



URBAN NATURE PLANS +

POLICY BRIEF 02

Co-creating Urban Nature Plans: **Recommendations for Local-level Policy Makers**





URBAN GREENING PLANS +

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 About this policy brief

This policy brief draws on hands-on experiences from the cities participating in the EU-funded [Urban Nature Plans plus](#) (UNPplus) project — Barcelona, Belgrade, Burgas, Mannheim, and Paris. It is informed by reflexive dialogues with municipal practitioners and an assessment of ongoing co-creation practices, identifying key systemic challenges and providing actionable recommendations for Local and Regional Governments (LRGs). It focuses on how inclusive governance can be embedded in urban nature planning, implementation, and long-term management to make co-creation a core element of urban sustainability transitions rather than a project-based add-on.

1.2 The UNP framework

The following recommendations support LRGs in establishing [Urban Nature Plans](#) (UNPs) to advance inclusive, multifunctional, and resilient Nature-based Solutions (NbS). Co-creation lies at the core of this framework. It is a distinctive step, a key milestone, and ongoing process that adapts to changing contexts across all 10 steps of the framework. As such, from the very start, UNPs are positioned to be developed with, and not only for, different stakeholder groups, representing the broad diversity within communities. By framing co-creation as a mutually reinforcing process, the UNP framework empowers cities to move beyond simple consultation toward holistic collaboration that fosters equity, shared ownership, and care for stakeholder inputs.

Co-creation, as part of the UNP process, ensures plans take local context into account, are fair, and are also sufficiently robust to leverage shared visions while limiting conflicting objectives. This approach allows cities to use co-created UNPs as practical entry points to simultaneously contribute to three distinct key planning frameworks:

- **Restoration:** National Restoration Plans (NRPs) under the [Nature Restoration Regulation](#) (NRR).
- **Climate Mitigation:** Climate planning instruments under the [EU Cities Mission](#), specifically [Climate City Contracts](#) (CCCs) – focusing on [Climate Neutrality](#)

[Action Plans](#) – and [Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans](#) (SECAPs).

- **Climate Adaptation:** [Regional Resilience Journeys](#) (RRJ) under the [EU Adaptation Mission](#).

1.3 Key recommendations for local policy makers

To operationalise inclusive governance, LRGs should implement the following actions, structured around three interconnected levels of co-creation developed within UNPplus project:

Level 1: Internal Governance: Co-creation within and across municipal departments and governance levels, focusing on internal coordination and multi-level alignment:

- **Roll out UNPs as strategic living frameworks** that sustain co-creation beyond initial design by integrating reflexive monitoring¹. Treat interventions as continuous, collaborative experiments, capturing stakeholder feedback to co-adapt strategies in response to changing political and ecological contexts.
- **Mandate co-governance and integrate NbS into core urban strategies**, moving beyond project-based initiatives to align planning, budgeting and regulation city-wide.
- **Break administrative silos and institutionalise cross-sectoral dialogue** through permanent boards or working structures dedicated to urban nature, involving key departments.
- **Allocate stable resources, including dedicated funding for process costs:** facilitation equity measures, and knowledge-brokers, recognising that relationship building requires significant time and staff investment.
- **Guarantee transparency by clearly communicating trade-offs**, document how input is used, and regularly

¹ For more information on the role of Reflexive Monitoring in the UNP+ project, visit [UrbanByNature](#) to access an online webinar and a briefing document on reflexive monitoring.

review governance arrangements to address exclusionary practices.

- **Institutionalise and scale solutions by embedding co-creation into standard regulatory tools, incentives, and voluntary agreements** (e.g., stewardship pacts). Take part in knowledge-exchange platforms to replicate successful approaches across different contexts.

Level 2: Community Engagement: Co-creation with community groups, emphasising vulnerable populations:

- **Institutionalise intentional inclusion via systematic stakeholder mapping** and intersectional analysis to identify and prioritise Commonly Excluded Stakeholders (CES).
- **Ensure equity and compensation**, removing practical barriers to participation by covering direct and indirect costs (e.g., travel, childcare, lost income).
- **Design flexible, culturally sensitive processes**, creating method-diverse engagement strategies (arts-based, storytelling, digital) with flexible entry/exit points that respond to local cultures.
- **Build trust through visible influence by co-defining goals** at the outset and provide continuous feedback

on how community inputs shape design, countering consultation fatigue.

- **Embed participatory monitoring**, linking co-creation processes to measurable social and ecological outcomes across NbS lifecycle, ensuring benefits are equally distributed.

Level 3: Multispecies and intergenerational considerations: Co-creation with voiceless stakeholders, extending consideration to more-than-human species and future generations:

- **Expand stakeholder definitions to include ecosystems, biodiversity, and future generations**, aligning governance with social and environmental justice.
- **Foster intergenerational practices** to capture knowledge centred on lived experiences and social memory to inform future greening, framing NbS as investments in long-term resilience.
- **Represent the voiceless stakeholders** by developing mechanisms such as guardianship roles for rivers, biodiversity advisory positions, or different generational councils to give nature and future citizens a “seat at the table”.

2. THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

NbS are increasingly recognised at the EU level as key instruments for tackling the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution (European Commission, 2023). However, recent assessments highlight that these crises are inextricably linked with water security, food systems, and public health, forming a complex “nexus” where actions in one area can trigger cascading effects in others (IPBES, 2024). As cost-effective interventions, NbS help respond to these challenges while promoting citizen-oriented engagement.

Embedding co-creation in urban NbS via the UNP framework is not only a democratic imperative, but also a practical necessity for ensuring that solutions are effective, legitimate and resilient. Current siloed governance approaches often fail to account for interdependencies, leading to conflicting objectives and inefficient resource use. Delaying integrated action is economically perilous. For instance, the costs of addressing biodiversity loss could be doubled if action is delayed by just a decade (IPBES, 2024).

For this brief, co-creation is understood as collaborative governance that enables diverse stakeholders to design and implement inclusive pathways for transformation (Dushkova & Kuhlicke, 2024). It shifts governance away from centralised hierarchies to distributed, shared decision-making (McCormick & Kiss, 2019; Rock et al., 2018). Co-creation serves as the mechanism to bundle diverse response options – such as restoration, sustainable food systems, and health interventions – allowing cities to maximise synergies and manage trade-offs (IPBES, 2024).

This framing aligns with the **New European Bauhaus** (NEB) principles and the NEB Compass (European Commission, 2022), outlining how communities potentially can be, or are involved in projects through three increasing participation ambition levels: (i) to consult, (ii) to co-develop, and (iii) to self-govern. Each ambition aims for a deeper, more collaborative form of engagement.

2.1 UNPs: The engine for co-creation

Why should cities invest in co-creation? While often perceived as complicated and resource-intensive, deep co-creation is the single most effective tool for de-risking implementation and management. Engaging stakeholders

early builds the trust and shared ownership necessary to ensure urban nature interventions are actively supported and stewarded by communities. This process anticipates conflicting interests before they become constraints, transforming potential resistance into collective responsibility.

UNPs act as strategic instruments for translating high-level NbS ambitions into coherent, locally grounded action. At the EU level, cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants are encouraged to develop ambitious UNPs, aligning with urban restoration targets in Article 8 of the NRR. This brief frames UNPs primarily as an integrative evolution of planning instruments, linking green-blue networks, climate adaptation, health, equity and biodiversity into a single cross-cutting framework. Rather than a fixed sequence, UNPs offer context-dependent entry points to operationalise co-creation. This brief frames UNPs primarily as **governance and learning instruments** for co-planning and co-management, providing the structure to organise cross-departmental collaboration (i.e. Step 2 - establish a working structure), and deepen stakeholder engagement (Step 3 - establish a co-creation process), while building the internal capacities required to sustain these practices over time.

2.2 Justice and policy alignment

Within UNPs, co-creation serves as a platform to embed justice by facilitating inclusive decision-making, acknowledging diverse social perceptions and making visible who benefits and who carries burdens. To fulfil this role effectively, UNPs should function as a bridge connecting day-to-day planning choices to high-level policy frameworks and help cities:

- **Embed equity as a core principle**, ensuring that greening strategies do not reproduce socio-economic and environmental inequalities, by integrating justice into process design and co-creating directly with communities most affected by environmental crises.
- **Build institutional capacity**, linking UNP milestones to targeted training in facilitation and conflict mediation, strengthening the ability of staff and partners to negotiate trade-offs and sustain collaborative practices beyond individual projects.

- **Standardise practice**, providing a common language and unified monitoring methodologies aligned with national frameworks to ensure consistency and clarity across departments and governance levels.
- **Integrate reflexive monitoring**, using transparent feedback mechanisms to benefit distribution and trade-offs, utilising regular reflection moments (e.g. knowledge co-production platforms) to exchange new learnings, identify critical turning points, and adapt priorities, methods and partnerships accordingly.
- **Facilitate peer learning**, serving as a platform for sharing best practices and providing tailored guidance to smaller municipalities and underrepresented communities.

2.3 The heart of the challenge and action areas

Despite broad recognition of NbS (as part of an overarching UNP) and growing consensus on the need for inclusive co-creation (Davis et al., 2025), implementation remains slow and fragmented. Successfully addressing the systemic barriers to co-creation requires identifying where policy interventions can generate the highest leverage. This section outlines the key challenges at each level and the corresponding detailed action areas for local governments.

Level 1: Internal governance

Key challenges – Across many European cities, NbS implementation is often constrained by fragmented governance structures and persistent administrative silos. Departments (environmental, water, housing, health, etc.) often operate with distinct mandates, budgets and planning cultures, making shared visions or coordinated actions difficult. Co-creation tends to be organised around time-bound pilot projects rather than permeating day-to-day practices. Furthermore, trust is often undermined by a legacy of symbolic participation and opaque decision-making, exacerbated by gaps in institutional capacity where practitioners lack the skills to link co-creation to social and ecological outcomes.

Action areas for local governments

- **Develop a city-wide co-governance strategy:** Move from isolated, project-oriented efforts to a strategy that tracks decision-making processes, clarifies who

is involved across all stages, and embeds co-creation methodologies into standard procedures.

- **Break administrative silos:** Establish permanent boards, committees or cross-departmental working structures dedicated to urban nature and NbS, involving key municipal departments and, where relevant, regional or national actors.
- **Allocate stable resources:** Include dedicated budget lines for co-creation processes (not just implementation). This should cover costs related to facilitation, equity measures, and knowledge brokers, recognising that relationship building requires significant time and staff investment.
- **Guarantee transparency and reflexivity:** Ensure transparency on purposes and budgets; clearly communicate trade-offs, document how input is used, and regularly review governance arrangements to identify and address practices which may unintentionally promote and/or contribute to exclusion.
- **Institutionalise and scale solutions:** Embed co-creation into standard regulatory tools, incentives, and voluntary agreements (e.g., stewardship pacts). Participate in knowledge-exchange platforms to share lessons and scale successful approaches.

Evidence from UNP+ Cities

- ★ **Mannheim** successfully addressed fragmentation by establishing a **Local Green Deal** group, an interdepartmental body that works across sectors to speed up climate neutrality processes. Similarly, **Paris** uses a high-level strategic mandate updated every six years to facilitate integration, such as the collaboration between Green Spaces and Public Works departments for the Catalonia Square Urban Forest.
- ★ The need for interdepartmental working structures is highlighted by **Belgrade**, where 20 distinct secretariats operate with separate strategies, leading to coordination gaps in areas like green space inspection. **Burgas** also reports that fragmented data management across Ecology and Construction departments hinders efficient analysis.

Level 2: Co-creation with community stakeholders

Key challenges – A persistent co-creation gap remains, particularly for those most exposed to environmental risks and socio-economic inequalities. CES such as low-income residents, migrants, youth, women, people with disabilities and/or special needs, and informal workers, face overlapping barriers, including structural obstacles (technical language), systemic drivers (power asymmetries), and practical constraints (time, childcare, digital access) (Davis et al., 2025). CES often lack real opportunities to shape decisions or see their priorities reflected in outcomes. One-off consultations with unclear mandates often fuel stakeholder fatigue and mistrust.

Action areas for local governments

- **Institutionalise intentional inclusion and targeting CES:** Using systematic stakeholder mapping (age, gender, ethnicity, disability, income, etc.) and intersectional analysis to identify who is commonly excluded, why, and when, to inform more inclusive engagement.
- **Commit to trust building, shared influence and visible outcomes:** Co-define goals, roles and rules at the outset; clarify the level of influence communities will have; provide continuous feedback on how inputs shape priorities and design; and make visible pathways from contribution to outcome to counter consultation fatigue.
- **Ensure equity and compensation for participation:** Compensate stakeholders for their time and expertise by covering direct and indirect costs (e.g., travel, childcare, meals, lost income) and providing logistical support, such as translation and plain-language communication.
- **Develop and implement flexible and culturally sensitive co-creation processes:** Create engagement formats with adaptable timing and flexible entry/exit points that accommodate different capacities. Explicitly address historical prejudices, social tensions, and power dynamics by working with trusted intermediaries and design formats that resonate with local practices, languages and norms.
- **Prioritise method diversity and capacity building:** Move beyond traditional workshops to include participatory mapping, storytelling, arts-based engagement, community walks, games or digital tools, to build knowledge and confidence among participants.

- **Institutionalise participatory monitoring and adaptive management:** Co-design indicators and monitoring practices with communities, especially CES, to capture which benefits are created and how they are distributed, using local knowledge and values to interpret results and guide adjustments in the process. Embed adaptive management procedures so that NbS can be responsive to changing conditions, over the short-, medium-, and long-term.

Evidence from UNP+ Cities

- ★ **Barcelona** engaged over 100 participants by combining the digital **Decidim** platform with face-to-face sessions, as part of the development of their **Plan Natura**. **Paris** fosters active stewardship through its “Permit to Plant” scheme, allowing citizens to garden in public spaces.
- ★ **Belgrade** found that due to political tensions that create conditions of mistrust, citizens are often more willing to collaborate with NGOs than state institutions; leveraging NGOs as trusted intermediaries has been a key enabler for them.
- ★ **Mannheim** has moved beyond ad-hoc engagement by establishing a “Participation Advisory Board” as a permanent body to oversee the quality of citizen participation.

Level 3: Co-creation with voiceless stakeholders

Key challenges – Governance and planning practices remain strongly anthropocentric and short-term, shaped by project cycles and funding schemes that prioritise rapid, visible outputs over slow ecological processes, maintenance and intergenerational stewardship. The interests of ecosystems, biodiversity, and future generations are weakly represented in decision-making arenas. The absence of robust monitoring frameworks that track long-term social and ecological performance limits the capacity to adapt NbS to changing climate conditions, social needs or unintended impacts.

Action areas for local governments

- **Expand stakeholder definitions:** Explicitly acknowledge that NbS are designed with and for nature. Define

stakeholders to include ecosystems, biodiversity and affected species, aligning NbS governance with principles of environmental and multispecies justice.

- **Embed intergenerational perspectives and social memory:** Incorporate intergenerational practices and social memory throughout NbS planning and design, acknowledging lived experience, all while recognising how past interventions, cultural practices and historical injustices shape present relationships with nature. Frame NbS as investments in long-term resilience and individual/community well-being, with attention to stewardship, local identity and sense of place across time.
- **Co-create with voiceless stakeholders:** Develop mechanisms for representation, such as guardianship roles for rivers or green corridors, biodiversity advisory positions, or generation councils and/or intergenerational forums. Integrate ecological indicators, scenario analyses and more-than-human narratives into decision-support tools so that the needs of ecosystems and species become visible and actionable.
- **Institutionalise intergenerational and rights-based perspectives:** Integrate intergenerational practices and rights-based principles in criteria for site selection, design and evaluation, ensuring NbS do not reinforce existing inequalities but contribute to more just, climate-resilient cities for current and future residents.

Evidence from UNP+ Cities

- ★ **Barcelona** uses a “Green Model” as part of their Plan Natura to analyse green space distribution through a social and environmental justice lens, identifying inequities in access to green spaces to create a more sustainable and inclusive city for all.
- ★ **Mannheim** is conducting “biotope network planning” to create interconnected habitats specifically to protect rare species like the European hamster, explicitly linking diverse ecosystems across the city. **Paris’s** zero-pesticide policy, started in the 1990s and completed in 2015 (2009 in gardens and 2015 in cemeteries), has successfully allowed wild species, such as foxes, to return to the city, demonstrating how long-term policy shifts can restore multispecies coexistence.

2.4 Leveraging EU support

To strengthen co-creation capacities and governance reforms, LRGs should systematically mobilise existing EU support instruments and platforms, for example:

- **EU experts and working groups:** Follow the discussions and outputs of relevant [EU Biodiversity Platform expert groups](#) (EUBP), such as the sub-expert group on the Nature Restoration Regulation and the [working group on Green Infrastructure](#). These platforms provide opportunities to clarify conceptual and implementation challenges and align local governance realities with EU-level discussions.
- **Technical Support Instrument (TSI):** Work with national authorities to use TSI to design and implement reforms that strengthen co-governance of NbS, address institutional and capacity gaps at the LRG level, and develop stable frameworks for co-creation.
- **Other EU funding and knowledge programmes:** Combine place-based EU instruments (e.g. [cohesion policy funds](#), [LIFE](#), [URBACT](#), [Horizon Europe](#)/Mission projects, NEB) and leverage knowledge from support platforms (e.g., [NetworkNature](#) Task Force 6 outputs) to pilot co-creation measures, develop and test innovative co-creation methods and tools, and scale successful approaches. Use these programmes and resources to institutionalise co-creation best practices, indicator systems, and infrastructure that remain beyond project cycles.

3. CONCLUSION

By addressing foundational governance challenges, strengthening inclusive community co-creation, and extending consideration to voiceless stakeholders, local governments can transform NbS from isolated and time-bounded projects into core components of just, resilient and nature-positive urban futures.

UNPs, supported by reflexive monitoring, capacity building, and robust co-governance frameworks, offer a concrete pathway to operationalise these ambitions. Enabling European cities to design and implement such plans at scale with adequate resources, guidance and peer-learning opportunities will be essential for delivering on EU commitments to nature restoration, climate resilience and social justice. This policy brief has outlined key steps and entry points to support that transition.

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About UNPplus

This policy brief is the result of discussions with city staff and policy makers, desk research, policy analysis and grounded in the experiences of cities participating in the EU-funded project UNPplus. It highlights key challenges in the implementation of Art. 8 of the NRR and action areas for National Governments to better support LRGs. UNPplus has a clear role in bridging these gaps by fostering shared understanding and collective advocacy.



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UNPplus can act as a facilitator by aligning frameworks, offering tools, and enabling city networks to advocate collectively. UNP+ supports regional collaborations by providing tools and fostering a shared understanding of the benefits of urban nature.

Image: UNP+



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