access to EU funds. This immediately alleviates the two biggest problems facing CUGs today.



Long-term Stability: In the longer term, through the implementation of an EU-level strategy or the creation of dedicated funding plans, the EU could offer a stable and accessible framework for CUGs and make them a permanent feature of Europe's urban landscape.



Data-driven Decision-making: Depending on the aggregated data from the category, policy streamlining across the EU can be scaled up or down from simply coordinating CUG policies across portfolios to the creation of a dedicated long-term financial funding stream (e.g. SUAP).



CONCLUSIONS

As European cities face unprecedented environmental, social, and economic challenges, Communal Urban Gardens represent a transformative opportunity to build more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable urban communities. CUGs are comprehensive solutions that deliver measurable benefits across environmental, social, and economic dimensions. They provide climate mitigation through carbon sequestration and urban cooling, strengthen community bonds, and transform underutilised land into productive assets.



(1) A Coordinated Path Forward

The three policy actions outlined— European Communal Urban Garden Observatory (ECUGO), the GrowValue: Communal Urban Garden Cost-Benefit tool, and coordinated financing—represent a comprehensive approach addressing current policy fragmentation.

These work synergistically: ECUGO provides knowledge infrastructure; the GrowValue tool for Communal Urban Gardens delivers evidence for decision-making; a revision of the Common Provisions Regulation would facilitate access to resources through EU Cohesion Policy.

While CUGs are local initiatives, their scalability requires European-level coordination. Success stories from cities like Budapest, Florence, and Madrid demonstrate that with institutional support, CUGs can flourish and deliver on their promise.

(2) Alignment with European Priorities

The Green Together framework aligns with core EU objectives, from the European Green Deal to the Urban Agenda. Integrating CUGs into Cohesion Policy creates a pathway for systematic scaling while respecting local contexts.

(3) Living Laboratories for Sustainable Cities

CUGs serve as living laboratories for participatory, community-led governance essential for 21st-century urban challenges. They demonstrate how bottom-up initiatives, when properly supported, deliver outcomes that neither top-down planning nor market mechanisms alone can achieve.

The volunteer-based, low-resource nature of CUGs makes them attractive in an era of fiscal constraints, while their capacity to generate economic benefits and social capital ensures sustainability.





The Imperative for Action

The challenges facing European cities—from climate change to social fragmentation—will only intensify in the coming decades. The question is not whether cities need more green, inclusive, productive spaces, but how quickly and effectively we can create them. Communal Urban Gardens offer a pathway that is immediately actionable, financially viable, and socially transformative.

By acting on these recommendations, Europe can position itself as a global leader in community-centred urban sustainability, creating cities that are not only more resilient to climate change, but more inclusive, productive, and liveable for all their inhabitants. The seeds of change are already planted across Europe's urban landscapes. What is needed now is the coordinated policy support to help them flourish; transforming not just individual neighbourhoods, but our collective vision of what European cities can become.



REFERENCES

- Andersen, H. (2001). *Governing European cities: Social fragmentation, social exclusion and urban governance*. Routledge.
- Anestis, G., & Stathakis, D. (2024). Urbanization trends from global to the local scale. In G. P. Petropoulos & C. Chalkias (Eds.), *Geographical information science: Case studies in earth and environmental monitoring* (pp. 357–375). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-443-13605-4.00010-2> ResearchGate
- Caputo, S. (2022). *Small scale soil-less urban agriculture in Europe*. Springer.
- Cumbers, A., Shaw, D., Crossan, J., & McMaster, R. (2017). The work of community gardens: Reclaiming place for community in the city. *Work, Employment and Society*, 32(1), 133–149.
- DG Environment. (2023, October 4). More consistent policy support needed for urban agriculture to flourish. European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/news/more-consistent-policy-support-needed-urban-agriculture-flourish-2023-10-04_en
- Diaz, J. M., Webb, S. T., Warner, L. A., & Monaghan, P. (2018). Barriers to community garden success: Demonstrating framework for expert consensus to inform policy and practice. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 31, 197–203.
- EPRS (European Parliamentary Research Service). (2025, January). *Urban agriculture: State of play*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/767192/EPRS_ATA\(2025\)7671_92_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/767192/EPRS_ATA(2025)7671_92_EN.pdf)
- Helmer, J. (2019, November 10). Urban farms are supposed to solve our food woes. The reality is not so simple. *The Huffington Post*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/urban-farming-foodurban-farm-problems-sustainability-food_n_5dc41733e4b0d8eb3c909a87
- Hess, A. J., & Trexler, C. J. (2011). A qualitative study of agricultural literacy in urban youth: Understanding for democratic participation in renewing the agri-food system. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 52(2), 151–162.
- IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). (2022). Urban systems and other settlements. In *Mitigation of climate change: Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/chapter/chapter-8/>
- Kailaish, G., & Banu Chitra, M. (2025). Transforming urban neglected spaces: The role of adaptive reuse and nature-based solutions. *International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope*, 6(2), 1027–1050.
- Koscica, M. (2014). Agropolis: The role of urban agriculture in addressing food insecurity in developing cities. *Journal of International Affairs*, 67(2), 177–186. vLexDRUM
- Langemeyer, J., Madrid-López, C., Mendoza Beltrán, A., & Villalba Méndez, G. (2021). Urban agriculture—a necessary pathway towards urban resilience and global sustainability? *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 210, Article 104055.
- Ohmer, M. L., Meadowcroft, P., Freed, K., & Lewis, E. (2009). Community gardening and community development: Individual, social and community benefits of a community conservation program. *Journal of Community Practice*, 17, 377–399.
- Shimpo, N. (2024). Community garden management for resilient cities: A case study in suburban Tokyo during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 251, Article 105148.



Annex A: Documentary

A documentary on CUGs will be released in October 2025 to raise further awareness on the widespread benefits of these initiatives. Pictures used in this report include stills from this film.

Annex B: Research interviews

Interviews were collected, recorded and transcribed in the period between December 2024 and August 2025.

Interview 1: DG Agri official

Interview 2: DG Regio official

Interview 3: Horizon Europe team officials from DG RTD and DG Agri

Interview 4: Representative of Brussels-based urban farming business association FedeAU

Interview 5: Expert from Cost Action study

Interview 6: Coordinator of CUG project funded by the Interreg Central Europe

Interview 7: Official from Krakow municipality (overseeing CUG initiatives)

Interview 8: Communal urban gardener from Budapest

Interview 9: NGO Representative from Florence (managing a CUG initiative)

Interview 10: Communal urban gardeners from Madrid

Interview 11: Communal urban gardener from Prague 1

Interview 12: Communal urban gardener from Prague 7

Interview 13: NGO representative from Turin (coordinating a CUG network)





EUROPAEUM
A network of leading European universities

PÉTER JÓZSEF BORI Central European University • **MICHELE COLLAZZO** University of Bologna
AMÓS DEL CASTILLO PETIDIER Universidad Complutense de Madrid
IHOR MOSHENETS Central European University • **FILIP SCHERF** University of St Andrews
BEATRIZ SERRA Universidade Católica Portuguesa
EVA TE DORSTHORST University of Luxembourg/Leiden University

Teaching Fellow
CHIARA LOVOTTI