

Reflecting on the EM|Path Approach in A Coruña



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Bringing Life into Cities

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What is The EM|Path Approach?

The EM|Path Approach is a co-productive, arts-based engagement process that aims to (re)connect people with nature in cities.

This approach to engagement and (re)connection has been co-produced with cities in the Connecting Nature project and builds upon the principles of co-production.

Characterized by meaningful co-production centered around the lived experiences of participants, the EM|Path approach is designed to be open, reflexive, and flexible. The approach recognizes and is framed by the power of creativity and creative activity and aims to establish the conditions for deeper care, understanding, and intimacy; in so doing, the EM|Path approach works to create the foundation for more meaningful co-production and engagement towards collective goals and objectives for a more sustainable future.

The EM|Path Approach consists of a collection of creative methods that have been brought together as a way for participants to explore and reflect on their connection(s) with nature at different points in time – namely, the past, present, and the future. The four central methods are: memory work, immersion in nature, body-mapping and eco-therapy practice¹⁴. Cutting across all four methods is the practice of embodied reflection.

14 See the method descriptions in Tool J

EXAMPLE:

Nostalgia for Nature – The EM|Path Approach in A Coruña, Spain

The EM|Path approach in A Coruña, Spain, was designed and delivered as two separate, but interconnected, activities. In June 2021, twelve local citizens who are involved in the municipal Urban Gardens, were invited to reflect, both individually and collectively, on the role of nature in their lives. Applying the methods of memory work, immersion in nature, and a short eco-therapy mindfulness session, the participants each wrote a memory text that captured and shared their past feelings and connection to nature. A follow-up session, focusing on the individuals' present experiences was completed in November 2021, with participants completing both an individual and a collective body map. Across both sessions, the participants were supported by two artists – a poet and an illustrator – who were invited to make a creative response, adding another layer to the creative element that is key to the EM|Path approach. The local artists also became central to the facilitation of the exercise, bringing their own expertise and cultural knowledge to the process. The sessions were carried out in Spanish and Galician, the local languages. The outputs from both days were then exhibited in the Agora building, including the memory work and body maps of the participants, as well as the illustrations and poem by the local artists/facilitators.



What is it for?

The EM|Path Approach has been used in cities working on nature-based solutions to prepare the ground for working on complex nature-based solutions (to date, the team have worked with Sarajevo, Nicosia, and A Coruña). The work with cities to date has demonstrated that application of this kind of co-production process with a group of people can deliver on:

- **Identifying local values** – through sharing how nature is, and has been valued in a local community (by members of that community), themes or values can be distinguished that can help guide and be part of new nature-based solutions in the city.
- **Embedding the local narrative in a project** – through sharing, acknowledging and connecting stories, the value of nature and nature-based solutions within the local context is explored, and becomes a foundation on which to identify the most appropriate and meaningful nature-based solution for the community.
- **Building new relationships** – the approach helps define shared ground and build strong bonds between people. This enhances collaboration when working in interdisciplinary teams, or helps to build a foundation for local community engagement.
- **Imagining and exploring new ways of living and working with nature** – through interactions with nature, participants can explore their changing relationship with and in nature over the past and present and consider the future possibilities and directions of nature-based solutions.

EXAMPLE:

In Nicosia, bridges between different team members were built as the common experience of the EM|Path Approach encouraged the team to reflect on common memories and newly created common experiences. This inspired the team to consider the future in new ways, reflected in the Map Art they co-created as a third phase of the EM|Path approach. Upon reflection, the Nicosia team highlighted the team-building effect of the process as well as the newly found possibility of bringing the office setting to nature. The team have since spent time in nature, noting the rejuvenating effects this has had on their relationships and work environment.

Who can be involved?

The EM|Path approach can be undertaken by groups of people seeking to prepare the ground for change. It is co-designed with key stakeholders; as such, it can be applied as either an internal or an external engagement process, decided at the pre-production process stage of the approach through co-productive methods.

The groups that have participated in this co-production process to date have had the following in common: being colleagues (i.e. pre-existing relationships), working on the same projects (i.e. shared goals, aims, and objectives), sharing an urban garden space (i.e. experience with nature-based solutions at the city/community level).

In addition, all participants, irrespective of location, all share lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing an additional layer for reflecting on the role of nature in promoting and supporting health and well-being.

To date, the main examples of its use have been in terms of human/nature relationships in urban environments, but the approach is open and flexible, with a view that it can be applied to explore a wide breadth of issues that are deemed important at the community level (e.g. addressing conflict resolution, reflecting on the meaning of home to address housing issues, and supporting intergeneration exchange to address issues of accessibility and inclusivity).

How did they Reflect on the EM|Path approach in A Coruña?

After carrying out the EM|Path approach, the core team of the A Coruña Municipality, reflected on their experience of the approach via:

- A. personal reflection, by filling in a reflection template ¹⁵ with guiding questions;
- B. peer-to-peer learning, during an interactive group discussion with Connecting Nature project partners, and other cities (i.e. Nicosia and Sarajevo) who have experienced the approach; and
- C. coaching, in conversation with the experts on the EM|Path approach.

All three reflection elements above considered the goals, the approach itself and the outcomes. The insights from these reflecting activities are clustered below.

Reflecting on the goals

“ The goal of implementing the EM|Path approach in A Coruña was **to highlight and reinforce the importance of heritage, feelings, and memories in connection to and with nature**, for our exemplar (urban gardens). Furthermore, the approach has allowed us to **reflect collectively on how these feelings can increase attachment towards public space and engage citizens in the co-designing of nature-based solutions.**

The composition of the group that was involved was significant and important to the outputs; specifically, A Coruña involved participants from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, as a way of demonstrating **the role of urban gardens to act as the first anchor point for migrants.** In addition, the engagement of individuals from different age groups highlights the **potential of urban gardens to foster intercultural and intergenerational exchange and relationships.** ”

15 See [STEP 4 - TOOL L1 - Guiding questions for reflection] for an example of such a template

Reflecting on the overall approach, A Coruna viewed the co-production process they completed via the EM|Path approach as successful for the following reasons:

- The approach confirmed that feelings of attachment, as well as memories and heritage are a key element for the success of the urban gardens;
- The writing of the memory texts, reflecting the richness and depth of the lived experience of participants with respect to nature, demonstrate a deep desire and will to re-connect with nature, and point to the need for nature to be more present in the city; in so doing, the memory texts provide the foundation to plan for the future of nature-based solutions in A Coruna; and
- The bringing together of the memory texts, artistic response (poem and illustrations), collective body map, and overall information regarding the A Coruna exemplar in an exhibition (November 2021) proved valuable in helping the council tell the story of the urban gardens exemplar, and the goal of expanding the network to other spaces in the city.



1. To what extent was your process... **legitimate?**

“ We think the process **was legitimate and the process was trusted both by the participants but also by ourselves (i.e. project partners in the council) as a source of valuable knowledge.** We think that the presence of **the artists also added legitimacy to the process;** for example, we believe that the participants felt more confident to write their texts after having Yolanda (the poet) giving them some tips. When we contacted the participants from the first exercise to have them in the body mapping exercise too, they were quite enthusiastic, suggesting they feel that the process was useful for them and that they trust it. ”

– **Antonio Prieto González, Concello da Coruña, Spain**

The EM|Path approach zeroes in on and highlights the lived experiences of the participants; using methods that not enable the participants to reflect on their experiences of and across different points in time (i.e. the past, the present), but also invites them to share their experiences in their own words, from their own perspective of knowing, this approach creates the conditions wherein the co-production process can be used to consider future goals and objectives. Furthermore, as noted by A Coruna, the experience of this approach has enabled them to re-affirm the values they are using to guide the overall planning, delivery, and stewardship of their exemplar.

The richness of the knowledge unearthed via the EM|Path approach – capturing the emotional, cultural, and historical connection to nature offers significant potential for the future scaling up and out of A Coruna’s urban garden network.

In terms of challenges, it is important to consider the investment of participants, and to manage expectations. This aspect of co-production needs to be integrated at each phase – planning, delivery, and stewardship – in order to ensure that the legitimacy of the process (and its outputs) are not compromised.



2. To what extent was your process... **inclusive?**

“ It was very inclusive, as we had different age groups, different gender, different cultural backgrounds (people coming from Galicia but also from South America, Italy, Portugal, Africa). This was achieved quite naturally because the urban gardens themselves are very diverse places where people from different backgrounds come together.

In terms of the different types of knowledge, we believe that having the artists (poet and illustrator) participate adds another layer of knowledge that is very valuable. ”

– **Antonio Prieto González, Concello da Coruña, Spain**

In other uses of the EM|Path Approach, the groups were defined by external factors (i.e., office colleagues, conference participants). In all cases, the aim is to focus the process on a common aspect that all participants share and are interested in, to ensure that inclusivity is maintained. Furthermore, delivering the approach in the local language will always yield better results, as it allows the participants to play with language (i.e. exploration of memories through metaphor, simile, symbol) and communicate comfortably, and with ease.

The role of facilitation is important. While it can be a challenge to maintain a balance between encouragement, boundaries, and engagement, the facilitator can guide and help participants in the creating the conditions for creating/maintaining a safe space for participants to feel creative, vulnerable, and comfortable in sharing their experiences/stories.



3. To what extent was your process... **open?**

“ In this case the EM|Path approach was only open to the urban gardeners, which are themselves, as stated before, a diverse group where people have different knowledges (for example, speaking of agriculture, we have elderly people with the knowledge of tradition but also people from younger generations with academic knowledge on organic agriculture). In further occasions, when applied to other exemplars, it could be a more open process aimed at a wider scope of actors. ”

As the EM|Path approach (its design and delivery) is co-designed, it can and has been adapted to changing needs, depending on the participants themselves. At each stage of the approach, the focus is on creating and facilitating an experience that places the needs of participants at the centre, and in so doing, it offers up the potential to capture more meaningful and significant aspects of the lived experience. For example, the memory works in A Coruna demonstrate a deep desire to re-connect with the joyful emotions of childhood – where people felt happiness, love, and free, connected to nature, family, and the simple pleasures of life. These memories are a driving force for why participants have returned to nature – particularly those who are older – and urban gardens, in particular.



4. What else was important for the EM|Path approach?

The **inclusion of practicing artists (a poet, illustrator) added another layer of openness, legitimacy, and inclusiveness to the co-production process.** Inviting the artists to contribute a creative response reinforces the role and value of creativity and creative activity that is a key element of the EM|Path approach. One of the key outputs from this is poetic text and illustrations produced, as a way of presenting the collective lived experience of the participants. The artistic outputs were brought together in an exhibition which served to ‘tell the story’ of the urban gardens in A Coruna. The use of art, and creative expression, have the potential to connect with others in an emotional way, offering a significant opportunity to communicate the benefits of nature-based solutions beyond those involved in projects.

Finally, it is worth noting **the role of time and pace as a key aspect of EM|Path approach;** working with citizens and participants from communities (particularly those who are not involved in projects at community/city-level) requires time; time to build trust, connections, and relationships between and among those to be involved in the co-production process. The EM|Path approach asks participants to share personal, meaningful aspects of their lives; time is an important resources, and the time it takes to plan and deliver a process that will yield meaningful outputs needs to be carefully considered.



1. To what extent did the process lead to outcomes that are **actionable**?

“ The results of the EM|Path approach can help communicate to citizens and policy makers the importance of urban gardens and their potential to have citizens reconnect with nature.

The artistic element is something very innovative, and it has a very visual appeal which can raise awareness and help communicate the importance and the potential of this type of nature-based solution. ”

– Antonio Prieto González & Maria Gonzales Vazquez,
Concello da Coruña, Spain

In A Coruna, **the results of the EM|Path approach re-affirmed the values and guiding elements that are central to planning, delivery, and stewardship of their nature-based solution exemplar** (i.e. memories, attachment, feelings, culture, heritage). The results of the memory work and body-mapping reinforce the overall objectives and aims of the exemplar, and offer a layer of richness to the Connecting Nature narrative.

“ The experience of the EM|Path approach in A Coruna links directly with the impact of nature-based solution on health and wellbeing, as the participants reflect on the way they feel when they're in contact with nature, which is usually a very positive feeling of wellbeing and happiness. ”

– Antonio Prieto González & Maria Gonzales Vazquez,
Concello da Coruña, Spain

The narrative is an innovative aspect tied to the Connecting Nature framework; it is also a challenging one for the cities. **The EM|Path approach can help cities share their stories of nature in creative (text, visual) ways and in so doing, enrich the overall narrative of nature-based solutions.** In A Coruña, the exhibition displayed a narrative that connected the past (A Coruña's heritage vis-à-vis agriculture), the present (the role and meaning of urban gardens as an extension of this heritage), and the future (the expanding of the urban gardens into a large-scale nature-based solution via a network threading urban gardens across the city). **In addition to guiding the planning and delivery of future urban garden spaces, the narrative reinforced via The EM|Path approach has the potential to guide actions related to stewardship well into the future.**



2. To what extent did the process lead to outcomes that are **empowering**?

“ Everyone has memories of nature, no matter their age, their cultural background, their gender, or their level of education, so this co-production process has significant potential to bring people together, strengthen the feelings of community, and empower community members to work together towards meaningful future objectives with respect to the planning, delivery, and stewardship of nature-based solutions. ”

– Antonio Prieto González & Maria Gonzales Vazquez,
Concello da Coruña, Spain

The EM|Path approach offers a way for participants to transform the intangible (feelings, emotions, meanings) into the tangible (project objectives and aims) via the development and exploration of individual and collective stories, based on lived experiences; the re-affirmation of key values and principles (attachment, memories, feelings, heritage) via the lived experiences of participants is empowering, both for the council and for participants involved both in terms of the co-production process itself, and how this process feeds into overall project objectives, aims, and outputs.



3. To what extent did the process lead to outcomes that are **aligning**?

“Bringing in arts can be a way to make the culture department more interested in nature-based solutions. If the process were to be adapted for children, it could also be an interesting tool for the education department to reflect on the feelings that children have towards nature... Also, because everyone has memories of nature, no matter in which department they work, it could be a tool to bring people together.”

– **Antonio Prieto González & Maria Gonzales Vazquez,**
Concello da Coruña, Spain

The EM|Path approach creates the space to explore and consider individual perspectives, drawing them together to identify towards a collective understanding of needs, common drives and aims for the future. Applying the EM|Path approach offers a pathway for considering multiple perspectives, and their alignment towards a shared goal. This is achieved through the building of trust and the fostering of empathy; when participants can reflect on and empathize with the way in which others see and understand the world (as expressed and shared through

their lived experiences) it offers opportunities to come to common understandings, common knowing, and common care and investment in a shared goal. In this way, this co-production process can create the foundation for better alignment of perspectives and views to meet agreed upon challenges, and to identify a way forward that all can contribute to, and in which all are invested (because of the connections, relationships, trust, and empathy that have been uncovered, supported, and fostered as part of the co-production process.).

Recap

Co-production seems complex at first but once you give it some time, it will intuitively become part of your way of working.

Six key things to remember about Co-production:



1. **Inclusivity:** Make sure all actors are included on an equal basis. Everyone brings his or her own perspectives and experiences and so they should all be able to take part in meetings and activities to come to better outcomes.



2. **Openness:** Get creative in setting up meetings to make sure participants feel and invited to open up! Introducing new ideas, locations, and approaches will help participants to think out loud and share innovative ideas. Invest in communication and facilitation skills to come to a welcoming and transparent approach.



3. **Legitimacy:** Make sure the process can be trusted by testing statements and assumptions, building on credible sources, and asking experts to help. It is important to reserve time to reflect on your own assumptions as well and adapt your practice as you go.



4. **Actionable:** Think about the outcomes before your start to make sure they can be put to practice. How to make your outcomes concrete? What are you hoping to *co-produce*?



5. **Empowering:** Consider ways to empower participants by finding shared interests, sharing responsibilities, opening up discussion making processes, and building towards a shared ownership of the project.



6. **Aligning:** Use Co-production as an integral approach to govern the project from the start. This will help you in breaking down interdepartmental silo's, building strategic support from different stakeholders and solutions that align with strategic agenda's.

