

GLOBAL CITIES HUB
2025
ANNUAL REPORT



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List of acronyms

AI	artificial intelligence
AIMF	Association internationale des maires francophones
GCH	Global Cities Hub
FoM	UN Forum of Mayors
HLPF	UN High-level Political Forum on sustainable development
GPM	Global Parliament of Mayors
ICLEI	Local governments for sustainability
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
LRGs	Local and Regional Governments
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UN	United Nations
UNDRR	UN Disaster Risk Reduction
UNECE	UN Economic Commission for Europe
UNEP	UN Environment Programme
UN-Habitat	UN Human Settlements Programme
VLR	Voluntary local review
WHO	World Health Organization
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society

Introduction

This annual report provides an overview of the activities by the Global Cities Hub (GCH) in 2025. GCH's activities are presented according to the five priority themes relevant to Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) and International Geneva, in line with the GCH Strategic Framework 2025–2028: the UN Forum of Mayors, human rights, urban health, smart cities, and environment/climate. Further, the report presents the specific engagements by GCH and the various axes of its policy work. It depicts its communication activities and describes the 2025 institutional developments.

The GCH has advanced over the years with the relentless support of its founders and partners. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the City of Geneva and the Canton of Geneva, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, our members, and the numerous LRGs with whom we have collaborated, as well as to the States, international organizations, city networks, NGOs, academic experts, and other stakeholders who played a vital role in shaping the meaningful journey of GCH.

With only 5 years of existence, the Global Cities Hub (GCH) has positioned itself as the city diplomacy platform in International Geneva, where local and regional governments (LRGs) can connect to relevant multilateral processes. It does so by identifying relevant processes for LRGs, encouraging States and the UN to create more space for LRGs within those processes, and by supporting cities and regions to increase their engagement in international affairs, so that they may influence the



global decisions that will ultimately impact them. In addition, the GCH also convenes international stakeholders to discuss global challenges through a dedicated urban lens, because we all know it, *our future is urban!*

In a world increasingly shaped by urbanization, cities are on the frontlines of major global challenges, including climate change, sustainable development, digitalization, public health, and human rights. That is why the GCH was founded with the conviction that cities and regions must play an active role in global governance, alongside States, international organizations and other stakeholders. In 2025, the GCH has therefore worked to create and influence the narrative around the role of LRGs in global governance, convening events, inserting explicit references to LRGs and urban issues in UN decisions, and convincing states that giving LRGs a greater voice in international debates is essential for efficiently developing solutions.

GCH's thematic priorities

The five priority themes below are multilateral issues deemed relevant to LRGs worldwide, as well as to the international ecosystem in Geneva, in line with the Strategic framework guiding the work of the Global Cities Hub for the period 2025–2028.

These priorities were advanced through a combination of events, international advocacy, policy work, quiet diplomacy, and the continuous development of reference tools, such as its Mapping and the International City Networks Directory.

Cities are key to protect the **environment** and combat **climate change**

Local and regional governments are critical actors in **advancing human rights**

The **UN Forum of Mayors** enables mayors to directly engage with the UN

Cities and regions shape the **health** of their residents

In an urbanizing world, **smart cities** influence how we live, work, and interact

GCH's thematic priorities continued

UN Forum of Mayors

The UN Forum of Mayors (FoM) is organized by the UN Economic Commission for Europe. As an official partner to the FoM, the GCH closely collaborated with UNECE, as well as with other UN regional economic commissions to support the 5th edition of the FoM, entitled “Cities Shape the Future”. In concrete terms, the GCH took part in all FoM Bureau meetings to prepare the FoM, it worked closely with all UN regional economic commissions to bring in mayors from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle east and organized four several side-events, in partnership with several international organizations (International Telecommunications Union (ITU), UN Disaster Risk Reduction, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Habitat, World Economic Forum).

A unique body of its kind, the FoM helps to raise the profile of local governments within the UN and International Geneva. It does so by showcasing that local governments, whilst affected by global challenges (climate change, urban health, gender equality, unemployment, housing crisis, etc.), are tackling these issues through innovative local solutions that can be replicated elsewhere.

Taking place on October 6-7, 2025, in Geneva, the FoM was designed as a “High-Level Political Forum” for cities. It focused, from a local perspective, on the same Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) previously examined by States at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in New York in July 2025.

The 5th edition of the FoM saw increased participation, with more than 80 cities (including 12 capitals) and 50 mayors and deputy mayors



from all continents. The mayors highlighted the concrete progress that their local policies have brought about for their residents: a healthier city thanks to reduced air pollution; a safer city thanks to initiatives to combat gender-based and sexual violence; a city that is developing economically thanks to investment and the integration of migrants and refugees.

Human Rights

While States are primarily responsible for protecting and promoting human rights, LRGs have a complementary role to play, which varies according to the national context. For example, the right to education, adequate housing, and the principle of non-discrimination are often realized at the subnational level through public services provided by LRGs to their residents. It is therefore essential for the GCH that LRGs are taken into account by the UN human rights system.

In the field of human rights, the GCH undertook several activities to advocate in favour of enhanced LRGs’ engagement with the UN human rights system. The GCH published, in partnership with the Geneva Human Rights Platform and

GCH's thematic priorities continued

the University of Bologna, a policy brief “Localizing Multilateralism: the role of LRGs in advancing human rights and the SDGs”. Launched in the margins of the Human Rights Council, the brief makes recommendations for strengthening the engagement of LRGs with the UN human rights system.

The GCH also co-organized with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a thematic workshop entitled “Enhancing national reporting and implementation of human rights through coordinated engagement at the local and regional levels: the role of NMIRFs”, which highlighted the importance of creating incentives for LRGs to advance human rights at the local level.



The GCH was invited to take part in the 60th anniversary of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, where it presented concrete ways to better include LRGs in the work of treaty bodies.

Urban Health

Health issues are a priority for many LRGs around the world. Although it is relatively rare for cities to have specific powers in the field of health, they



nevertheless have a significant influence on the social determinants of health. Whether in terms of housing, pollution, access to sports facilities or green spaces, social ties, access to water and sanitation, or healthy food, cities have significant leverage to improve the health and well-being of their residents. This is why the GCH has undertaken various activities related to urban health in 2025.

The GCH was invited by the World Health Organization (WHO) to take part in the High-Level Panel of Mayors at the 4th Ministerial Conference on Road Safety, where it reiterated that cities play a key role in urban planning and have the power to significantly influence the behaviour and mobility of their residents. The GCH also took part in discussions within the WHO-led Healthy Cities regional networks on the opportunity to create a mechanism to better coordinate the efforts of regional networks that support cities around the world in improving their health policies, through a “healthy city” label. Another activity in partnership with the WHO was the exchange between with the City of Geneva and a delegation of Korean mayors focused on the social determinants of health.

In 2025, the GCH continued to follow the negotiation process for a new pandemic treaty and encouraged States to take into account the role of

GCH's thematic priorities continued

LRGs in pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response. The 78th World Health Assembly adopted the new pandemic treaty. As a follow-up, the GCH co-organized with UN-Habitat, the Global Parliament of Mayors, and Geneva Health Files a Geneva Urban debate entitled "Global Health, Local Action: Understanding the New Pandemic Treaty", focusing on the implications of the new treaty for LRGs.

Smart Cities and Civerse

In 2025, the GCH pursued its close collaboration with the ITU to include cities in various international debates on the topic of smart cities and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to enable the development of civerse(s). In particular, the ITU and the GCH worked together to ensure that the development and implementation of various standards and guidelines relating to smart cities and the civerse could include the perspectives of LRGs, while ensuring a human-centered approach. The international community must help cities and regions take appropriate measures to achieve socio-economic development goals and avoid excessive dependence on service providers.



At the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the Smart City Leaders' Talk on "Safe Smart Cities and Climate Frustration" discussed ways

in which smart cities can contribute to the fight against climate change, while maintaining their focus on the needs of their residents.

The GCH is recognised as a key partner and a platform for amplifying the voice of cities by the ITU, which is committed to actively involving cities in the discussions. As more and more cities continue to explore the potential of the civerse, the various events organized by the GCH help to reinforce the message that technology must always serve humanity, and not the other way round.

As part of the AI for Good Summit, the GCH supported the organization of the following events: (1) AI & virtual worlds: Building the cities and governments of tomorrow to explore the civerse and AI-generated virtual worlds; (2) Leaving no one behind in the civerse to harness digital innovation and ensure its use for the public good; (3) Civerse: AI-Powered Virtual Worlds for Resilient, Smart and Inclusive Cities to discuss the opportunities and challenges of the civerse in terms of public services.

The GCH also organized a Geneva Urban Debate, in partnership with ITU, UN Habitat and entitled "Co-governing the civerse", which provided a virtual tour of multilateral processes and their main outcomes in the realm of smart cities, virtual worlds and AI, and the civerse.

Environmental protection and Climate Change

Environmental protection and the fight against climate change are priorities for most LRGs with which the GCH has engaged since its inception.

GCH's thematic priorities *continued*

These are also key issues for the international community, particularly the UN and its Member States. In 2025, the GCH focused on areas where it believed it could have the greatest impact. In doing so, it significantly strengthened its ties with UNEP and ICLEI, which have become key partners.

For instance, the GCH pursued its work within the Coalition of Local and Subnational Governments to End Plastic Pollution, with a position paper ahead of the 5th session of the intergovernmental negotiations (highlighting the central role of LRGs in managing the lifecycle of plastic), a statement during the negotiations themselves, as well as a webinar to analyse the results of that session which took place in Geneva.

The GCH also actively contributed to the 7th United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-7) in Nairobi, organized by UNEP. There, the GCH co-organized the Cities and Regions Summit during UNEA-7 and an event on extreme heat in urban areas, in which it supported the participation of mayors. The GCH made several statements in plenary to highlight

the role of LRGs in developing innovative local solutions to protect the environment and adapt to climate change.

On other environmental/climate topics, the GCH organized a specific briefing for LRGs ahead of the 8th session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, in cooperation with Switzerland and UNDRR, and it also intervened in the plenary session to convey key messages in relation to the role of LRGs in preventing, preparing and in responding to disasters.

For the second consecutive year, the GCH collaborated with the IFRC to organize the Cities Beat the Heat event. The webinar, which was very well received by cities, an increasing number of which are being impacted by heat waves, highlighted the measures taken by Athens to address extreme heat, the upcoming IPCC special report on climate change and cities, as well as an innovative micro-insurance scheme for women in India who are unable to work in situations of extreme heat.



Other 2025 highlights

City Diplomacy

The GCH is located in the heart of International Geneva, but its diplomatic outreach goes beyond. As such, the GCH participates in numerous meetings organized by other entities, and it also engages on topics that go beyond its thematic priorities. This helps the GCH to understand the dynamics and the space that can be created for LRGs, strengthen its network of contacts within relevant organizations that can help the GCH fulfil its mandate, contribute to certain initiatives, and reflect on ways and means to increase the influence of LRGs in multilateralism, particularly by creating a new status for LRGs at the UN.

The GCH was thus invited to participate in annual meetings of major city networks, including UCLG in Barcelona and the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) in Braga. The GCH has been cooperating with the GPM for several years, with a focus in 2025 on encouraging States to reform the international financial system to make it more inclusive of LRGs, in particular in the run-up to the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development held in Sevilla. The GCH was also invited to a workshop on decentralized development cooperation, which was co-organized by the OECD and Germany in Berlin. There, the GCH advocated for better integration between the multilateral frameworks (Agenda 2030 and Addis Ababa Action Agenda), development cooperation led by States, and that led by LRGs.

The GCH co-organized with OCHA a private meeting for LRGs interested in humanitarian action, to help LRGs deepen their understanding and how they may concretely contribute to humanitarian action in the most effective manner through the

UN system. The GCH hosted a meeting of big Swiss Cities with International Geneva stakeholders to discuss enhanced engagement opportunities in the field of environment and urban development.

The GCH Annual Retreat brought together representatives of LRGs from Belgium, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, as well as international organizations to discuss the emergence of LRGs as emerging multilateral donors, an issue that remains understudied. The phenomenon of LRGs funding international organizations for development or humanitarian programs however appears to be growing. The retreat therefore provided an opportunity to better understand their incentives and challenges, to discuss whether and how LRGs could engage more strategically.

Finally, given its expertise, the GCH has been invited by several entities (UNESCWA Arab Mayors' Academy, Catalonia region, Barcelona province, Geneva Graduate Institute, École des Hautes Études Internationales et Politiques, etc.) to present city/urban diplomacy and the GCH's raison d'être. These encounters have allowed the GCH to explain multilateralism and advocate for greater engagement by cities on the international stage, particularly in addressing global challenges such as the SDGs.



Other 2025 highlights continued

Policy Work

In 2025, the GCH continued to produce substantive work in the form of policy papers, drawing on its experience, notably through participation in various multilateral processes, organizing numerous events, and holding meetings with a wide range of actors in intergovernmental and city diplomacy.

The GCH's policy objectives are clear: to create and influence the narrative around the role of LRGs in global governance, to set precedents by inserting explicit references to LRGs or urban issues in UN decisions, and to convince States that giving LRGs a greater role in international debates allows for a better understanding of realities on the ground and the development of relevant and appropriate solutions.

In the field of human rights, the GCH published "Localizing Multilateralism: the role of LRGs in advancing human rights and the SDGs" to explore ways of strengthening LRGs' engagement with the UN human rights system. It also published a policy paper entitled "Strengthening confidence in financing local climate-responsive projects", highlighting the need to "localize" international funding through enhanced cooperation between LRGs, the private sector and international financial institutions. In an article in the journal Paradiplomacia, the GCH describes the various forms of city diplomacy and emphasizes that it should not develop in parallel with that pursued by States, but should be linked to and complementary to it (and not be confined to being practised within city networks). The Declaration of Mayors on financing for development launched by both the GCH and GPM was signed by



33 mayors worldwide and launched during the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development. Several of the Declaration's recommendations are reflected in the Sevilla Engagement (the final outcome of the Conference), whereby States have committed to strengthening sub-national finances and the capacities of LRGs, and called upon multilateral development banks to better meet local development needs.

The GCH has also taken advantage of various multilateral opportunities to publicly articulate its positions, including the importance of giving greater recognition to the role of LRGs, enabling them to participate in international events in their own capacity, and contributing with specific language related to LRGs in selected intergovernmental negotiations.

In the field of the environment, the GCH was particularly active in the negotiation process for the treaty on plastic pollution, where it submitted proposals for language. Through the Local Authorities Major Group, the GCH submitted specific language during the consultation process on UNEP's medium-term strategy 2026–2029, which now contains more references to LRGs than in the past. In the run-up to UNEA-7, the GCH also provided input into the negotiation process for the Final Ministerial Declaration and for a UNEA

Other 2025 highlights *continued*

resolution on the implementation of multilateral environment agreements, which now includes a modest reference to the local level. At the 8th Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction (GPDRR), it emphasized the need to localize the Sendai Framework and managed to influence the text of the Co-Chairs' summary.

In the field of human rights, the GCH also provided specific drafting suggestions during the inter-governmental negotiations on the resolution on economic, social and cultural rights at the Human Rights Council. For the first time, the resolution - adopted by consensus - included an explicit reference to LRGs, recognising and encouraging their contribution to economic, social and cultural rights.

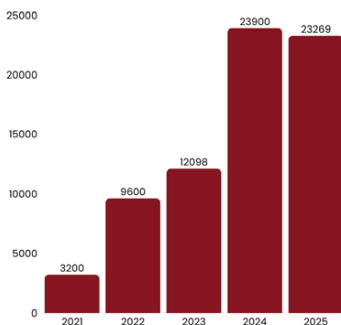
Finally, the GCH has continued its work in the area of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), which are powerful tools for aligning local policies with the SDGs, promoting coherence between local and national policies, mobilizing stakeholders, demonstrating leadership in sustainable development, attracting private investment, benchmarking against other cities, and strengthening local data collection processes. For that purpose, the GCH has closely collaborated with the city of Geneva, which published its first VLR at the end of 2025, with the support of the Swiss federal authorities.

Communication

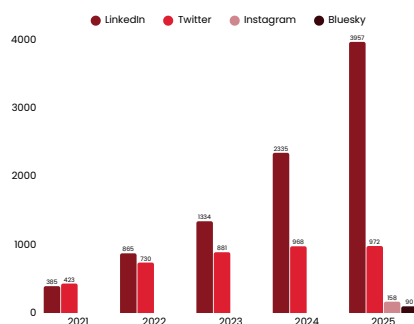
While much of its work takes place primarily in international forums, diplomatic circles, and targets specific stakeholder groups (LRGs, city networks, international organizations, States), the GCH attaches great importance to relaying its messages and activities to a wider audience.

In 2025, particular attention was dedicated to strengthening its communication through its website, newsletter, social media (with the launch of an Instagram account) and new video content. For instance, the audience of GCH increased significantly on LinkedIn, which remains the top priority for GCH's communication strategy and through its newsletter.

Evolution of the number of sessions on the website 2021-2025



Evolution of the number of followers on social media 2021-2025



2025

30 events

(co)organised by the Global Cities Hub

Among the participants:

180 local and regional governments

87 representatives of Member States

50+ city networks, IOs, NGOs and others

Yearly numbers as of 31 December 2025

In total, the GCH (co-)organized 30 events in 2025 and also contributed to and/or participated in numerous other events to convey core messages related to LRGs and inclusive multilateralism. Events are one of the main tools for implementing the GCH's mission. It is through this channel that it can reach its audience, which includes LRGs themselves, but also States, international organizations, city networks, NGOs, and other actors that promote a more inclusive multilateralism towards cities.

Institutional developments

Membership

Following Nairobi's accession at the end of 2024, the City of Zurich, Basel and the Province of Barcelona joined as ordinary members in 2025, while the Canton and the City of Geneva remain founding members. Membership in the GCH entails a commitment to advancing more inclusive multilateralism for LRGs and highlights the complementary nature of multilevel diplomacy, as well as the mutual benefits that coordination among all levels of governments can generate for the people.

Governance

In 2025, the General Assembly of the GCH appointed a new President, Ms. Christina Kitsos (City Councilor, City of Geneva), succeeding Mr. Sami Kanaan. The GCH expresses its deep gratitude to Mr. Sami Kanaan for his unwavering commitment throughout the organisation's formative years, which has been instrumental to its development. It also warmly thanks Ms. Christina Kitsos for accepting this responsibility and for her continued dedication, as well as that of the City of Geneva, to advancing the GCH's mission.



Partnerships

Partnerships stand at the core of GCH's work and its mandate to connect various stakeholders. Two Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were thus renewed in 2025 with the UNECE and the AIMF. In addition, the GCH consolidated its ties with UNEP with a MoU to support the commitment of LRGs to global environmental governance. Further, the GCH also strengthened its cooperation with all UN regional economic commissions (UNECE, UNESCAP, UNESCWA, UNECLAC, UNECA) around the organization of the UN Forum of Mayors.



Funding

The GCH's financial position remained stable in 2025, supported by the continued commitment of its two founding entities (Canton of Geneva and City of Geneva), as well as the Swiss Confederation. Limited additional funding was secured through membership fees and partnerships with international organizations. All major contributors slightly increased or extended their commitments on a multi-year basis. The GCH aims to build on this positive trajectory to continue delivering on its

Institutional developments continued

mandate and to maximize its impact in support of a more inclusive multilateralism. Despite the unprecedented pressures faced by the International Geneva ecosystem in 2025, the GCH is deeply grateful to its members for providing a strong degree of financial stability and enabling continued development.



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