

# Yes San Francisco - place-based innovation for urban economic revitalization

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| Region                        | North America                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Award Scheme                  | Shanghai Manual                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Themes                        | Innovation<br>Local Economic Development<br>Regeneration                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Sustainable Development Goals | Goal 8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all<br>Goal 9 - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation<br>Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable |

## Summary

Yes San Francisco (Yes SF) is a place-based urban revitalization initiative launched in 2023 to address the city’s post-pandemic economic downturn and accelerate its transition toward a green, inclusive economy. Led by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce in partnership with the World Economic Forum, Deloitte, Citi, Salesforce, and civic agencies, the initiative transforms vacant downtown spaces into innovation hubs for climate technology, entrepreneurship, and community engagement. Supported by flexible zoning reforms, Yes SF creates a platform where sustainability, innovation, and economic recovery intersect. Through its flagship Innovation Challenge and Top Innovator Programme, Yes SF attracts and supports startups in clean energy, building decarbonization, circular economy, and sustainable mobility. Winning innovators deploy real-world pilot projects, such as off-grid EV charging (It’s Electric), AI-powered construction waste recycling (Urban Machine), and bio-based remediation (BluumBio). These pilots stimulate job creation, attract green investment, and activate underused spaces. To date, the initiative has engaged over 26 startups, hosted 70 public and investor events, and helped generate more than 20 local jobs while mobilizing USD 8.8 billion in regional climate-tech investment. By combining entrepreneurship, civic participation, and sustainability, Yes SF exemplifies how cities can harness innovation ecosystems to achieve economic renewal, environmental progress, and inclusive urban growth.

## Background and Objective

In the aftermath of COVID-19, San Francisco’s downtown core faced severe economic disruption, with office vacancies exceeding 35 per cent and declining footfall stalling small business activity. Simultaneously, the city confronted ambitious climate goals under its 2040 Climate Action Plan, requiring deep decarbonization and sustainable growth. Recognizing the need for coordinated,

place-based action, Yes San Francisco (Yes SF) was launched in 2023 by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce in partnership with the World Economic Forum, Deloitte, Salesforce, Citi, and public agencies. The initiative reimagines underused downtown spaces as active hubs for innovation, climate technology deployment, and inclusive urban revitalization, aligning economic recovery with sustainability objectives. Yes SF seeks to catalyse San Francisco's economic renewal through climate-led innovation. Its key objectives include repurposing vacant commercial spaces, empowering entrepreneurs, and piloting clean technologies that advance the city's green transition. By merging economic revitalization with environmental resilience, the initiative aims to strengthen the local innovation ecosystem, attract investment in climate technology, and foster job creation. It also strives to embed sustainability and equity into urban growth strategies by linking startups, civic institutions, and communities, establishing a model of inclusive, collaborative urban transformation that positions the city as a global hub for sustainable innovation.

### **Actions and Implementation**

The initiative combines spatial and institutional innovation. Yes SF established a downtown hub that serves as a co-working space, community convening centre, and exhibition venue for climate innovation. Through the Top Innovator Programme, developed with UpLink (a WEF platform), startups receive tailored mentorship, funding opportunities, and visibility. The annual Innovation Challenge invites ventures in clean energy, mobility, building decarbonization, and circular economy to deploy solutions within the city. Pilot projects include AI-powered waste wood reclamation (Urban Machine), off-grid EV charging (It's Electric), and bio-based soil remediation (BluumBio). Supported by blended finance and flexible zoning reforms, Yes SF positions San Francisco as a living lab for sustainable and inclusive innovation.

### **Outcomes and Impacts**

Since its inception, Yes SF has mobilized over 26 startups, hosted 70 investor and community events, and generated more than 20 local jobs. Its pilot projects have transformed dormant spaces into dynamic testbeds for sustainability, advancing the deployment of clean energy, circular materials, and low-carbon infrastructure. The initiative has attracted over USD 8.8 billion in climate-tech investment to the Bay Area, reinforcing San Francisco's leadership in green innovation. Beyond economic gains, Yes SF has cultivated civic partnerships, inspired regulatory reform, and fostered a culture of collaboration, contributing to a just, resilient, and innovation-driven urban economy aligned with global sustainability goals.

## **Sustainability and Scalability**

Yes SF operates through a blended finance model combining public innovation grants, corporate sponsorship, and philanthropic investment. Its governance structure integrates city agencies, business networks, and academic partners, ensuring institutional continuity. Adaptive zoning reforms, flexible use of space, and open innovation mechanisms make the initiative replicable in other cities seeking to revitalize downtown areas while advancing green transitions. Continuous learning, private-sector engagement, and community participation underpin its sustainability. The programme's ecosystem-based approach demonstrates how post-industrial cities can achieve long-term economic resilience through innovation, inclusion, and climate action, serving as a scalable model for global urban regeneration.

## **Gender and Social Inclusivity**

Inclusivity is a defining pillar of Yes SF. The initiative supports diverse founders, local entrepreneurs, and community organizations through mentorship, training, and access to innovation resources. Public programming encourages participation from underrepresented groups in technology, promoting equitable access to green jobs and business opportunities. The open, civic format of the Yes SF hub fosters collaboration between residents, innovators, and policymakers, embedding social responsibility within the city's economic transformation. By aligning sustainability with inclusion, Yes SF ensures that urban innovation contributes not only to environmental progress but also to social cohesion and empowerment across San Francisco's diverse communities.

## **Innovative Initiative**

Yes SF's innovation lies in its place-based strategy—using the city itself as a living laboratory for sustainable technologies. Rather than relying solely on policy incentives, it activates underutilized urban spaces as real-world experimentation zones. By blending adaptive zoning, civic partnerships, and startup incubation, the initiative connects technology development directly with community needs. This integrated approach bridges economic regeneration and climate adaptation, positioning San Francisco as a leader in innovation-led urban renewal. The initiative transforms regulatory, physical, and social barriers into opportunities for creative collaboration, offering a pioneering model for cities to achieve equitable, green, and digitally driven recovery.

## **Resources devoted to delivery**

Yes SF is supported through a multi-stakeholder partnership led by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, leveraging corporate, civic, and philanthropic funding. A USD 1 million deployment fund, financed by Deloitte and partners, supports pilot projects, while the City's flexible zoning policy enables adaptive reuse of commercial buildings. Corporate partners like Salesforce and Citi provide mentorship, data insights, and innovation grants. The initiative also draws on volunteer expertise and in-kind contributions from accelerators and investors. This hybrid financing and governance model ensures sustained resource mobilization, enabling continuous innovation deployment and ecosystem strengthening across the city's downtown districts.

## **Conclusion**

Yes San Francisco demonstrates how cities can merge climate innovation with economic revitalization through collaboration, adaptive policy, and local entrepreneurship. By transforming underused downtown spaces into civic laboratories for sustainability, the initiative accelerates the transition to a low-carbon economy while supporting inclusive growth. Its network-driven, participatory approach highlights the power of partnerships in shaping resilient, future-ready cities. As a replicable model, Yes SF exemplifies the principles of the New Urban Agenda, showing how post-pandemic recovery can be leveraged to build greener, fairer, and more innovative urban economies