ESPON Seminar
Small and medium-sized cities in Europe

15-16 November 2023 in Cuenca, Spain

*Policy Atlas of Sustainable Urban Development
for Small Urban Areas*
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The policy background

Growing recognition of Small Urban Areas (SUA) in the EU policy discourse.

Riga Declaration (2015):

- Acknowledges the role of SUAs in ensuring a **balanced territorial development.**

- Envisions the provision of specific measures to support their development in the form of **integrated place-based mechanism**.

The **cohesion policy** represents the main source of EU funding that promotes specific measures devoted to sustainable and integrated development of urban areas, including small ones.

The Policy Atlas of Sustainable Urban Development for Small Urban Areas

Target: Policy-makers (local authorities), practitioners, academics

Aim: It provides for a compass for **navigating the policy challenges** of sustainable urban development in SUAs, facilitating the promotion of **strategies tailored** to their needs
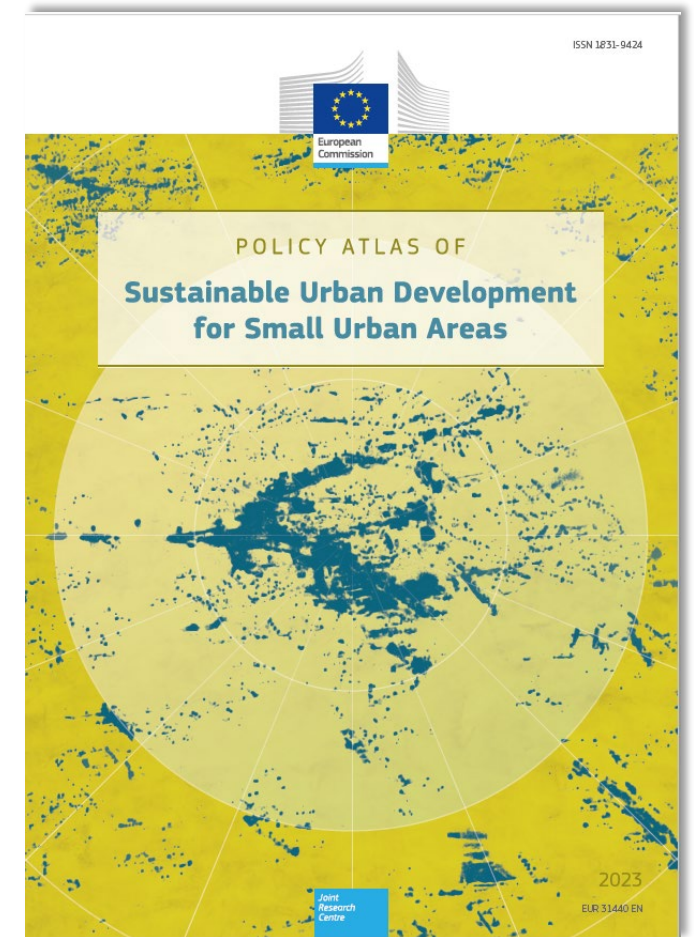
Objectives and structure of the Atlas

PART I

- To provide an **operational definition of SUAs** that can be adopted at EU level.
- To identify the **main trends** concerning SUAs and, linked to this, the specific **development challenges** they are facing.
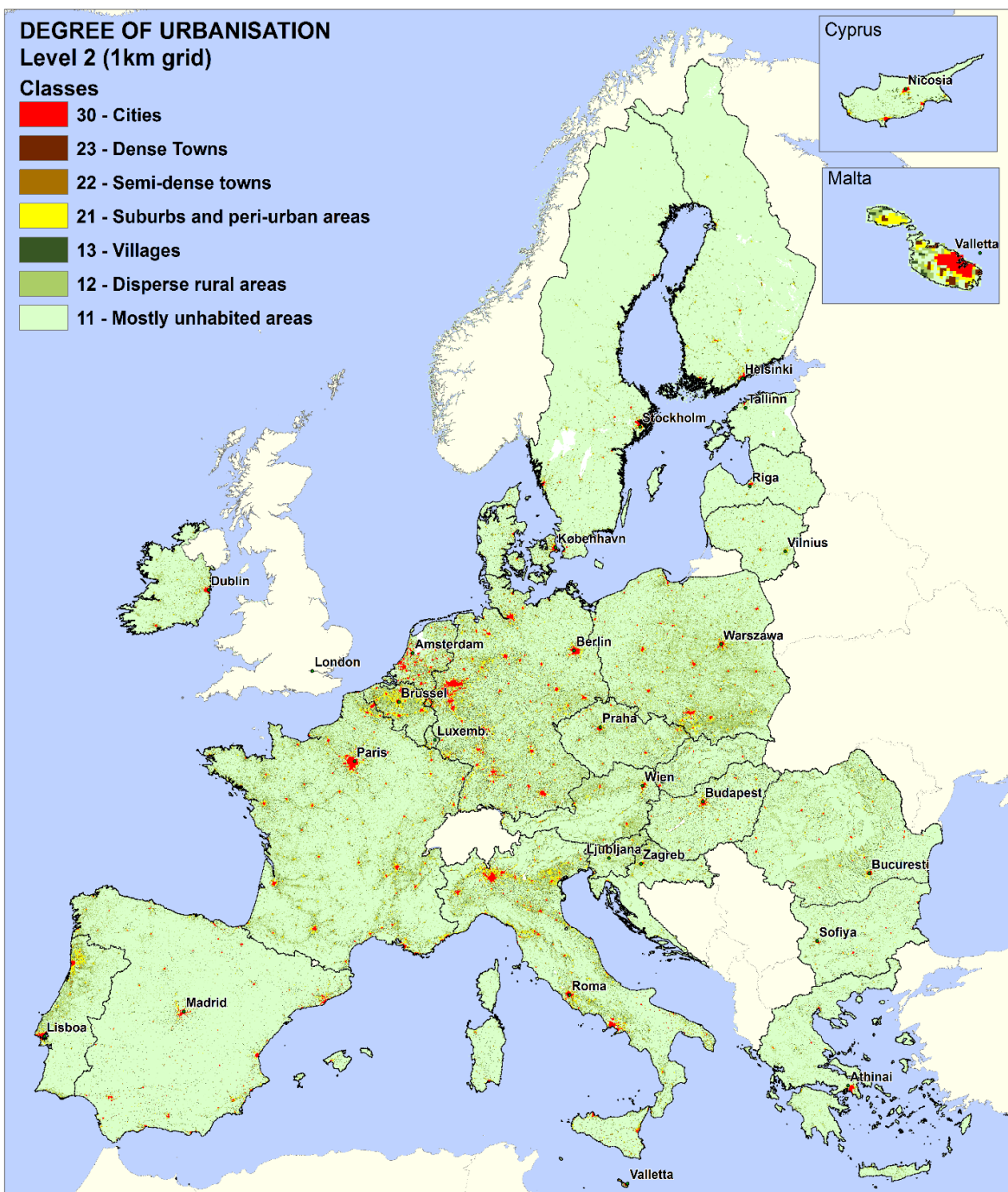
PART II

- To uncover the main **policy approaches** put forward by SUAs in facing the above-identified challenges.

PART III

- To analyse how SUAs implemented **SUD strategies in the 2014-2020** programming period, providing **inspirational examples** from which to draw **recommendations** for the current programming period.

PART I

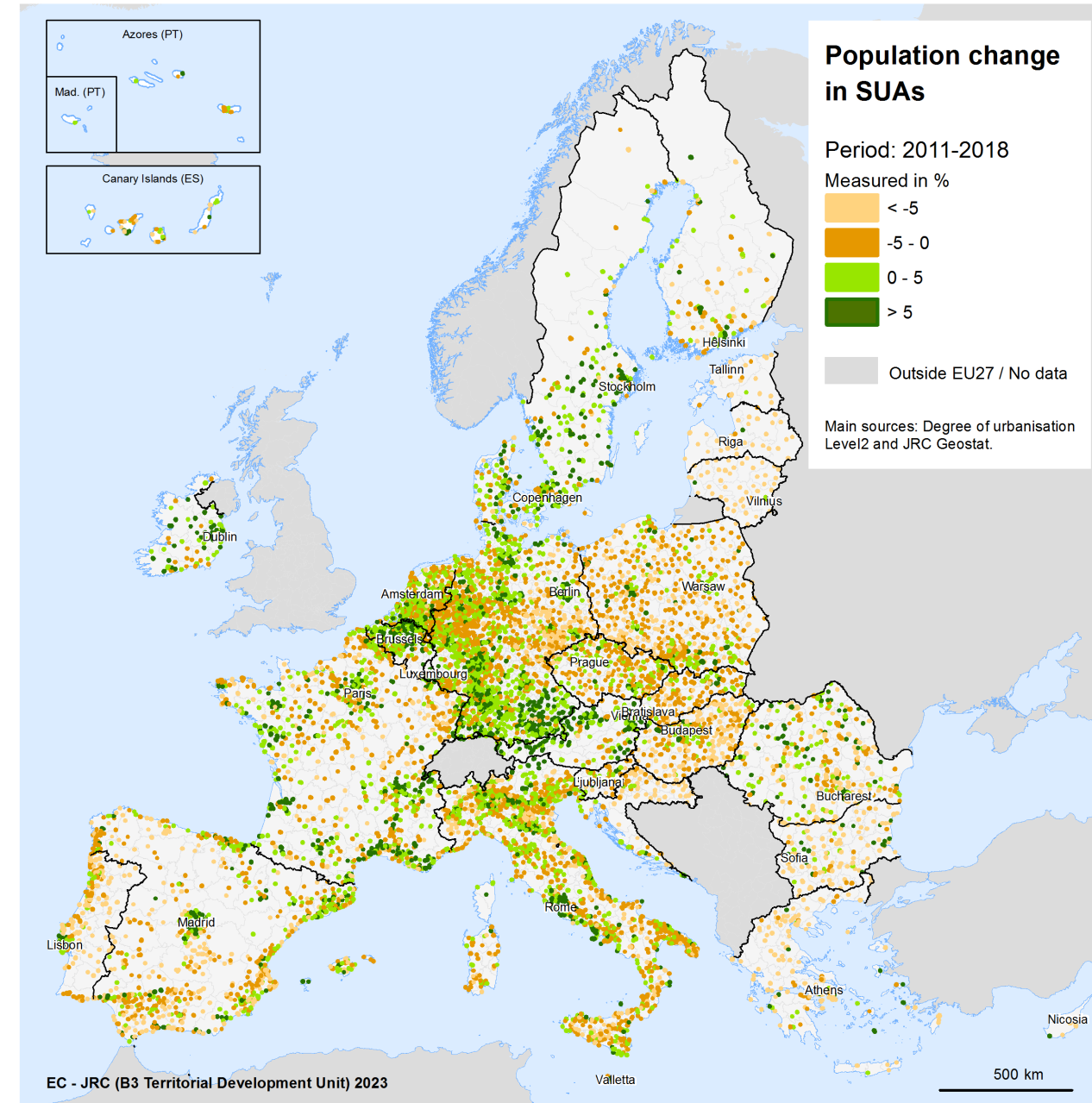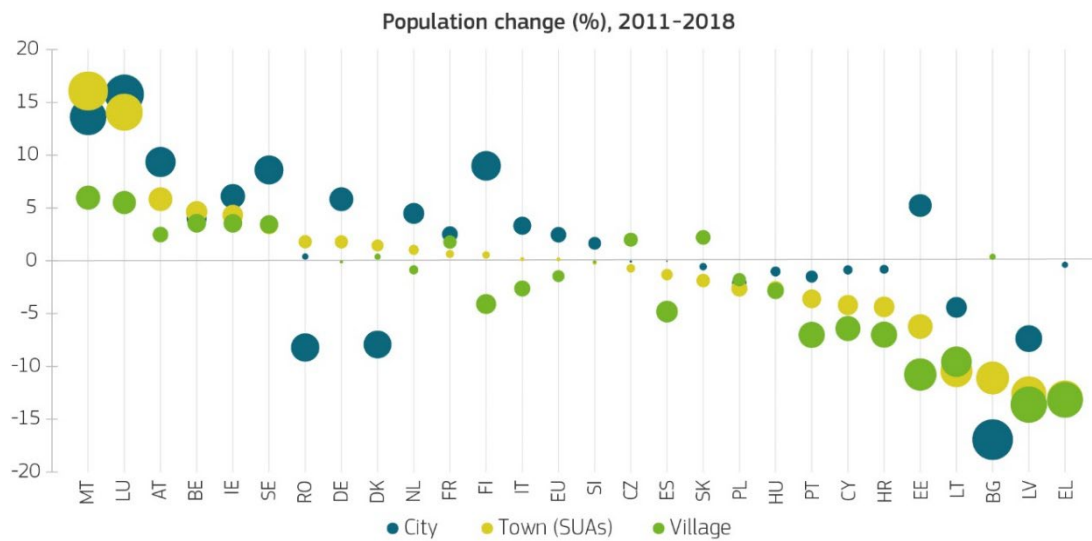# An introduction to Small Urban Areas

The importance of the Level 2 of the Degree of Urbanisation

Small Urban Areas (SUAs) are settlements characterized by a population between **5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants** and a density above **300 inhabitants/km2**

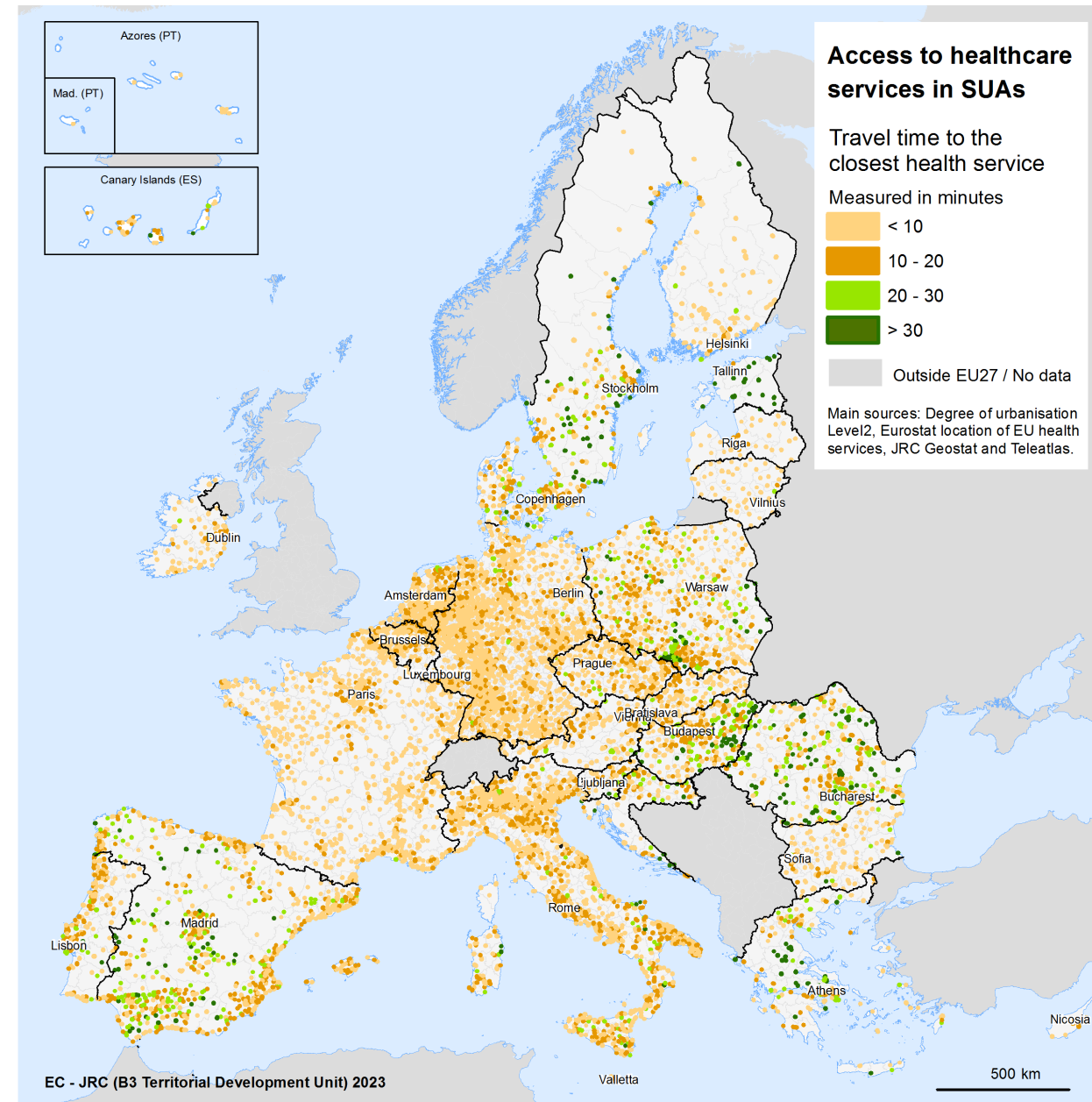|			Population size thresholds of the			No population size criterion (not a settlement)
			>=50,000	5,000 - 49,999	500-4,999	
Population density of cells, inhabitants per km²	>=1500	High density	Cities	Dense Towns		
	>=300	Moderate density		Semi-dense Towns	Villages	Suburbs or peri-urban area
	>=50	Low density				Dispersed rural areas
	<50	Very low density				Mostly uninhabited areas

POPULATION CHANGE IN SUAs

- EU average of SUAs´ pop increased by 1.4%.

- More than half of the MS saw their **SUAs population shrinking**.

- **Eastern and Southern MS** and the **inner part** of the countries are particularly impacted by the shrinkage process.

Population change (%), 2011–2018

Population change in SUAs

Period: 2011-2018
Measured in %

- < -5
- -5 - 0
- 0 - 5
- > 5

Outside EU27 / No data

Main sources: Degree of urbanisation Level2 and JRC Geostat.

EC - JRC (B3 Territorial Development Unit) 2023

500 km

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES IN SUAs

- On average, residents living in a city have better access to healthcare service, comparing to SUAs and villages.
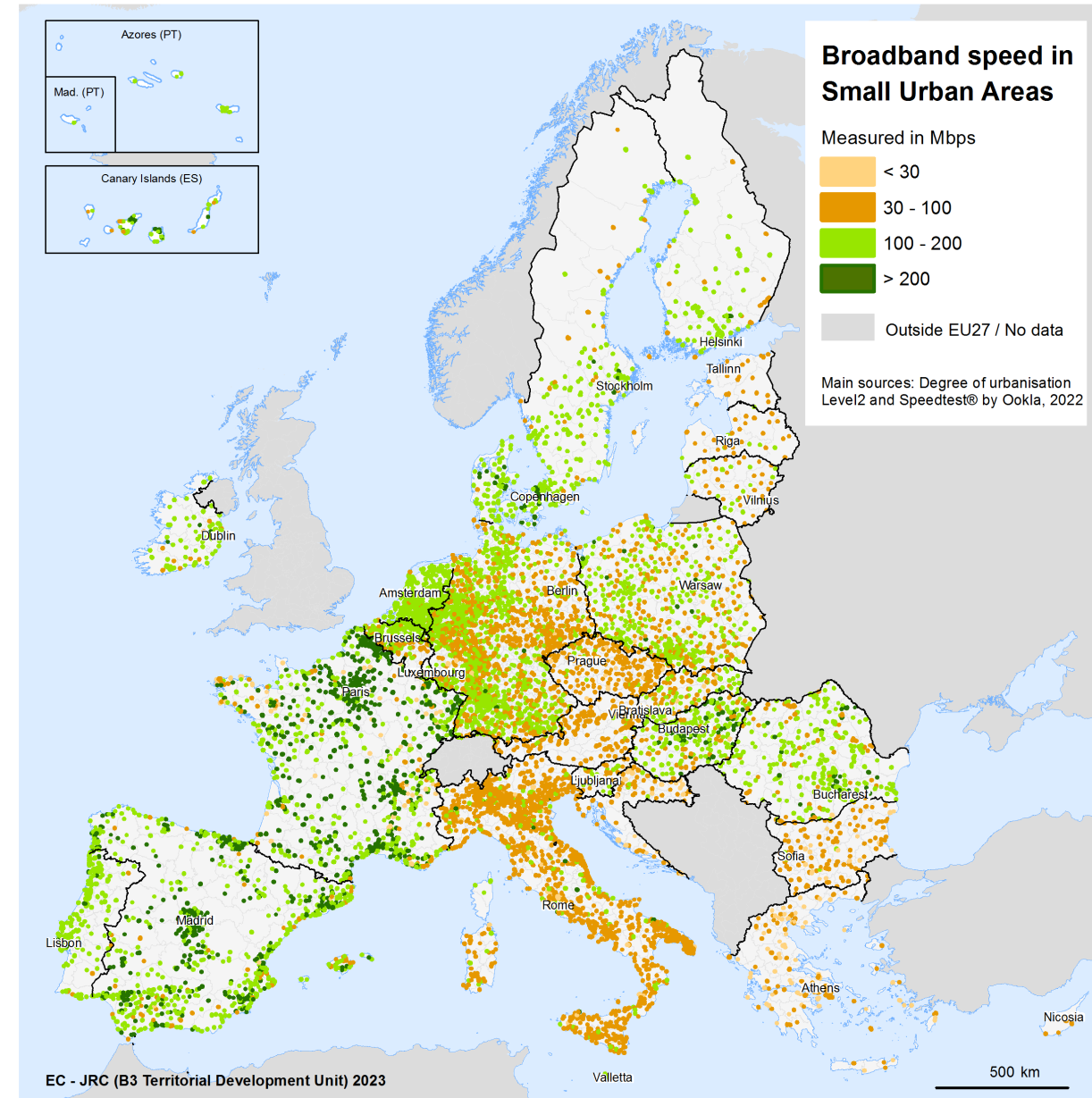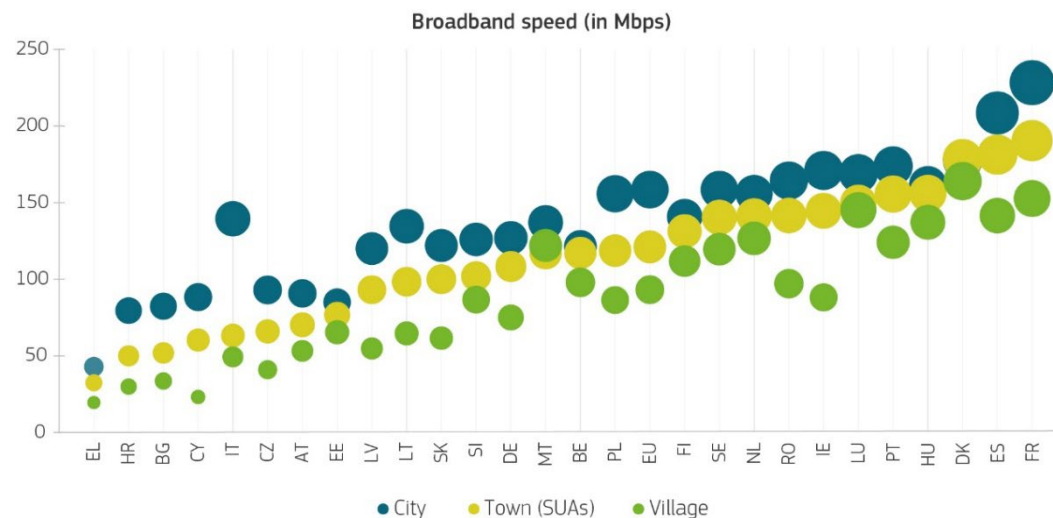
- A **disadvantaged situation** is found in HR, FR and ES where the travel time for SUAs is almost **3 times higher** than for the cities.

- The gap between cities and SUAs in some countries is small in LU, FI, DE, BE, IT.

Travel time to health services (in minutes)

Legend: ● City ● Town (SUAs) ● Village

X-axis categories: IT, FI, LU, DE, BE, BG, LV, HU, CZ, LT, MT, AT, SI, IE, CY, SK, PL, EU, SE, DK, NL, ES, FR, HR, RO, PT, EL

Access to healthcare services in SUAs

Travel time to the closest health service

Measured in minutes
- < 10
- 10 - 20
- 20 - 30
- > 30
- Outside EU27 / No data

Main sources: Degree of urbanisation Level2, Eurostat location of EU health services, JRC Geostat and Teleatlas.

Azores (PT)

Mad. (PT)

Canary Islands (ES)

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500 km

BROADBAND SPEED IN SUAs

- **EU average speed connection** is 160 Mbps in cities, while for **SUAs** and villages these values drop to **120** and 93 **Mbps**, respectively.
- Whereas some countries do not meet an average speed access of at least 30 Mbps (EL, HR, BG and CY)…
- others enjoy broadband connection with over 100 Mbps such as FR, ES, DK, HU, PT and LU.

Broadband speed (in Mbps)

● City   ● Town (SUAs)   ● Village

Broadband speed in Small Urban Areas

Measured in Mbps
- < 30
- 30 - 100
- 100 - 200
- > 200
- Outside EU27 / No data

Main sources: Degree of urbanisation Level2 and Speedtest® by Ookla, 2022

EC - JRC (B3 Territorial Development Unit) 2023

500 km

PART II

Five policy approaches to turn the tide

SUAs as active proponents of sustainable urban development

SUAs across the EU are active in putting forward different **policy approaches** to **reverse declining trends** and tackle related **challenges**.

Analysis of existing **databases** of **projects** and **good practices** in urban development: e.g. European Green Leaf Award, URBACT, Urban Agenda partnerships, New European Bauhaus, Territorial Agenda 2030, Covenant of Mayors…

Identification of **5 categories of policy approaches** and related **examples**

Five policy approaches

1. **Re-activating places for people and community**. Improving the built environment and activating these spaces for the benefit of the local community.

2. **Re-discovering uniqueness.** Projects to capitalise on endogenous local assets linked to the specificity of their territories.

3. **Re-connecting with nature for a sustainable future.** Initiatives that utilise nature as the key pillar for sustainable local development

4. **Re-inventing smart public services**. Improving the access and functionality of public services to promote individual and community well-being in SUAs.

5. **Re-imaging governance and partnerships.** Transforming the way SUAs build multi-stakeholder, multi-level and cross-departmental structures to better address local challenges.

Inspire yourself!

Melgaço (PT) Pop-up Shop (Urban Agenda)- renting vacant commercial spaces in the municipality to start-ups and young entrepreneurs, for a symbolic price of 1 EUR.

Karlovac (HR) Fantastic Forest Phenomenon (NEB) - transform a neighborhood into a self-sustainable circular space, in which human-made and natural components coexist to create a hybrid urban-natural ecosystem.

Gava (ES) GAVIUS (UIA) – developing an innovative artificial intelligence based tool that functions as a virtual assistant for communicating to citizens their social welfare entitlements and assisting them.

Policy approaches	Small Urban Area	Country	Source	Link
Re-discover Uniqueness	Volterra	Italy	Lazzeroni (2022)	*https://www.elgar part-978180088*
	Altena	Germany	URBACT	*https://archive.urt*
	Tykocin	Poland	Hrehorowicz-Gaber (2019)	*https://iopscience*
	Prudnik	Poland	Hrehorowicz-Gaber (2019)	*https://iopscience*
	Fermo	Italy	URBACT	*https://keep.eu/ap*
	Baena	Spain	URBACT	*https://archive.urt summary.pdf*
	Östersund	Sweden	CREATIVE CITIES NETWORK	*https://en.unesco.*
	Novska	Croatia	URBACT	*https://archive.urt*

PART III

Strategies of Sustainable Urban Development for Small Urban Areas

Picture emerging from the 2014-2020 programming period
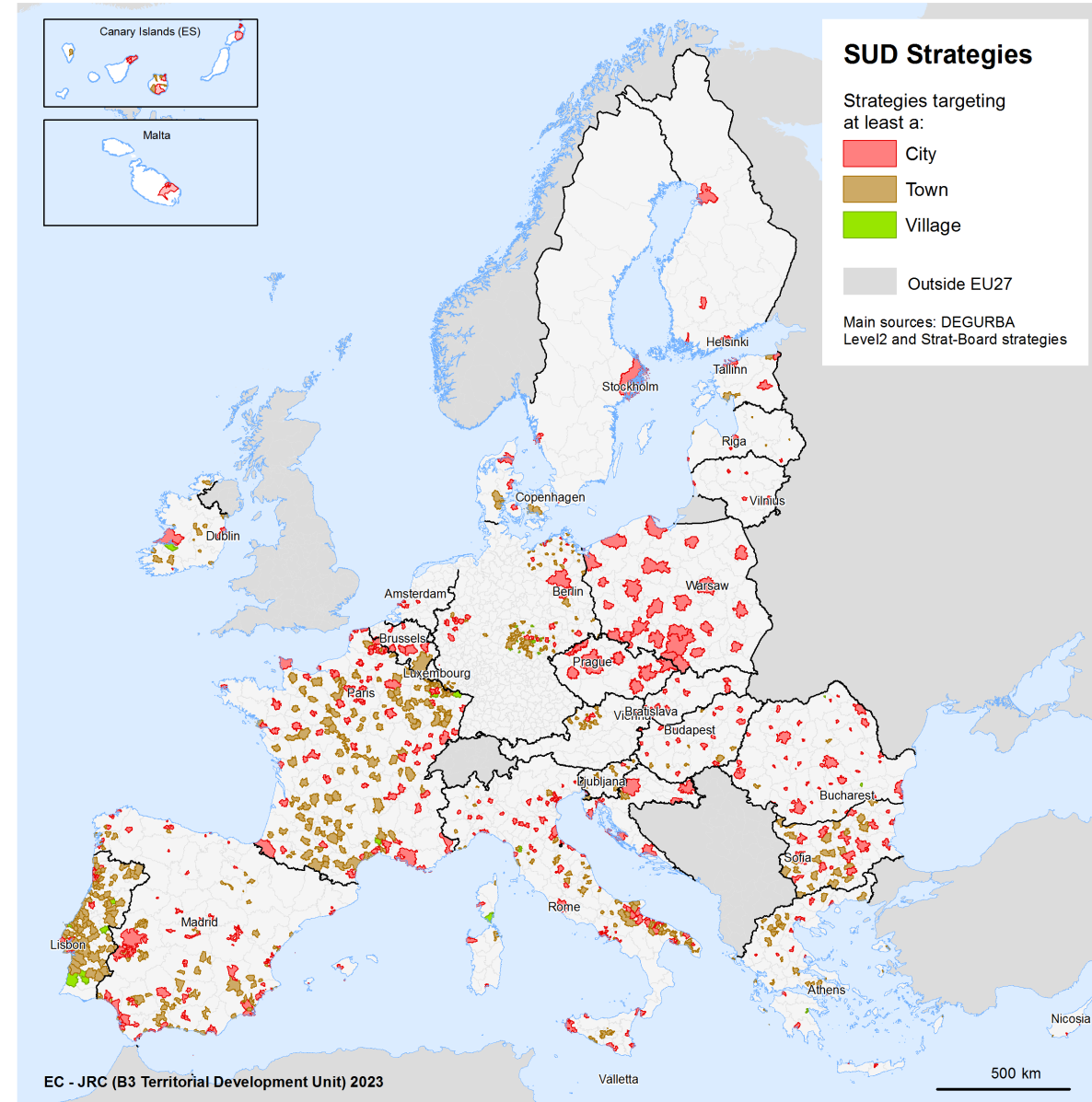
STRAT-Board is a dataset and webtool that collects data on all the SUD strategies implemented in 2014-2020

Thanks to **STRAT-Board** and the **Level 2 Degree of urbanization** it was possible to classify 1021 SUD strategies into 3 categories:

1) Strategies that target at least one **city (47.4%)**.

2) Strategies that target one or more **towns (49.7%)**.

3) Strategies that target only **villages (2.9%)**.

Half of the SUD strategies analysed, namely 507 strategies, **targets a town** (or more than one)

Vast majority in 4 countries (AT,LU,PT, SI)

Canary Islands (ES)

Malta

SUD Strategies

Strategies targeting at least a:

- City
- Town
- Village

Outside EU27

Main sources: DEGURBA Level2 and Strat-Board strategies

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500 km

Characteristic of SUD strategies targeting SUAs

- Main types of territorial focus: entire **town** (40.2%) and **neighbourhood approach** (32.9%)

- They have **small budgets**: 51.7% of them allocated less than 5 million EUR of ESIF

- Most recurrent keywords: **mobility**, **social inclusion**, **energy**, **culture and heritage**.

- In respect to cities, focus more on topics linked with the **rehabilitation of the physical space**

- In respect to cities, **combines smaller numbers of thematic objectives and funds**

Percentage of strategies targeting towns and cities per number of thematic objectives
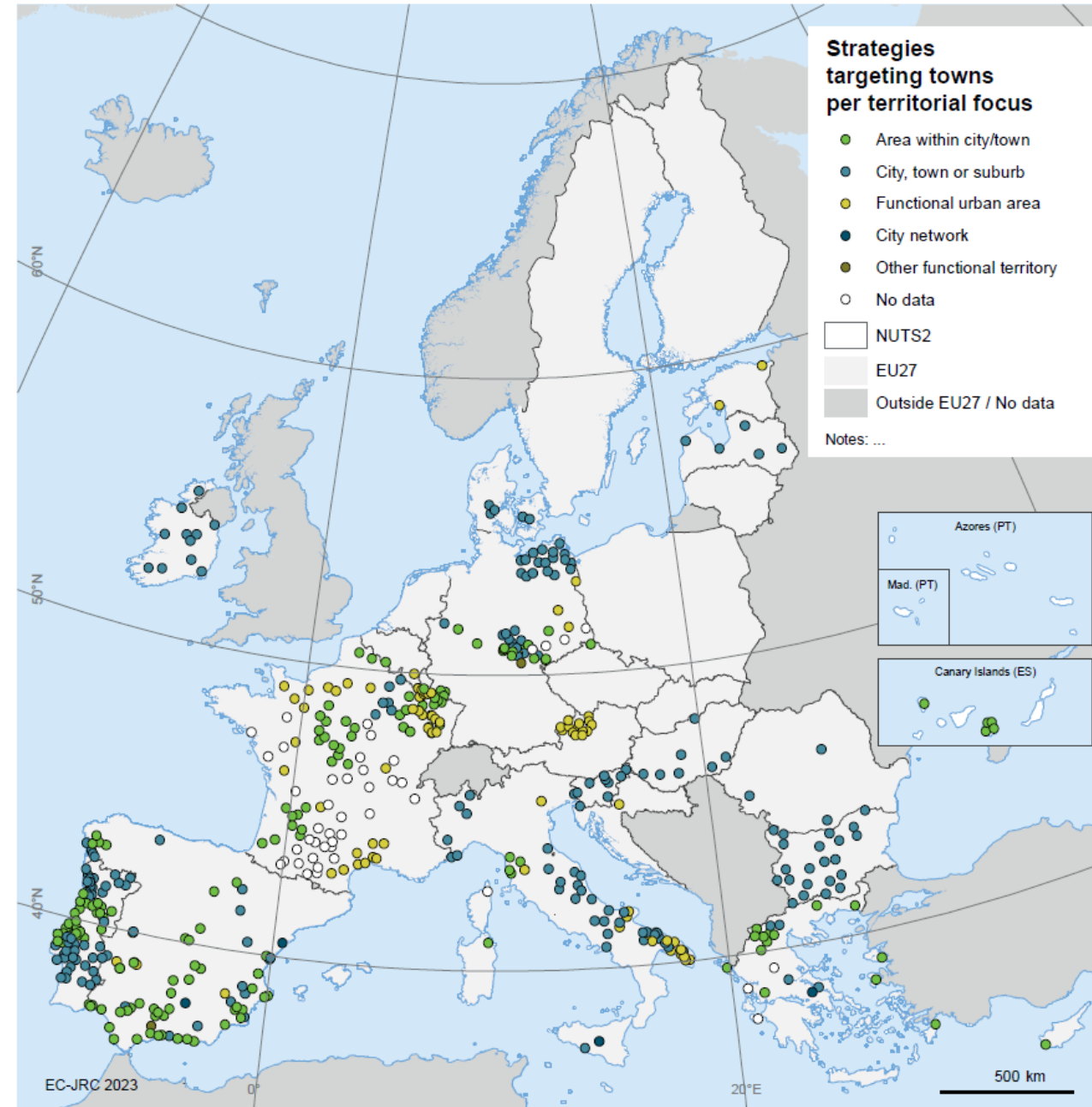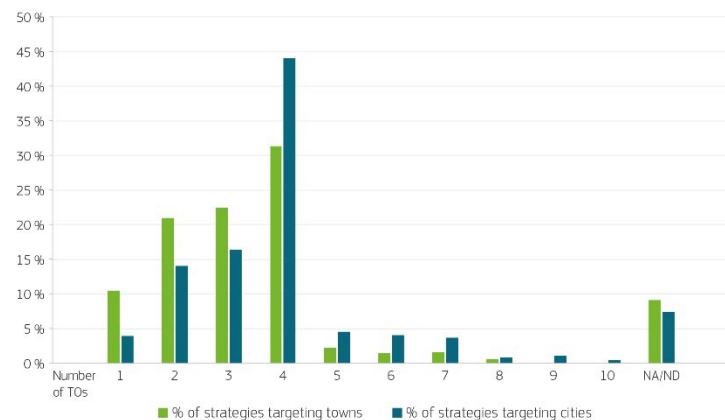
Case studies

Examples showing how **SUD strategies** represent a significant **instrument for SUAs** to rethink their development path while tackling their challenges.

For each case:
- Key **development challenges** (e.g. abandoned spaces, population decline, lack of green and blue infrastructure)
- Description of the **strategy** and analysis of two **operational challenges** (in terms of strategic dimension, governance, funding and finance …)
- A **project** (e.g. improving energy efficiency of buildings, transforming a former barrack into a community hub)

Cuneo (Italy)

Fundão (Portugal)

Kilkenny (Ireland)

Lebach (Germany)

Lucena (Spain)

Salgótarján (Hungary)

Ventspils (Latvia)

Key messages

- To make the strategy **more effective and cross-sectoral**, it is useful to identify the **common thread** underlying the development challenges and opportunities of the territory, and from that to establish a **strong conceptual framework** guiding the whole strategy.

- Smaller towns need to focus on their competitive advantages. It is important to start by analysing the territory for **outstanding values** (e.g. craft making, agriculture, small-town lifestyle) and make them a **springboard for creating synergies and pooling resources**.

- For a smaller administration, it is worth **allocating resources to public consultation** that may be out of the ordinary mechanisms used. It should start in the **early stage of the process** and **continue throughout the policy-cycle** to revise the original plan, and ensure its continuity in subsequent programming periods.

POLICY ATLAS OF

**Sustainable Urban Development
for Small Urban Areas**

2023

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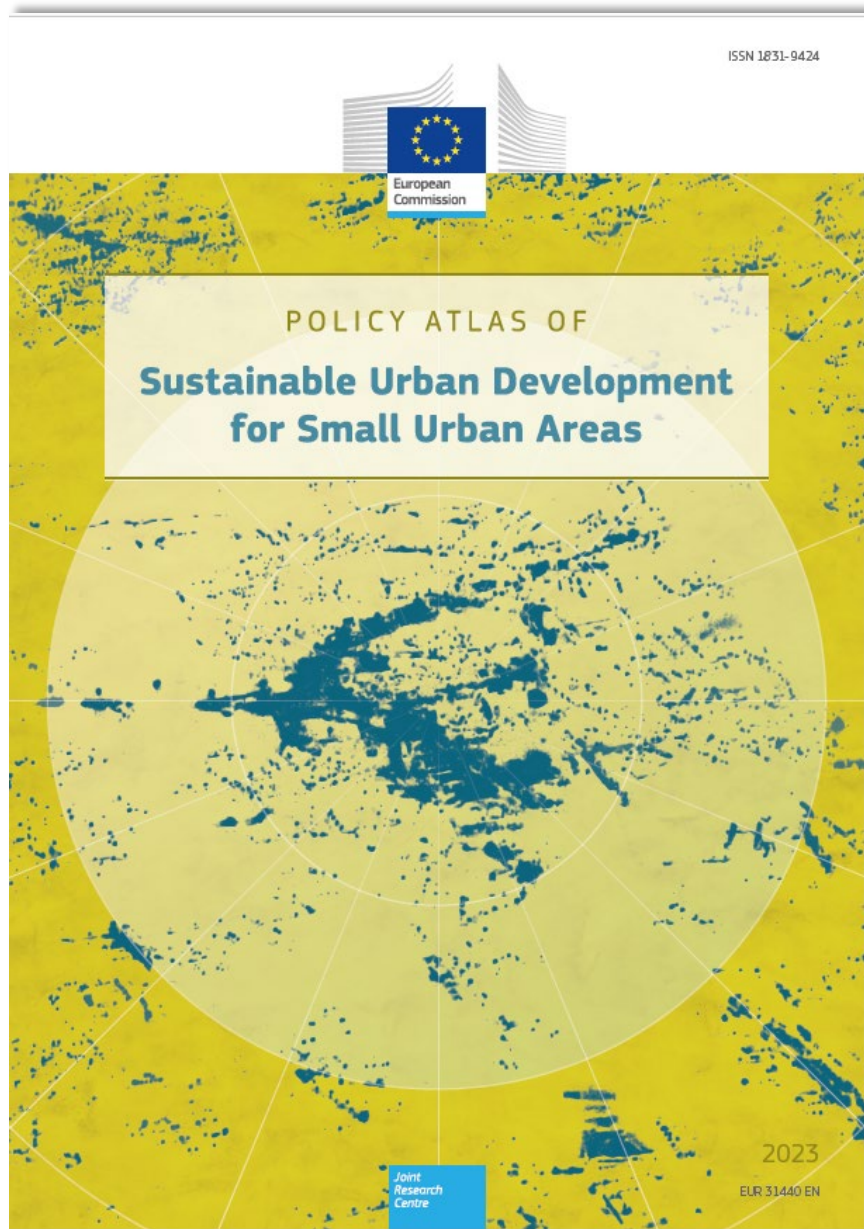
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