

CONCEPT NOTE

European Metropolitan Authorities Forum 2026

Marmara Municipalities Union will organize the EMA Forum 2026 in collaboration with the Barcelona Metropolitan Area on 7-8 October 2026 in Istanbul, Türkiye.

This edition follows the tenth anniversary of the EMA Forum, celebrated in Barcelona in October 2025 alongside the World Metropolitan Summit. That milestone marked a decade of joint advocacy to strengthen the metropolitan voice in European policies and programmes and to promote structured cooperation among metropolitan authorities at the international level.

The EMA Forum 2026 will focus on the critical role of metropolitan areas in shaping and governing global and European agendas beyond 2030. It will examine how metropolises are central to achieving EU goals, emphasizing their strategic role in the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034, Cohesion Policy, and the EU agenda for cities.

Moreover, at a time when international debates have increasingly shifted away from the climate emergency, a key theme of the Forum will be climate-driven water risks. This will highlight the urgent need for metropolitan-scale governance to effectively manage water scarcity, flooding, and related socio-environmental vulnerabilities.

Overall, the Forum's theme will be **"Governing the Metropolitan Future: Policies, Funds, and Climate-Driven Water Risks."** It aims to reaffirm metropolitan authorities as active partners in policy design, implementation, and governance, ensuring that metropolises are equipped to deliver resilient, inclusive, and effective solutions to global challenges.

Metropolitan Perspective Beyond 2030

International and European agendas are currently being reshaped in response to a rapidly evolving and increasingly complex global context. Issues that only a few years ago were at the forefront of multilateral debate, such as climate change, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and the green and digital transitions, have progressively lost political visibility, despite the fact that their impacts are becoming more severe and tangible across the globe.

Over recent decades, nations, regions, local authorities, civil society and international organisations reached a certain consensus around shared priorities, mainly defined by the Agenda 2030: tackling climate change, reducing poverty and hunger, promoting education, ensuring access to water and basic services, social and economic development, strengthening multilateralism and governance, and building cooperation and peace.

Today, these common objectives risk being overshadowed by short-term geopolitical aspirations. Geopolitical instability, armed conflicts, security concerns, and macroeconomic pressures have come to dominate public and institutional narratives. This shift in priorities risks narrowing the strategic involvement of local authorities and diverting attention from long-term structural challenges that remain critical for sustainable and inclusive development.

On the other hand, periods of instability can also open opportunities for political and institutional reform. Local and regional governments have long advocated for being recognized not merely as implementers of global agendas, but as political actors in their own right in international decision-making. This demand has become particularly relevant in the debates on the future of the New Urban Agenda (NUA), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Pact for the Future and the post-2030 frameworks, where local and regional governments are seeking to consolidate a unified political voice in global decision-making.

Our focus remains on the added value of metropolitan areas, where the effects of global instability have a strong impact. Our territories and citizens absorb the social, economic and environmental consequences of global crises. Rising living costs, housing shortages, growing inequalities, migration pressures and increasing demands on public services are experienced first and most intensely in urban areas. Metropolitan areas are where global challenges become local realities – but also where solutions are tested, implemented and scaled up. They concentrate innovation, economic activity, infrastructure, knowledge and social diversity. For this reason, they are not only directly affected by global challenges; they are essential actors in delivering effective, practical and innovative solutions to achieve global goals.

The EMA Forum 2026 will therefore come at a crucial moment to reaffirm the metropolitan perspective in shaping global agendas beyond 2030. European metropolitan areas will continue to raise their voice in defence of the metropolitan dimension, multilateral cooperation, sustainable development, equity, and inclusive social and economic development for present and future generations worldwide. Metropolitan authorities are ready not only to adapt to change, but also to actively help shape it.

A Crucial Moment for the European Framework 2028-2034: Policies and Funds

The coming years will be decisive for Europe. Beyond the geopolitical context, Europe's future capacity to compete and innovate globally will depend on how it structures its territorial development and empowers its key economic and innovation engines to drive sustainable growth and reinforce the continent's resilience and competitiveness.

The preparation of the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034, the new Cohesion Policy, the European Affordable Housing Plan and the definition of the EU Agenda for Cities will be decisive for our metropolitan areas and will determine investment priorities and governance models for the next decade. These frameworks will shape how Europe addresses competitiveness, sustainability, energy transition, housing, mobility and social inclusion.

This represents a critical opportunity to strengthen the role of metropolitan areas within the European project. Metropolitan areas concentrate a significant share of Europe's population, GDP, innovation capacity and strategic infrastructure. They are key drivers of competitiveness, social cohesion and the green and digital transitions. At the same time, they face the most complex and interconnected challenges, from housing affordability and water scarcity to security and economic transformation.

For these reasons, metropolitan authorities must not be treated solely as beneficiaries or implementing bodies of European funds. They must be recognised as strategic actors in the design, implementation and evaluation of European policies and programmes.

The next MFF and the future Cohesion Policy should therefore guarantee stronger and more direct involvement of metropolitan areas, through governance mechanisms that allow structural participation, not dependent exclusively on national or regional intermediaries. This includes direct access to dedicated metropolitan funding instruments, binding consultation in programme design, and a clear institutional role in monitoring and evaluation processes.

However, current signals from European institutions suggest that local, and especially metropolitan authorities, may not have a sufficiently relevant role in shaping the next generation of programmes and funds. Early indications regarding the future Cohesion Policy, the Global Gateway strategy and the new EU Agenda for Cities point towards governance models in which metropolitan involvement remains conditional on the willingness of national or regional governments.

On 16 July 2025, the European Commission presented its proposal for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, described as an EU budget “for a stronger Europe”. The proposed seven-year budget amounts to almost €2 trillion and is expected to come into force in January 2028, following negotiations with the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. This negotiation period will be crucial for advocating metropolitan priorities and ensuring that metropolitan areas are meaningfully reflected in the next generation of EU programmes and funding instruments.



EMA meeting with the Executive VP Raffaele Fitto

Strategic programmes, including cohesion-related funds, would be integrated into 27 National and Regional Partnership Plans, reinforcing Member States' role in programming and implementation. This restructuring risks reducing local and regional negotiating power and limiting funding for local development. The Cohesion Alliance, an initiative of the European Committee of the Regions that gathers over 12,000 local and regional representatives and partners, advocates for Cohesion Policy as the EU's main long-term decentralized investment tool.

The EMA network has also published a study gathering information about the role of metropolitan areas in Cohesion Policy during the period 2021-2027. The EMA's analysis on "[The impact of cohesion policy on metropolitan areas during the period 2021-2027](#)" examines the role of metropolitan areas in Cohesion Policy (2021-2027), highlighting the impact of European funding through key projects identified by the metropolises themselves. Data from 23 metropolitan areas across 12 EU countries show that even with limited resources, they deliver significant results. Recognizing their role more explicitly and improving access to Cohesion Policy instruments could substantially increase EU-wide impact. Strengthening metropolitan authorities is not a selfish request but a strategic investment in Europe's competitiveness, resilience, and social cohesion.

In the case of the new EU Agenda for Cities, there is a clear recognition of the importance of metropolitan areas, with references to initiatives such as Italy's Metro Plus programme, Portugal's integrated intermunicipal strategies, and Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) support to metropolitan areas. However, when it comes to implementation, the strategy again leaves the final decision largely in the hands of national and regional authorities. As the Commission states, "When addressing the challenges facing urban areas in national and regional partnership plans, Member States should provide the opportunities for cities and other urban authorities to shape programmes of reforms and investments tailored to their specific needs" (European Commission, 2025).

In parallel, the European Affordable Housing Plan offers a key opportunity to tackle growing housing challenges. Metropolitan areas are at the centre of affordability and supply pressures, with direct implications for competitiveness and social cohesion. These initiatives should therefore provide concrete tools, funding and coordination mechanisms, while ensuring that metropolitan authorities are fully involved as strategic actors in designing and implementing solutions adapted to their realities. The European Housing Alliance can play a key role in fostering coordination between European, national, regional and local actors, promoting best practices and reinforcing a shared strategic vision. However, for these initiatives to be effective, metropolitan authorities must be integrated as core partners, with a direct role in shaping priorities, accessing relevant funding instruments and implementing solutions adapted to their specific realities.

Many of Europe's most pressing challenges have a clear metropolitan dimension. Ignoring this reality risks limiting the effectiveness of European programmes and preventing Europe from unlocking the full potential of its metropolitan areas to deliver tangible results. Europe will not be able to compete in this new global context if its metropolises are unable to unleash their full potential.

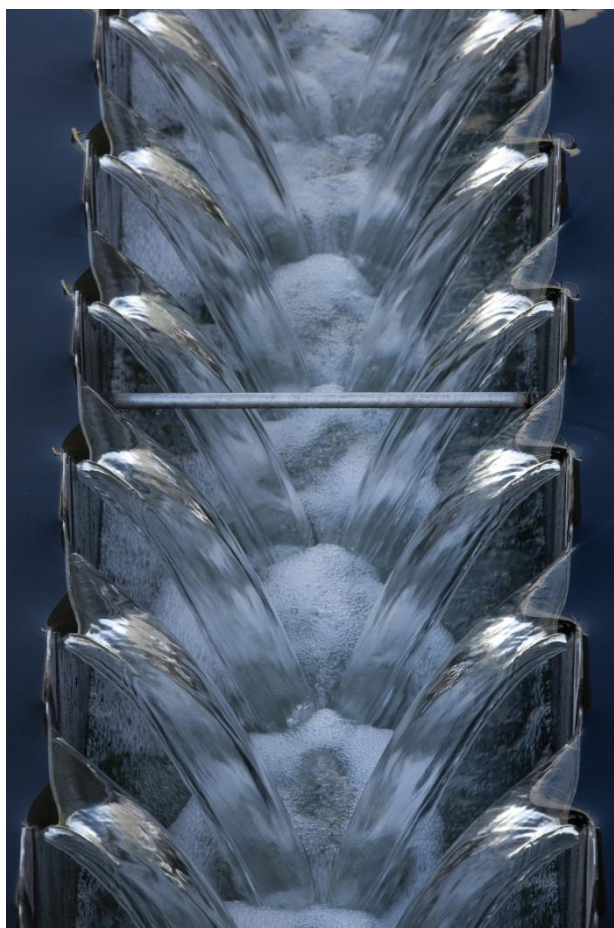
The EMA Forum 2026 will therefore call for a renewed partnership between European institutions and metropolitan authorities – a partnership based on trust, shared responsibility and direct dialogue. If Europe is serious about its ambitions for competitiveness, sustainability and social cohesion, it must fully and structurally integrate metropolitan areas into the governance of European policies and programmes.

Climate-Driven Water Risks

While international attention increasingly turns towards geopolitical strategies focused on security, trade and global power dynamics, the accelerating consequences of climate change continue to intensify, and this dimension appears to have lost visibility in global discussions. Among the effects, water scarcity stands out as one of the most urgent and destabilising consequences of climate change. The Forum therefore will also place a particular emphasis on addressing climate-driven water risks, recognising their profound implications for metropolitan areas.

Climate-driven water risks arise from the close link between climate change and the hydrologic cycle, where rising temperatures disrupt precipitation patterns and exacerbate both water scarcity and water-related hazards. According to UNEP, over 90% of natural disasters worldwide are weather- and water-related. Many regions in the world are facing a dual water challenge: growing water scarcity on the one hand, and more frequent and severe floods and storms on the other. UN-Water states that roughly half of the global population now experiences severe water scarcity for at least part of the year, a figure projected to rise with further warming and population growth. UNCCD estimates that droughts may affect over three-quarters of the world's population by 2050, while the number of people at risk of floods is projected to increase from 1.2 billion to 1.6 billion by the same year.

Today, climate-driven water risks are no longer limited to environmental degradation. They increasingly translate into humanitarian risks, food insecurity and socio-economic vulnerability, as more frequent and severe droughts, floods and storms affect social well-being. These water-related extremes increasingly trigger public health threats through the spread of water-borne and climate-sensitive diseases, while simultaneously undermining agricultural production and disrupting food supply chains. These risks are particularly pronounced in urban areas. The international consensus on sustainable urbanisation, epitomised by the New Urban Agenda adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (*Habitat III*), directly embraces water and sanitation as core components of resilient and inclusive cities. Cities concentrate population, economic activity and critical infrastructure, while at the same time transforming natural hydrological systems through land sealing, altered drainage patterns, and intensive water demand. Climate change is therefore reshaping urban water systems in ways that directly translate into rising disaster risks, including more frequent and severe droughts, pluvial and fluvial flooding, and urban heat-water interactions.



At the same time, climate-driven water risks are inseparable from questions of inequality and social vulnerability. According to the Joint Monitoring Programme of the World Health Organization and UNICEF, 2.2 billion people worldwide (around one in three) lacked access to safely managed drinking water services in 2017, while 4.2 billion people (more than half of the global population) lacked access to safely managed sanitation services. These deficits are highly unevenly distributed and disproportionately affect women and girls, low-income households, and marginalized ethnic or cultural communities, who face both persistent service gaps and heightened exposure to climate-related hazards such as droughts, floods and urban flooding.

Inequality is particularly acute in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where around 420 million children, nearly one in five globally, live in areas affected by armed conflict and fragility, a figure that could rise significantly by 2030 if preventive action is not taken. According to UNICEF, in countries affected by protracted conflict, children under the age of 15 are, on average, almost three times more likely to die from diarrhoeal diseases caused by a lack of safe water, sanitation and hygiene than from direct violence.

Global and European Policy Frameworks

The global policy debate increasingly frames climate-driven water risk as a core development and governance challenge. At the centre of the global agenda stands the water and sanitation framework adopted under the auspices of the United Nations. SDG 6 establishes a holistic vision to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, and translates this ambition into a set of interlinked targets covering access, quality, efficiency, ecosystem protection and governance across the entire water cycle.

Within this framework, Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) constitutes the operational backbone of the governance target and provides a common logic for addressing climate-driven water risks in an integrated manner. By promoting coordination across domestic supply, agriculture, industry, energy and ecosystem protection, and by strengthening cooperation across administrative boundaries, this approach explicitly recognises that water scarcity, pollution and flood risks are interconnected outcomes of development pathways, land-use decisions and institutional arrangements rather than isolated sectoral problems. For metropolitan areas in particular, where water systems, infrastructure networks and land-use dynamics extend far beyond municipal borders, this integrated governance logic is especially relevant. Metropolitan governance arrangements offer a critical scale for aligning climate adaptation, spatial planning and infrastructure investment, and for translating global commitments on water and climate into territorially coherent action.

At the European level, climate-driven water risks have similarly become a strategic concern, as reflected in the European Commission's 2025-2029 Strategic Plan. Water resources across the EU are under growing and multi-dimensional pressure, and water resilience is now positioned as a central pillar of quality of life, economic competitiveness and strategic autonomy by the European Commission. Increasing floods, prolonged droughts and structural water scarcity are already constraining key economic sectors and causing large-scale damage across the EU. According to the European Environment Agency, water scarcity affected around 34% of EU territory during at least one season in 2022, while Water Europe notes that water scarcity already affects 38% of the EU population and jeopardizes key industries valued at €192 billion, with water demand projected to increase significantly by 2030.

The dual exposure to scarcity and flooding has reinforced the need to move beyond fragmented, sector-based responses and to embed water considerations into spatial planning, urban development

and infrastructure strategies. The EU's legal and policy architecture is anchored in the Water Framework Directive, complemented by the Floods Directive and the Nature Restoration Regulation, which together provide the backbone of European water governance. In parallel, the recently adopted EU Water Resilience Strategy (2025) defines a renewed policy direction focused on restoring and protecting the water cycle, building a water-smart and competitive economy, and securing clean and affordable water and sanitation for all, while setting concrete efficiency and demand-management objectives for the coming decade. The strategy sets a minimum target of a 10% improvement in water efficiency by 2030 and stresses the need to limit additional water demand stemming from the clean industrial and digital transition, while reinforcing agricultural resilience. For metropolitan areas, where economic activity, population growth and climate exposure are most concentrated, these European frameworks highlight both the scale of risk and the opportunity to act as frontrunners in integrated, climate-resilient water and land-use planning.

Metropolitan Governance and Implementation

Against this global and European policy background, metropolitan areas emerge as key actors in governing climate-driven water risks. Metropolises operate as functional territories where water systems, mobility networks, food and energy supply chains, labour markets and ecological systems intersect across municipal boundaries. Their scale and institutional complexity create significant governance challenges, but also unique opportunities to integrate climate adaptation, water management, spatial planning, infrastructure investment and social policy within a united strategic framework.

In these high-density urban systems, disruptions to water availability or quality can rapidly cascade across supply chains, service provision and local economies, generating impacts that extend far beyond municipal boundaries. This systemic exposure is particularly pronounced in coastal and delta metropolises, where sea-level rise and groundwater salinisation create long-term and potentially irreversible risks for drinking water systems, housing, transport infrastructure and urban livelihoods. Metropolitan authorities are therefore well positioned to reduce risk by coordinating policies across sectors and jurisdictions, mobilising finance for resilient infrastructure and nature-based solutions, strengthening early-warning and preparedness systems, and aligning local action with national and international climate and water agendas.

From the current policy perspective, while water management must be planned and coordinated at river basin and functional urban area scale, EU funding continues to be predominantly programmed at NUTS-2 level rather than at the metropolitan scale. This creates a persistent scale mismatch for climate-driven water risks, which materialise across shared catchments, interconnected infrastructure networks and regional land-use systems that extend well beyond individual municipalities. Metropolitan areas, therefore, remain structurally positioned between regional and local policy levels, despite operating as functional urban areas (FUAs) where water demand, flood exposure, pollution pressures and climate vulnerability are generated and managed in an integrated way.

Recognising metropolitan areas as formal policy actors in climate adaptation and water governance would allow them to assume a legitimate coordinating role across municipalities, utilities and sectoral authorities, and to participate directly in programming, governance and funding decisions. This recognition should be operationalised through the systematic use and expansion of metropolitan-level Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) for water infrastructure and nature-based solutions, enabling coherent, cross-boundary investment packages under a single territorial strategy. In parallel, the introduction of dedicated Policy Objectives (POs) for the European Cohesion Policy or

budget envelopes for metropolitan areas would allow direct and targeted financing of complex urban water risks, such as drought resilience, flood protection, water quality and ecosystem restoration, at the scale where these risks can be most effectively addressed. Empowering metropolitan areas in this way would transform them into the main coordinators of climate-driven water risk management, capable of aligning basin-scale planning with urban development, infrastructure investment and social priorities across Europe's most exposed and strategically important territories.

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