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City groups unite over climate change

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Two international organizations of cities — the European Union’s Covenant of Mayors and the United Nations’ Compact of Mayors — announced an alliance Wednesday to tackle climate change.

“One plus one equals more than two,” Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire former mayor of New York told POLITICO in a telephone interview of the new grouping called the Global Covenant of Mayors. Bloomberg is special envoy for cities and climate change for U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

The new grouping unites over 7,000 cities home to more than 600 million people.

Under the voluntary initiative, cities and regional and local authorities commit to climate targets. By creating a central platform for data on what cities are doing on the ground, the idea is also to allow cities to make comparisons among themselves, and to allow citizens to check on how their own cities are doing.

“It is very critical that these mayors exchange information with each other,” said Christiana Figueres, the outgoing head of the U.N.’s climate change secretariat.

Cities have a crucial role in reducing greenhouse gases because over half of the world’s population lives in urban areas. Cities already are responsible for 75 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, according to the United Nations Environment Program.

But cities are also vulnerable to climate change because many are located in coastal areas or are affected by traffic and air pollution.

“In a way, cities are the first to feel the change,” Maroš Šefčovič, the European Commission’s vice president in charge of the energy union, said in an interview.

Compared to often slow-moving central governments, cities can innovate more quickly and are able to swiftly react to citizen pressure.

“It is clear that the public understands that something is changing and they want to have government do something about it,” Bloomberg said. “Mayors have constituencies that live down the street and they see the pollution ... they see the temperature [rising] ... they’ve seen the fact that the rivers aren’t clean and the water levels are lower. They can pressure the mayors.”

People living in cities are increasingly upset about environmental problems, especially in fast-growing urban centers in developing countries.

“The poster child for that discussion is certainly China, where air pollution has come to such unacceptable levels that you see the population mobilizing, and more importantly, the government reacting to that,” Figueres said.