



## THE INSTITUTIONAL DIALOGUE PROJECT OF THE GREEN LIVING AREAS MISSION

# ENHANCING THE SUPERBLOCK POLICY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADAPTABILITY THROUGH A TERRITORIAL APPROACH

## POLICY BRIEF

### ABSTRACT

The Superblock policy brings a transformative approach to urban planning by emphasising community well-being, sustainable mobility, and public space revitalisation. Its success in Barcelona, the benchmark of this model, shows its ability to enhance air quality, reduce congestion and stimulate the local economy. However, replicating or adapting this policy to diverse contexts requires an integrated territorial perspective promoting articulation between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. This policy brief offers practical suggestions to guarantee that the Superblocks policy promotes territorial cohesion, inclusion, and sustainable development in all regions by tackling issues including territorial fragmentation, urban-rural disconnects, and stakeholder resistance to change.

**Keywords:** Superblocks Policy, Urban Planning Innovation, Territorial Cohesion, Sustainable Urban Development, Urban-Rural Linkages, Peri-Urban Integration, Green Mobility, Public Space Revitalisation, Inclusive Urban Policies, Climate-Resilient Cities

### KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

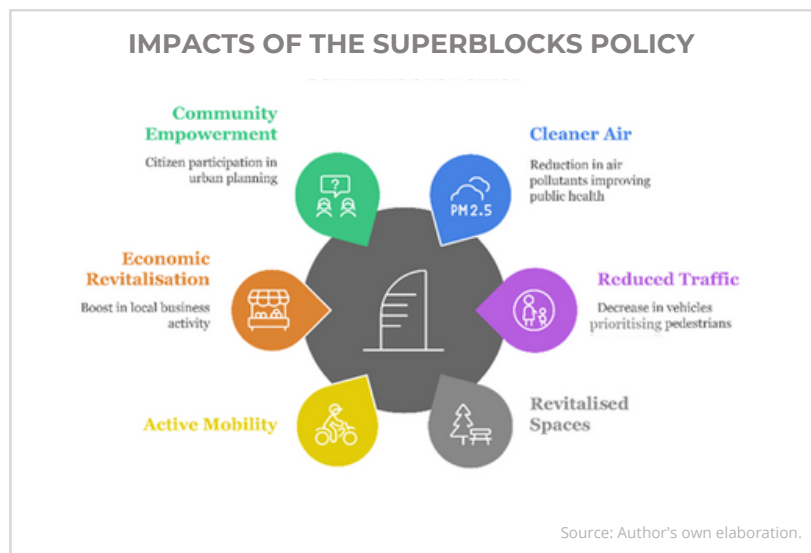
- **Strengthen Territorial Cohesion:** Articulate urban, peri-urban, and rural areas for balanced development.
- **Data-Driven Strategies:** Collect and use data to adapt Superblocks policy to local contexts.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** Foster co-design and continuous engagement to ease adaptation.
- **Coordinated Governance:** Improve coordination across local, regional, and national governments to promote cohesive territorial planning and development.
- **Implementation by phases:** Pilot and progressively launch Superblocks to minimise disruption.
- **Ensure Sustainability and Equity:** Integrate resilience and equitable access into all policy development and implementation phases.



## INTRODUCTION

The superblock policy is an innovative urban strategy for reclaiming public space and creating a low-traffic, pedestrian-friendly environment. It improves urban sustainability by lowering congestion, noise, and pollution while also promoting equitable access to green spaces, active community participation, development of multifunctional public spaces, sustainable mobility options, and stimulation of local economic activity. It is recognised as a benchmark for inclusive and innovative urban planning, with demonstrable environmental, social, and economic benefits.

Adapting and implementing the Superblock policy across diverse urban contexts requires alignment with broader territorial planning and mobility strategies, such as those covering commuting zones and rural areas. While cities expand and densify, their interactions with commuting zones become more complex, involving daily interactions across different



levels and sectors. These dynamics intensify the need for a more integrated and transversal approach to addressing urban challenges and inclusivity and sustainable development across all regions. The lack of articulation between urban planning and broader territorial systems—particularly with commuting zones and rural surroundings—risks reinforcing inequalities, deepening social and spatial divides, and unintentionally building barriers for commuters. This Policy Brief seeks to address these challenges by offering targeted recommendations to sweeten the adaptability and replicability of the Superblocks policy through an integrated territorial approach. These recommendations aim to strengthen urban-rural linkages and ensure the policy promotes inclusivity and equity across urban, peri-urban, and rural landscapes.

### INSTITUTIONAL DIALOGUE: ACCELERATING MEDITERRANEAN SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS

On October 10, 2024, the Institutional Dialogue Project of the Green Living Areas Mission hosted its 1st Institutional Policy Dialogue in Brussels in parallel with the European Week of Regions and Cities. The event showcased successful policies with high replicability potential, across thematic domains, including Bologna's Sulp in the mobility sector. The Institutional Dialogue aims to bring together policy champions – policy-makers who successfully implemented a given policy instrument in the Mediterranean – with other stakeholders interested in replicating and transferring these policies. The insights gathered shaped the recommendations in this brief, ensuring a practical and collaborative approach.

For further information on the Policy Instrument, scan the QR below.



Or visit the Policy Instrument webpage  
[https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/ecologiaurbana/sites/default/files/en\\_gb\\_MESURA%20GOVERN%20SUPERILLES.pdf](https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/ecologiaurbana/sites/default/files/en_gb_MESURA%20GOVERN%20SUPERILLES.pdf)

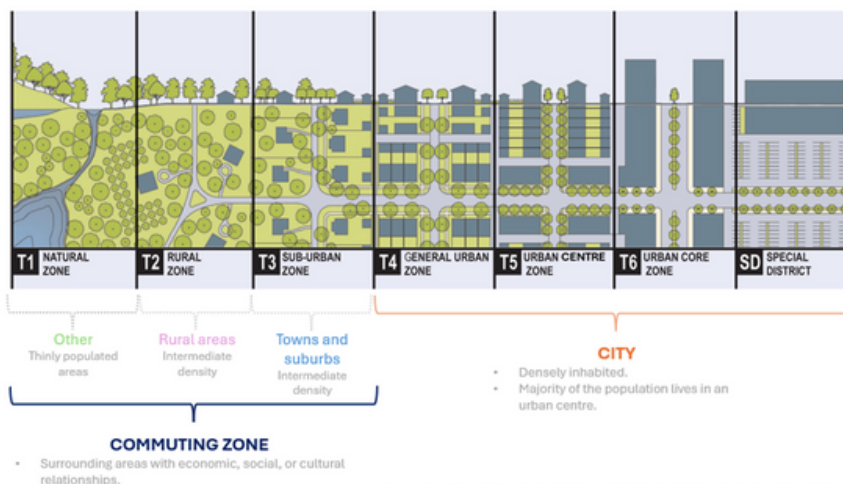


## TERRITORIAL INTEGRATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR ADAPTABLE SUPERBLOCKS

The Superblocks Policy is an internationally recognised urban planning innovation, and Barcelona stands as its most prominent example of success. In Barcelona, Superblocks has significantly contributed to sustainable mobility, public space revitalisation, and air quality improvements (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022; C40 Cities, 2016). The initiative has reclaimed over 23 hectares of public space from vehicular use, prioritising pedestrian-friendly areas and community spaces (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022). In the Sant Antoni Superblock, nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) levels have decreased by 33%, aligning with European Union air quality standards (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022). Additionally, the Poblenou Superblock experienced a 30% increase in local businesses following implementation, showcasing the economic benefits of the policy (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022; C40 Cities, 2016). The initiative has also led to a rise in active mobility, with bicycle and personal mobility vehicle (VMP) use increasing by 30.94% and public transport demand growing by 2.16% (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022). These outcomes position Barcelona's Superblocks policy as a leading model for liveable, resilient, and environmentally sustainable cities.

However, broader integration with peri-urban and rural areas remains a critical challenge. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure that Superblocks operates as part of a cohesive territorial framework rather than an isolated urban intervention, fulfilling the needs of non-resident users such as commuters and regional businesses. Urban centres often rely on surrounding regions for labour markets, goods, and services, whereas rural areas depend on urban hubs for infrastructure, connectivity, and economic opportunities (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2013).

### INTEGRATED VISION OF THE TERRITORY



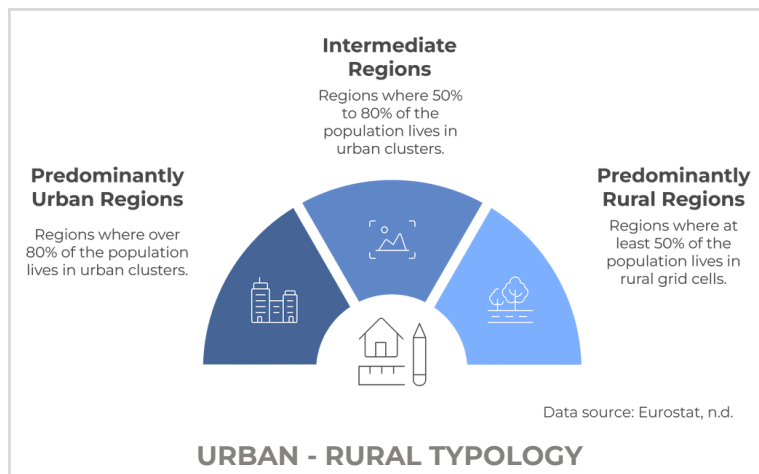
This diagram illustrates the interconnectedness of urban, peri-urban, and rural areas within a broader territorial framework. It highlights the Commuting Zone, where urban centres and surrounding regions engage in vital cultural, economic, and social exchanges. These areas rely on each other for labour, goods, services, and infrastructure, underscoring the need for integrated planning to ensure that urban and territorial policies function as part of a cohesive system. Recognising these linkages is crucial for promoting sustainable, region-wide development.

Source: Image from Center for Applied Transect Studies (n.d.), data adapted from Eurostat (n.d.).



Effectively adapting the Superblocks policy to diverse contexts requires tailoring policies to local conditions – such as city typologies, density, urban morphology, and spatial distribution– rather than a one-size-fits-all approach (Agència d'Ecologia Urbana de Barcelona, 2021). The Agència d'Ecologia Urbana de Barcelona (2021) emphasises that each superblock functions as a basic unit of “ecosystemic urbanism,” coordinating interventions across multiple fields (mobility, public space, biodiversity, energy use, and waste management) to create more liveable and socially cohesive neighbourhoods (Agència d'Ecologia Urbana de Barcelona, 2021). However, superblocks are only one instrument among many in sustainable urban development. To maximise its positive impact, Superblocks must be integrated with broader city policies and plans – for example, aligning Superblocks with public transit networks and housing affordability strategies – in order to mitigate potential externalities such as displaced traffic in surrounding areas and upward pressure on rents (gentrification) within superblock zones (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021; Agència d'Ecologia Urbana de Barcelona, 2021).

Compact cities benefit from enhanced public transit and pedestrian networks, while intermediate or sprawling regions require integrated transport systems and stronger economic linkages to ensure cohesion. The typologies outlined by the European Commission and OECD help align the Superblock policy with local development strategies and broader territorial cohesion objectives.



## FRAMEWORK AND BROADER REFERENCES: URBAN-RURAL LINKAGES AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRATION

Articulating urban, peri-urban, and side-rural territories is necessary for sustainable development. Leading frameworks — including the EU Cohesion Policy, the Territorial

2030, and the UN-Habitat Urban-Rural Linkages Guidelines—establish clear mandates for territorial articulation, emphasising the integration of diverse regions to reduce spatial inequalities and foster connectivity. Aligning with these frameworks ensures that the Superblocks policy serves not as a standalone urban intervention but as a driver for equitable regional development. Key principles (such as improving connectivity, tailoring policies to territorial typologies, and ensuring equity in public services and space distribution) are essential to maximise the policy's impact. Furthermore, the policy must be integrated with other urban and territorial policies, forming a cohesive strategy that



addresses the needs of commuters and regional stakeholders (EU Cohesion Policy; Territorial Agenda 2030; UN-Habitat).

## CHALLENGES AND THE NEED FOR INTEGRATION

Integrating urban, peri-urban, and side-rural areas builds a solid foundation for territorial cohesiveness and sustainable development. Nonetheless, the implementation and adaption of the Superblocks policy face significant challenges due to a lack of a territorial perspective that takes into account urban-rural interconnections. These challenges hinder the policy's replicability and adaptability across diverse contexts and undermine regional integration efforts.

**Resistance from Stakeholders:** Superblocks could face resistance from businesses, commuters, and residents concerned about reduced accessibility, mobility disruptions, and economic risks (Flyvbjerg, 1998). This opposition is often tied to inadequate communication and engagement during the policy's design and implementation phases, as well as the failure to integrate the needs of stakeholders from both the urban centres and the commuting zones (Healey, 1997; Sustainable Just Cities, n.d.). Balancing the inputs and perceptions of stakeholders from both areas is crucial, as this can help to develop broad support for the policy.

**Urban-Rural Disconnects:** The Superblocks model, although primarily focused on urban areas, must be implemented within broader urban planning strategies, such as Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) (which address the reorganisation of mobility networks, logistics, and parking solutions) to prevent isolation and disarticulation. Despite this, the policy's implementation can fail to properly articulate peri-urban and side-rural areas, where socio-economic and commuting patterns diverge. This disconnection may result in fragmented mobility systems that exclude non-resident users from benefiting fully, thus limiting the policy's effectiveness in promoting regional integration and development (Springer, 2023). To overcome this challenge and facilitate regional cohesion, it is essential first to identify which policies or models best suit the characteristics and needs of the city. The selected urban policy (such as the Superblocks policy) should be tailored

## KEY STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES FOR TERRITORIAL INTEGRATION

- **Territorial Cohesion as a Strategic Mandate:** Ensuring urban interventions address regional inequalities by aligning with broader territorial frameworks (EU Cohesion Policy, Territorial Agenda 2030).
- **Urban-Rural Connectivity:** Establishing efficient transport and infrastructure networks bridges economic, social, and mobility divides between urban and rural areas (UN-Habitat Urban-Rural Linkages Guidelines, OECD Rural-Urban Partnerships Framework).
- **Multi-Level Governance and Collaborative Planning:** Strengthening coordination between local, regional, and national authorities while fostering meaningful stakeholder engagement (OECD, 2023; UN-Habitat Guidelines).
- **Equity in Public Space and Services:** Delivering fair and equitable access to infrastructure, public spaces, and economic opportunities across diverse territories (FAO Urban-Rural Land Linkages, Territorial Agenda 2030).
- **Typologies and Adaptation:** Developing tailored policies that reflect the unique characteristics of functional regions, from compact cities to peri-urban and rural nodes (European Commission's Urban-Rural Typology, OECD Functional Regions Framework).
- **Sustainability and Resilience:** Aligning urban strategies with global sustainability goals, leveraging green infrastructure and integrated land use for climate resilience (UN-Habitat Guidelines, Territorial Agenda 2030).





to the city's context, considering peri-urban and side-rural areas, and should be in line with broader policies such as mobility plans and territorial development strategies.

**Inequitable Access to Public Spaces and Services:** Without proper territorial coordination, Superblocks risk reinforcing inequalities by concentrating benefits in urban centres while neglecting intermediate or side-rural regions. This gap leaves certain populations, especially in peri-urban areas, with limited access to improved infrastructure, green spaces, or public services (Cities Forum, n.d.). Moreover, urban public space revitalisation may unintentionally fuel gentrification despite its positive effects. Property values may rise as these areas improve, which might force out low-income residents and small businesses and widen social divides. To reduce these risks, the Superblocks policy must be implemented in combination with preventive measures to avoid gentrification and ensure that it encourages inclusive urban development rather than unintentionally causing displacement.

**Fragmented Governance and Policy Alignment:** The success of Superblocks depends on overcoming fragmented governance structures and misaligned priorities across local, regional, and national levels. Without clear coordination mechanisms, implementation may become inefficient and limited in scope (Meijers, 2008).

**Challenges in Adapting to Diverse Typologies:** The Superblocks policy is primarily designed for compact urban environments, creating significant challenges when applying the model to regions with different territorial typologies, such as intermediate cities or sprawling peri-urban and side-rural areas. The challenge is that these less dense areas, like side-rural regions, have different dynamics and infrastructural needs. These areas might require tailored policies that focus on improving green and blue infrastructure and public spaces while promoting a more balanced distribution of housing, services, and education.

These challenges underline the need to align the Superblocks policy with sub-national, national and regional territorial principles, ensuring that cohesion, equity and sustainability are promoted across all regions, particularly in the surrounding areas influenced by the policy.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the discussion, we propose the following recommendations for implementing, adapting, or scaling the Superblocks Policy. These recommendations aim to ensure comprehensive territorial cohesion and sustainable development. However, their applicability will depend on the specific characteristics of each territory and its governance structures, as not all recommendations may be implementable in every context.



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## General Recommendations

- **Cluster-Based Territorial Approaches:** Incorporate cluster-based strategies as a complementary initiative to adapt Superblock policies while preserving and enhancing economic interdependencies. Territorial clusters—organised by sectors, such as agriculture or manufacturing—should be mapped and considered during the design and implementation of Superblocks. By spatially articulating the different clusters, policymakers and planners can ensure that internal flows (such as supply chains and distribution networks) are not disrupted. This approach facilitates economic sustainability, reduces environmental impacts, and aligns the Superblocks policy with broader regional development goals.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Comprehensive baseline data (such as geographic and demographic data, transport infrastructure assessments, user-specific insights, commuting patterns, and rural-urban dynamics) must be compiled to adapt the Superblocks policy to a specific context effectively. Robust data analysis (as local transport behaviours and cultural characteristics) will ensure informed decision-making and support the development of strategies that address the unique needs of each region and the scale of interventions.
- **Community Engagement with a Common Territorial Vision:** Actively engaging stakeholders (residents, businesses, and commuters) in designing and implementing the Superblocks policy through participatory planning will lower resistance, promote consensus, and guarantee that the policy meets the diverse demands of all stakeholders. This participatory approach should extend beyond the design phase to include continuous support during the implementation, providing affected stakeholders with the guidance needed to adapt to new changes. In this context, balancing stakeholders' participation is essential, prioritising those directly affected by the changes to avoid unnecessary complexity in the design and implementation processes.
- **Multi-Level Governance Alignment:** Encourage cooperation among local, regional, and national governments to guarantee consistent policies, efficient resource sharing, and integrated planning. This can be done by articulating territorial development strategies, creating cross-jurisdictional alliances, and engaging all key stakeholders.
- **Tailored Policies for City Typologies:** Before implementing the Superblocks policy, evaluate whether it is critical to assess whether it is the best policy for each city's unique characteristics. If the Superblocks policy is deemed appropriate, it should be adapted to each area's needs, considering local and regional territorial frameworks, typologies, and existing legislation. Using data and typological frameworks will ensure that policies are relevant, scalable, and impactful across different contexts.



- **Sustainability and Resilience Integration:** Incorporate sustainability and resilience goals, such as climate adaptation, green infrastructure, and resource efficiency, into Superblock initiatives. Align these efforts with global frameworks like the European Green Deal and Sustainable Development Goals to ensure long-term ecological benefits.

## Specific Recommendations

- **Transport Integration and Connectivity:** Develop multimodal transport systems that link Superblocks to regional transport networks, ensuring connectivity between urban cores, peri-urban zones, and side-rural areas. Articulated systems should prioritise accessibility, affordability, and reliability for all users. Enhancing transport infrastructure at different scales is key to fostering behavioural changes in mobility and contributing to the long-term acceptance of the Superblocks model. In turn, improved connectivity will help alleviate mobility disruptions and increase accessibility.
  - Urban Areas: Prioritize public transit improvements, including high-frequency service, last-mile connectivity, and expanded cycling and pedestrian networks.
  - Intermediate Zones: Establish parking systems and regional transit hubs to connect commuters from peri-urban areas to urban superblocks.
  - Side-Rural Areas: Focus on affordable and accessible public transport systems that connect side-rural nodes to urban centres, enabling economic flows and social mobility.
- **Pilot Projects for Testing and Scaling:** Implement Superblocks via phased pilot projects to assess its feasibility and collect feedback before scaling up the policy. These pilots should be designed to test functionality while allowing adjustments based on local needs and typological contexts.
  - Urban Areas: Test time-restricted Superblocks schemes in high-traffic neighbourhoods to evaluate impacts on mobility and community engagement.
  - Intermediate Zones: Conduct pilot projects in mixed-use districts and transit-adjacent areas to assess scalability and regional connectivity.
  - Side-Rural Areas: To address rural-urban integration, combine Superblock pilots with broader rural revitalisation programs, such as green corridors and local market hubs.
- **Progressive Implementation with Integrated Changes:** Implement the Superblocks policy gradually, guaranteeing that the required infrastructure (such as alternative transportation, parking solutions, and user guidance) is put in place simultaneously to prevent resistance and mobility disruption.
  - Urban Areas: Use time-slot-based restrictions (such as car-free hours) to transition high-traffic areas into Superblocks models progressively.





- Intermediate Zones: Prioritize a phased implementation across central nodes and mixed-use areas, ensuring integration with regional transport systems.
- Side-Rural Areas: Gradually integrate Superblocks with existing infrastructure, ensuring minimal disruption to economic and social flows in rural zones.
- **Equity in Access to Public Spaces and Services:** Design the Superblocks policy to ensure equitable access to public spaces, green infrastructure, and essential services across urban, peri-urban, and side-rural regions. This includes addressing territorial disparities and promoting balanced development.
  - Urban Areas: Prioritise the redistribution of public spaces and green areas to underserved city neighbourhoods.
  - Intermediate Zones: Guarantee green corridors and public spaces are equitably distributed and connected to nearby urban centres.
  - Side-Rural Areas: Improve access to essential services and public spaces in rural zones, prioritising areas with limited infrastructure and connectivity.

## CONCLUSION

The Superblocks Policy has transformative potential for promoting sustainable, inclusive, and resilient urban spaces. Nevertheless, to guarantee its successful implementation and adaptation across diverse contexts, it must be integrated within a broader territorial framework that aligns with urban, peri-urban, and rural dynamics. This policy can foster territorial cohesion and equitable development by addressing key challenges (such as stakeholder resistance, urban-rural disconnects, and governance fragmentation) and adopting tailored recommendations. Policymakers are encouraged to leverage the insights and recommendations outlined in this Policy Brief to adapt the Superblocks policy as a catalyst for territorial sustainability while ensuring that the unique characteristics of each territory are respected and reflected in their approach.



## PROJECT SUMMARY

The Institutional Dialogue Project of the Green Living Areas Mission seeks to enhance policy transfer through dialogue among policy-makers and public stakeholders. It focuses on continuous policy improvement and transformation, and aims to establish long-term cooperation on public policy instruments at the Euro-Mediterranean level, ultimately improving citizens' quality of life

## PROJECT CONTACT INFORMATION

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