



The Nature Future Workshops

The Nature Futures Workshops (NFW) were an opportunity to think as creatively as possible about the desired futures for nature in our Conexus' cities in 2050. This factsheet presents an overview of the methods used to explore these futures. Discussions in the workshops generated a series of present concerns, future hopes, and pathways towards the futures we desire.

Background

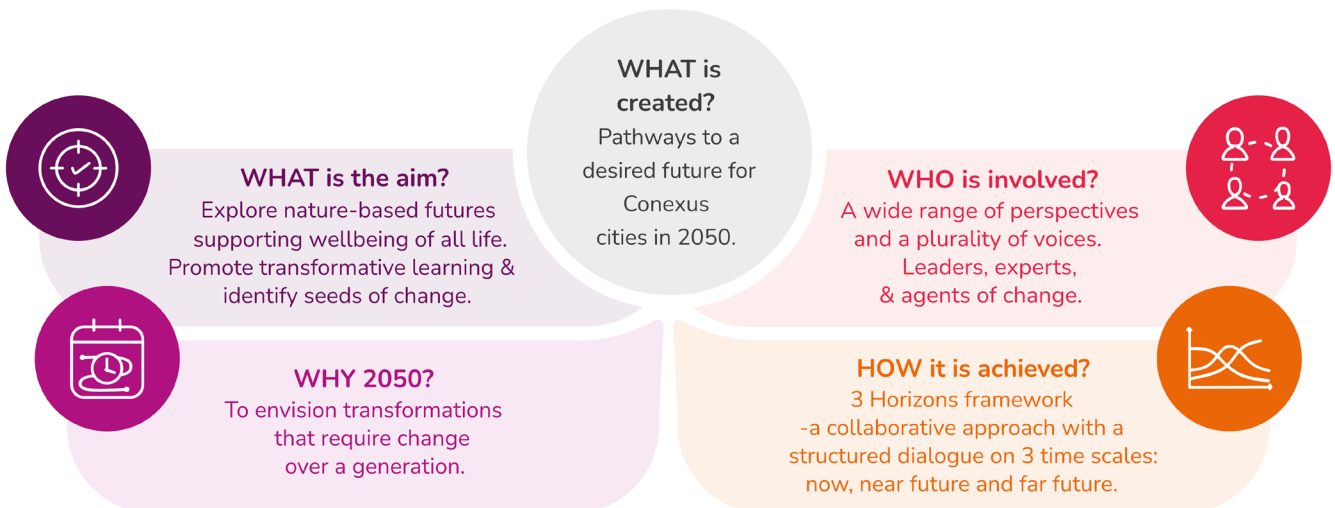
It is impossible to know the future, but we are all always involved in creating futures, and we can choose to try and do so more or less deliberately. Imagining desired worlds is not an easy task. Yet, it is an important exercise to begin the process of participating in shaping collective futures, where we can try to imagine the transformations we think are needed, and consider how they can be brought

about. The Nature Futures Workshops were an invitation for Conexus' Life-Labs to exercise their collective imagination by exploring desired futures. Our methodology was inspired by the Three Horizons approach (Sharpe et al., 2016), characterized by the dynamic relationship between understanding the current world and creating representations of desired future states.

Highlights



1. 6 workshops with 112 participants from different backgrounds
2. Looking 25 years ahead to ensure generation-spanning transformations
3. Exploring 3 horizons: present, near future and distant future to define a pathway to a desirable future
4. Including a more-than-human perspective to broaden imaginaries



Overview

Members of the NBS community and related stakeholders can have limited opportunities to step back from dealing with immediate or urgent problems and offer solutions. The Nature Futures Workshops were an opportunity to exercise our collective imagination about desired futures, allowing us to step back, shape alternatives to the present, and identify detailed pathways towards them. Exercising our capacity to co-imagine desired futures can help us strengthen our NBS communities and broaden ‘nature-based thinking’ within them.

With that in mind, the methodology for the Nature Futures Workshops was designed to explore nature-based futures that support the wellbeing of all life in our cities. Participants included a wide range of leaders, experts, and agents of change, who are directly and indirectly involved in shaping the future of nature (and life) in the Conexus cities. The idea aimed to promote mutual learning and a process of change through the engagement of diverse stakeholders in the NFWs.

Together, participants explored desired futures for nature (and life) by engaging with a range of perspectives and plurality of voices. By sharing their visions and dreams, participants co-created elements of the future they want for nature (and life) in the Conexus cities in 2050. But why 2050? Because looking at the year 2050, the scale and scope of transformation is closer to the kind of change that requires a generation, as it includes changes in social values and attitudes.

How

The workshop was designed in three steps to jointly explore desires, hopes, and possibilities around the idea of nature-based futures for our cities in the year 2050. The format was adapted from the Three Horizons framework (Sharpe, 2013; Sharpe et al., 2016, cited in: Pereira et al., 2020), which provides a collaborative approach to build pathways for desirable futures based on a structured and guided dialogue considered along a temporal continuum (from now, near future, and far future).

The basic format we proposed involved exploring the three different ‘horizons’ in small groups, effectively brainstorming and exchanging ideas across three steps that cover:

Step 1: The futures we’re making now (Horizon 1), where participants foresee the future from current trends, scan the horizon and consider where ‘business as usual’ is taking their city;

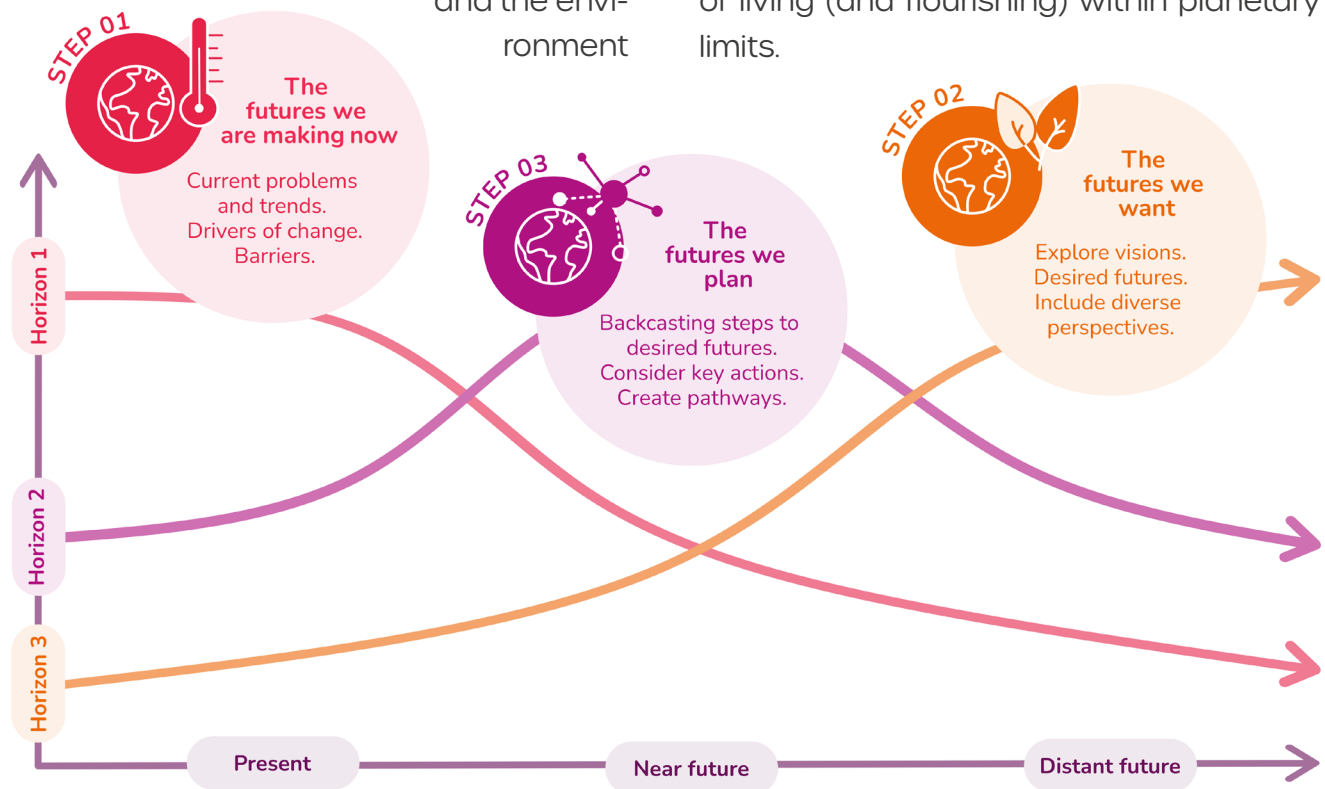
Step 2: The futures we want (Horizon 3), where participants explore their visions of desired futures;

Step 3: How we can get there (Horizon 2), backcasting from desired futures to consider key actions and interventions that can create pathways from step 1 to step 2.

To contextualize our discussions, the first step invited participants to describe problems and issues related to nature and the environment

in the present, focusing on identifying current trends, business-as-usual practices, drivers of environmental change, barriers to more positive change, and promising seeds of change, which is an analysis method also known as horizon scanning. As the exercise involves a plurality of voices, different opinions will emerge during the discussion, which may cause divergences. It is important to identify any disagreements, write them down, and then encourage participants to move forward, not wasting too much time disagreeing.

The second step was about brainstorming an ideal future for nature in our cities in 2050. Participants were invited to time travel and visit a neighborhood in 2050, when a truly sustainable society has taken shape, where human-natural relations have transformed, shaping the development of the city and creating new ways of living (and flourishing) within planetary limits.





Here, local teams were also invited to explore the possibilities of combining a diverse human-centered range of perspectives with more-than-human perspectives, that is, considering the needs of other species and elements of the ecosystem. In this discussion, they identified some ‘keystone’ aspects of the local environment: key parts of ecosystems or species that they believe are currently under threat, but could flourish in different future worlds.

Having explored the present and desired future, the third step invited participants to help bridge the gap between the present and future vision(s), by looking back and forward in time and identifying key changes and actions that may help society (human and other) and institutions to transition to the desired future. Discussions here should consider the changes required to achieve key aspects of their desired futures, exploring change in a range of technological, political, cultural, ecological, economic, and social factors. Reflections

invited participants to think about short, medium and long-term changes, while avoiding getting stuck on “what is missing now”. Finding pathways to get there could include Nature-based Solutions across spatial scales, while considering the interdependencies between local actions and global influences.

“The 3H process has been interesting, but also challenging. It revealed certain limitations in our Life-Lab, especially a ‘lack of dreamers’ and alternative perspectives.”

Participant in Santiago workshop

The 3H methodology provides for a flexible approach to the duration of the workshop, but a commitment within a day to three would be ideal (one day for each step), as it takes time to create the trust needed to share dreams and generate significant debates.

Timings of each step can be adjusted. If time is restricted, it is recommended shortening step 1 rather than 2 or 3.

Pre-workshop survey

Imagining and wishing for a better future is not always easy. Therefore, we invited participants to complete a preparatory survey before our workshops. The surveys asked participants to describe present 'trends' that are shaping the future of their cities, 'drivers' of change and 'seeds' pointing to innovative initiatives and new possibilities, representing the future potential of the present moment. The material from the surveys provided input on trends, drivers, and seeds, which was then used by facilitators to initiate discussions when needed.

Participants were also invited to write a personal postcard to their present selves from their future selves in 2050. This initial exercise allowed them to practice their ability to speculate about a desired future by sharing their individual imaginary world. Our hope was to ease people into storytelling beyond the constraints of the present.

Conclusion

The Nature Futures Workshops were seen as an interesting, but also challenging, exercise to explore our desired futures.

Some participants had difficulties articulating positive futures in the face of prevailing pessimism (one asking: "Do we have to be optimistic?"). This is understandable given the polycrisis times we are living through, which can give participants the feeling they need to ask for permission to dream. There was also a feeling that, despite how much we dream and wish for a better future, there is no space for our voices. Or that, even when we have that space we are not being heard (the same participant reminded: "Let's imagine we will have a voice! We will be heard!").

"It was a very rich process with the possibility of dreaming, and thinking outside the box. It was a great freedom that we felt out of our comfort zone".

Participant in Sao Paulo workshop



The process itself was very time constrained, and for some Life-Labs, working online sapped creative engagement even further. Despite the short time frame, a wide range of social, economic, and environmental issues and themes were addressed in our discussions. Exercising the collective imagination about desired futures through the 3H methodology allowed participants to envision, compile ideas of alternatives to the present and identify pathways towards their realization.

When a more-than-human perspective was included, broader perspectives were

discussed. For example, perspectives on agency, nature, and human-nature relationships beyond established narratives and perspectives, going beyond cities boundaries and considering large scale changes.

Some participants felt the exercise revealed the limits to their collective imaginations. To generate more creative outputs, they suggested it would have been good to invite new voices into the discussions, taking people out of their offices, having the discussion closer to nature or including other means to generate shared and open thinking spaces.

Key messages



1. Allowing enough time is essential to build trust, to collectively co-create desired futures and alternatives to the present.
2. Inviting new voices to the discussion can generate more shared visions and innovative ideas.
3. Inviting reflections on more-than-human perspectives broadened our future visions.

References

BINA, O., et al. (2023). Guidance for Nature Futures Workshops. Working Document (revised), EU funded project CONEXUS grant agreement no. 867564, University of Lisbon and University of Sheffield. U.Lisboa repository. <https://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/56074/1/Bina%20etal-23-Guidance%20for%20Nature%20Future%20Workshops.pdf>

BINA, O., et al. Exploring desired urban futures: the transformative potential of a nature-based approach (forthcoming).

PEREIRA, et al. (2020). Developing multiscale and integrative nature-people scenarios using the Nature Futures Framework, *People and Nature*, 2, 1172-1195, DOI: 10.1002/pan3.10146.

SHARPE, B., et al. (2016). Three horizons: a pathways practice for transformation, *Ecology and Society*, 21 (2): 47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26270405>.



This project has received funding from the Europeans Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 867564



Learn more in
conexusnbs.com

Partners



University of
Sheffield



INSTITUTO DE CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS



SLU



In collaboration with all Life Labs