

COOKBOOK ON VIRTUAL INTERACTIVE EXCHANGE FORMATS FOR CITIES

TIPS AND LEARNINGS FOR
VIRTUAL CITY-TO-CITY
EXCHANGE



INTERLACE
RESTORING URBAN ECOSYSTEMS
RECUPERANDO ECOSISTEMAS URBANOS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 'Cookbook on virtual interactive exchange formats for cities' is a collection of virtual collaboration methods tested and evaluated in the INTERLACE project. It can be a particular challenge to build collaboration and trust between cities merely online, but the available methods and tools were able to replace the physical meetings to a large extent. This is good news for future projects and cooperation processes that will rely more heavily on virtual exchange mitigating CO2 emissions from traveling.

The Cookbook is however more than just another list of methods and tools, as it is specifically tailored to the needs of cities and public authorities that want to build networks on nature-based solutions (NBS) and ecosystem restoration. It looks at city-to-city exchange processes in larger groups as well as in city pairs. The findings from these regular meetings in different group sizes show a clear picture of the advantages and disadvantages of each individual format and inspires replicators in their decision of how to organize the exchange between cities. It guides the reader through specific interactive exchange formats, describing how to plan, prepare and implement them. Examples from real life applications are included.

SO, WHO IS THIS COOKBOOK FOR?

- Public authorities and cities wishing to engage in fruitful exchange with other cities
- City networks aiming to build an inclusive environment for sharing and learning among their members
- Academia, companies and other actors working with a diverse range of stakeholders on the design and implementation of NBS

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the main success factors of European research and coordination projects on NBS is the collaboration and continuous exchange between its city partners that allow for in-depth peer-to-peer learning and the organization of joint activities aimed at bringing together the urban ecosystem restoration community.

It is therefore considered crucial to establish effective structures for city-to-city exchange between the local partners. In the case of the INTERLACE project, which inspired this Cookbook, the cities were located in Latin America and Europe. Regular meetings were established and their interactive character emphasized among the organizing institutions. All methods described below aimed to allow for creative thinking and open discussion, rather than hierarchical presentation of achievements and results. Accordingly, different interactive tools, platforms and methods that foster curiosity and collaboration were tested.

There are several ways to go about fostering peer-to-peer learning and exchange among cities, starting from the group size in which mutual learning and interaction is facilitated. The methods in this Cookbook were either applied in larger groups of six cities and up to 25 participants or in city pairs with a smaller number of participants. Both ex-

change formats have their advantages, depending on the desired outcome. While exchange in larger groups leads to a good overview of approaches and solutions in several cities, in-depth exchange is easier facilitated in city pairs. In order to ensure that city pairs benefit from the twinning, a matching exercise based on a short profile can be organized. In this case cities fill out a brief form, indicating their main interests and challenges concerning the relevant topic at hand. A template form is provided in the Annex of this Cookbook.

The following chapters describe the methods applied in both larger group settings and pairs, including an evaluation form that can be used to monitor satisfaction and results (see Annex). In this way, the Cookbook aims to give practical advice and inspire other cities and public authorities that want to use more interactive features and methods in their networking and learning activities.

2 VIRTUAL EXCHANGE METHODS

This chapter provides an overview of useful virtual exchange methods that were applied in group settings with several cities.

2.1 COLLECTION OF EXCHANGE METHODS AND TOOLS

The selected methods and tools, including the warm-up exercises all address distinct questions and challenges during the city-to-city exchange. They have been selected for their usefulness in achieving specific outcomes. The chapter is divided into three parts:

- **warm-up exercises** that intend to break the ice at the beginning of the session or to get familiar with the session's topic in a playful way
- the **interactive methods** with distinct goals that are described for each one;
- **tools** that were used to conduct the virtual sessions or parts of them.

For many methods an attempt was made to add a visual component to support the discussions and stimulate creative thinking by visualizing the concept, e.g. a tree symbol for the root cause analysis method. This additional support is highly beneficial for structuring the contributions and thoughts in many sessions.

The table below provides an overview of collaboration platforms and their respective advantages. Many of them are referenced in the following descriptions of methods.

TABLE 1

ONLINE COLLABORATION PLATFORMS USED IN INTERLACE (NON-EXHAUSTIVE)

NAME	MAIN FEATURE	REMARKS
ZOOM	Video conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chat function • Breakout room function for smaller group meetings, randomized or manually created groups possible • Access via computer and mobile phone • Basic poll function (see below) • Simultaneous translation function
MIRO	Whiteboard and visualization tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whiteboard with large possibilities to visualize group discussion processes • Parallel working of different groups • Complex opportunities, needs some time to get acquainted with functions
GOOGLE JAMBOARD	Whiteboard and visualization tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whiteboard with possibilities to visualize group discussion processes • Parallel working of different groups • User-friendly set-up, easy to navigate
GOOGLE SLIDES	Presentations and whiteboard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slides and presentations can be shared with participants for joint elaboration • Participants can work on slides directly during the meeting • Whiteboard function with text boxes as sticky notes
MENTIMETER	Polls and surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaborate poll and survey function • Possibility to track each participants answer through multiple questions • Word cloud function • Limited, free version available
ZOOM POLLS	Polls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple poll function for participants of a Zoom room • Easy to navigate by moderator, limited set-up (single and multiple choice)
WONDER	Digital networking platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal networking in groups • Participants can easily change between groups and meet different people • Useful for coffee breaks and informal exchange

WARM-UP EXERCISES

NAME OF THE EXERCISE

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

IMPROMPTU NETWORKING

Warm-up method to identify expectations and challenges and trigger new connections and a warmer atmosphere

Zoom

20 minutes

Liberating Structures

Description: The moderator defines one or two questions the participants should focus on (e.g. what my expectations are, what I bring into the meeting today, what I wish to see from other participants). Participants now come together in pairs for a certain amount of time to exchange on the questions ideally for around 3-4 minutes. Repeat three times with new pairings, resulting in an overall networking phase of around 12-15 minutes. In a virtual set-up, the mo-

derator creates random breakout sessions to bring participants together in pairs. This way, all participants establish contacts in the beginning and are encouraged to speak and participants playfully start to think about the aim of the session. The method is helpful to break hierarchies between invited participants

NAME OF THE EXERCISE

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

NBS ICE-BREAKER

Welcome participants and prepare them to have a discussion about NBS

Zoom & Miro or Google Presentations

10-15 minutes

n/a

Description: The moderator or meeting organiser prepares a Miro Board or a Google presentation with a large picture of a symbol of nature, for example a tree, as well as sticky notes with different colours beforehand. When working with the Google presentation, prepare some boxes of different colours to represent the sticky notes. Make sure to explain how to apply the sticky notes to the Miro Board / Google presentation. Each participant can be assigned a specific coloured sticky note.

At the beginning of the session, the moderator shares the link to the Miro Board / Google presentation with all participants via the chat function. Then the moderator formu-

lates a question like: "How do you connect with or relate to nature?" The participants now have up to 5 minutes to answer the question by using the sticky notes and sticking them to the picture of the tree. After a few minutes the moderator stops the participants and highlights some of the sticky notes. This way, the session starts with a personal, appreciative and friendly ice-breaker. A possibility is to ask participants to include the city they are from on the notes to get an overview geographic representation.

METHODS

METHOD 1

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS

Identify root problems, resulting challenges and present first ideas for solutions

Zoom and Google Presentations

60 minutes

n/a

Description: This method is suitable for groups between 6 to 10 persons to discuss local challenges cities are experiencing and the underlying root causes of those challenges. The moderator shares the link to a joint google presentation in which the picture of a large tree with roots, branches and leaves is displayed. A google presentation (or another equivalent tool) allows all participants to access the presentation and edit it.

The participants are asked to write sticky notes in the google presentation tool with most relevant local problems related to the chosen topic and to stick them to the trunk of the tree. Alternatively, the moderator can follow the discussion and prepare the notes. After 10 minutes the participants

are asked to identify the underlying root causes of those apparent problems and to write them on sticky notes and stick them to the roots of the tree. Understanding the root causes of problems supports cities in finding better solutions. We asked the participants how the city pairing could support in addressing those problems and which solutions could be sought. The answers are written again on notes that are stacked to the leaves and branches of the tree. As a result, the problems, underlying root causes and potential solutions are identified and visualized. This can be repeated for further topics.

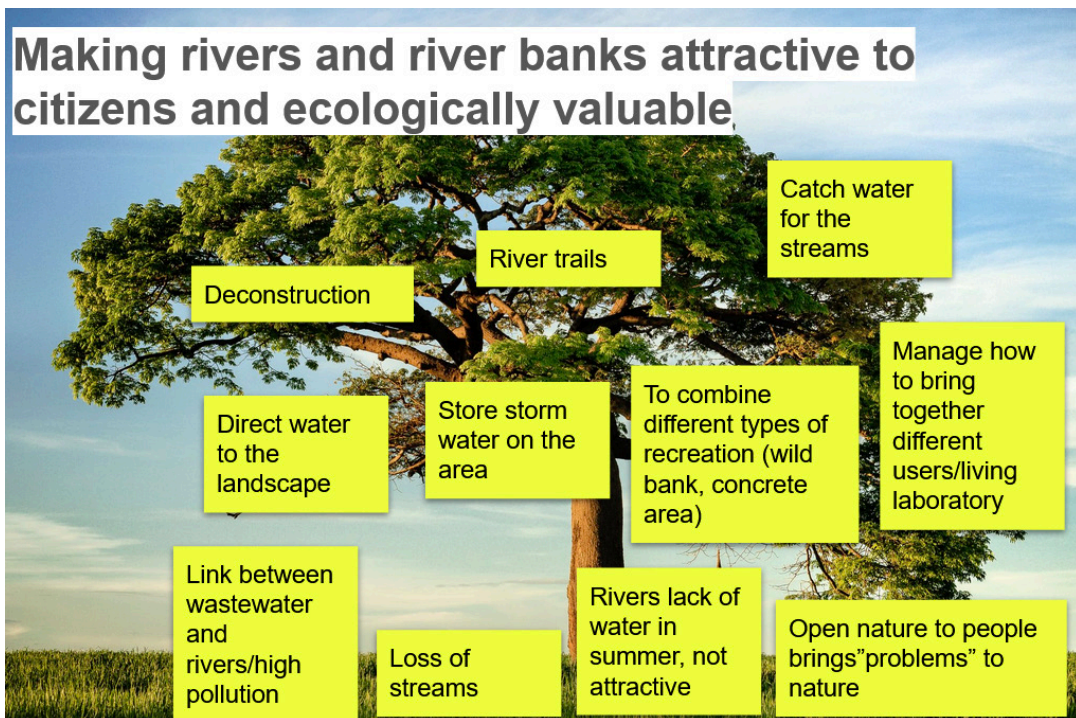


figure 1: Root cause method applied (Photo by niko photos on Unsplash)

METHOD 2

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

WHAT, SO WHAT, NOW WHAT? W³

Gathering knowledge, drawing conclusions and defining new steps

Zoom and Miro

45 minutes

Liberating Structures

Description: This method allows participants to jointly look back at what has happened and been elaborated in the last months or weeks, to draw conclusions on the status quo and define next steps. It was used to create common ground for the newly brought together city pairs, to gather the existing knowledge about each other, to identify what this means for the city-to-city cooperation between the two cities and to then set the agenda and define next activities in the city pair.

WHAT: In a first round, each city collects facts and notions they know about their sister city on a prepared Miro board, such as challenges the sister city faces, size of the sister city, activities the sister city is working on etc. This is done in silence and for both cities in parallel for five to 10 minutes. Then the boards are presented to the respective partner city and open questions are answered. This round re-

shes the memory on what the cities know about each other and creates the base for cooperation.

SO WHAT: In a second step, both cities discuss together which conclusions they can draw from the information gathered in phase one, namely which topics and activities they could work on together. A moderator marks the sticky notes containing the topics and ideas that are interesting to both cities.

NOW WHAT: In the third and final step, the topics are narrowed down to concrete action points and prioritized. The working agenda for the city pair is set for the next meetings and organizational issues like meeting times etc. are clarified.



figure 2: W³ method applied on a Miro board

METHOD 3

NAME OF THE METHOD

- Main goal**
- Online platform used**
- Timeframe**
- Copy right**

(VIRTUAL) POSTER SESSION

- Introduction to topics and presentation of cities
- Zoom and Miro
- 10-15 min per poster
- n/a

Description: Each city is asked to prepare a virtual poster on a certain topic or on their city for an information session. In this session, about 10 minutes are taken to present the poster via Miro and 5 minutes are foreseen for questions from the audience. Depending on the topic, the timeframe can be adapted. Possible occasions and topics where posters were applied during the INTERLACE project are a gene-

ral introduction of the city, an overview of local challenges related to NBS and an update poster after 1,5 years of project duration. The posters remain accessible to all participants via the Miro board and can be visited in breaks (if you have a longer virtual meeting) or any time after the session.



figure 3: Virtual city posters in Miro

METHOD 4

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

RETROSPECTIVE

Look back on past processes and define strengths and weaknesses

Miro

45 minutes

n/a

Description: This retrospective works online via a Miro Board. Essentially, a team is asked to evaluate a process or project, by gathering feedback on working processes, successes and room for improvement. On the Miro Board, four squares in different colors were added, each with a different title: Lessons learned, Accomplishments, Problem areas and Future considerations. After a brief introduction, the participants were asked to add their thoughts via sticky notes in the four different areas in a silent brainstorming.

This can either be done for all four areas at once, or one after the other. About 5 to 7 minutes were given per feedback area. After 30 minutes of silent working and brainstorming, the moderator clustered the sticky notes and invited participants to share their observations and thoughts. This discussion helps to improve the ongoing work and planning of future activities. The results were kept on the Miro Board for future reference.

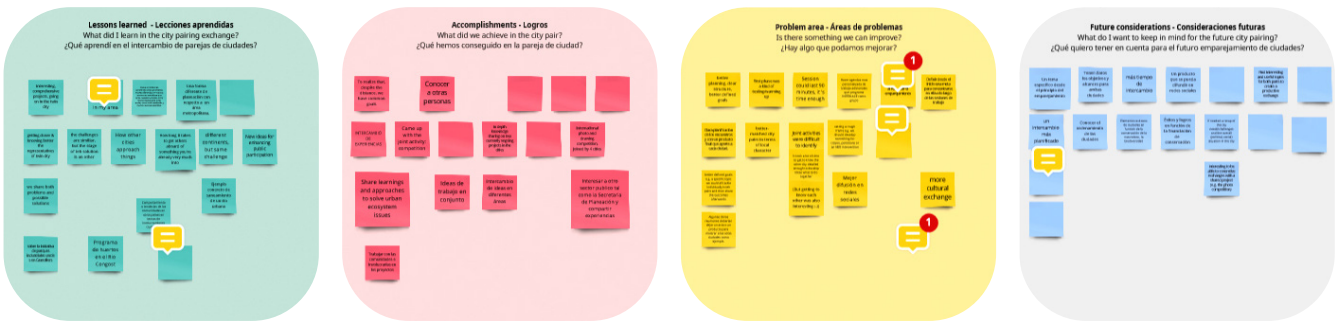


figure 4: Retrospective on Miro Board

METHOD 5

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

HOST CITIES

Get to know cities and colleagues better

n/a

20 minutes

n/a

Description: This method aims at building knowledge and trust among the participants of a city-to-city exchange program. Specifically if physical meetings are not possible, this online method can contribute to this goal in a playful way. During each online meeting, one participating city was asked to function as a host city. This included the preparation of a 10 to 15 minute long input about the city and the department involved. The rotating host city function gives each city the chance to introduce the team behind the city name and to find a playful and entertaining way to get familiar with each other's local activities. Consequently, the establishment of the host city function leads to several meetings chaired by each of the cities, giving them the

chance to introduce colleagues and departments involved in the project, but also going deeper into their climate, energy or NBS activities and ambitions. Moreover, the host cities may include social and cultural characteristics of their countries and cities in their presentations, showing pictures or videos of landscape, nature and food typical of the regions. This additional component can successfully convey a feeling of comradeship and create a warmer, more familiar atmosphere during the meetings.

METHOD 6

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

EXCHANGE IN SMALLER GROUPS

Stimulate discussion and create a working atmosphere where participants feel comfortable sharing experiences

Zoom

15 minutes for discussion in groups and 30-45 minutes for discussion in the plenary

n/a

Description: In round one, two participants discuss one question/topic for five minutes. In round two, two pairs of the first round are grouped together to discuss the same question/topic for ten minutes. Afterwards, all groups present their outcomes to the plenary. In the plenary questions are answered. It is useful to identify a person to pre-

sent findings per group in the beginning of round two. This method allows everyone to speak and to participate and is useful when the audience is very diverse, heterogeneous and participants do not know each other.

METHOD 7

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

INTERVIEW-STYLE PRESENTATION

Present achievements in a lively way

Zoom

10-15 minutes

n/a

Description: This method was applied to loosen up the atmosphere in sessions where the main goal was to transfer knowledge and new information to a larger audience. As organizers did not want to follow the usual process of delivering input with an oral presentation supported by a few power point slides, the team opted for an interview-style presentation. More specifically, the information was delivered by an interviewer and one or more interviewees. The latter conveyed the input after being asked questions

in a casual interview style, with the interviewer being able to ask follow-up questions in a natural way. The questions were agreed upon with the interviewees beforehand. Power point slides with pictures and nearly no text accompanied the interview presentation, to support the information conveyed visually.

METHOD 8

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

VIRTUAL CITY TOURS

Show participants spaces of NBS interventions via video

Zoom

15 minutes

n/a

Description: This method can be applied during online or hybrid meetings. All cities are asked beforehand to take amateur videos with mobile phones or photo cameras of their urban environments, specifically covering the NBS intervention sites. While playing the video on the online plat-

form, the city representatives explain what the audience is seeing. Each video should ideally be about 5 to 10 minutes long and the showing can be followed by questions from the audience.

METHOD 9

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

OPEN SPACE METHOD

Give participants the opportunity to bring own topics to the table

Exceptionally took place on site

2 hours

n/a

Description: This method can be applied when session organizers want to give participants the opportunity to create and manage the agenda themselves. Cities were asked beforehand to think about topics they would like to suggest and to discuss with others. At the time of the meeting, session templates that had been printed prior were distributed among the participants. They contained fields for a title, a brief description of the topic proposed and the session organizers. The filled templates were then collected and pinned to a wall, when participants were asked to support their favorite sessions by sticking sticky dots to the respective document. Based on this prioritization, a number of highest ranked topics can then be selected. The participants who suggested the topic were then asked to moderate the session and take notes in a notes template. It was decided to have three sessions in parallel and two in a row, amounting to a total of six open spaces. Each space was scheduled to take around 40 minutes.

In case this method should take place in a virtual setting, the steps can be transferred to an online process. For instance, cities will then be asked to fill the session template

online, for example via a Miro Board or Google slides. For the prioritization exercise it is important that other online participants will be able to vote for their favorite session, for example via star-shaped sticky dots that can be prepared by the organizer beforehand and placed by the participants on the respective sticky notes during the exercise. In the online setting, cities will be asked to write their suggestions for topics on sticky notes, ideally in a ten minute silent brainstorming. It is important that cities indicate the author of the idea; this can be facilitated beforehand by providing an exemplary sticky note. In a second step, all participants vote for their favorite sessions. Based on this prioritization, the highest ranking sessions are selected for the open space. Sessions can take place in breakout groups via Zoom or in separate meetings with distinct log-in details that should be prepared beforehand.

METHOD 8

NAME OF THE METHOD

Main goal

Online platform used

Timeframe

Copy right

QUIZ

Playfully test the knowledge about a project, process or topic

Zoom and zoom polls

10 minutes

n/a

Description: At the beginning of a virtual meeting, the moderator announces a quiz via Zoom polls to bring the audience's attention to the topic of the meeting. The questions can serve as a recapitalization of activities that have been performed in the past or determine the participants' knowledge on project related topics. As the polls are anonymous, no participant needs to feel that they are being personally tested. The questions are multiple choice, so that the results can be aggregated fast. The questions are shown to the audience, giving them one minute to read and choose their answer. In a next step, the aggregated

quiz results are shown and the moderator shortly discusses them, giving the correct answer. This method is a fun way to engage and activate the audience and brings the participants to the same level of knowledge. Organizers of this method may consider different tools; zoom polls are a simple way to apply the quiz. However, for example, Menti-meter offers a few more possibilities to collect and display poll and survey information.

2.2.

EVALUATION OF THE METHODS BY PARTICIPANTS

In order to examine the usefulness, comprehensibility and general acceptance of the methods used, an evaluation questionnaire was developed. With the main goal of producing comparable results, the same questionnaire was distributed shortly after each of the interactive exchange formats. It was decided to conduct the survey via Google Forms, which was accessible to all participants.

The questionnaire is provided in the Annex and may be used for inspiration. As can be seen, an important focus of the evaluation form was the suitability of the method to the objective of the session, i.e. whether its format and structure produced useful results and moved the discussion forward. Cities were also asked to reflect the aim of the method from their point of view. This was done in order for the organizers to check whether instructions they gave were clear and led to the desired outcome. Additionally, it was important that all participants felt comfortable during the session, which is essential in order to ensure that ideas and knowledge from all participants are collected. By making everyone's voice heard it was aimed to yield the best possible results from the discussion and an inclusive process.

3.

SUMMARY

Networking and exchange lie at the core of many research and capacity-building projects. Geographical distances and the inability to meet face-to-face for other reasons shape the way in which such exchange is organized, making it crucial to find effective virtual formats that foster exchange and mutual learning. So far, most of the methods tested and presented in this Cookbook were well received by the audience – even though there is a risk to overburden meetings with methodological structures where simple discussions can bring out the most useful spontaneous results. Overall, the balance of introducing new interactive methods and giving open, non-facilitated spaces is key when bringing together different cities or local actors that wish to learn from each other.

4.

ANNEX

4.1

City profile A short profile provides the basis for the matching of city pairs. Intentionally kept short, it asks cities for a self-estimation of expertise in terms of NBS or another relevant topic, to group mentor and mentee cities together. Furthermore, main interests and relevant sub-topics are provided to pick from according to local preferences. Own interests differing from the list provided can be added if considered very important. Last but not least, cities can indicate whether they are interested in organizing joint activities with their respective city pair, and if so, should give examples of such small, low-budget projects that could range from high-level political exchange, art projects or virtual workshops and more.

NAME OF THE CITY

Estimated level of readiness and expertise in NBS in the city. (Choose from: low, medium, high)

Cities may include examples of previous NBS activities.

EXEMPLARY ANSWERS

MEDIUM

Main interests for cooperation

- Strategy development
- Stakeholder involvement
- Financing of NBS
- Water pollution
- Environmental education
- Citizen participation and engagement
- Communication on NBS
- Blue/green networks
- Green space management
- Heat stress
- Flood risk
- Air quality
- Tools and models
- Other

Please choose the 3 most important ones from the list and add others, if applicable.

- **Financing the NBS.** The city has a number of plans to implement NBS, one of the constraints is the lack of funding to make them a reality.
- **Blue/green networks.** One of the city’s plans for blue corridors is the river corridor, which seeks to generate these continuous green spaces or corridors for the city.
- **Flood risk.** As the river is a backbone that crosses the city not only in its urban area but also in the rural area, this generates great vulnerabilities and risk zones due to the scarcity of urban planning in its beginnings.

Are you interested in organizing small local projects on NBS? If so, which activities or projects do you imagine?

Examples are: joint communication activities, joint workshops, cooperation and exchange between local schools, small-scale activities requiring no additional funding, etc.

YES, information activities with local schools and universities, spaces to raise awareness of the NBS to the general public (sustainable development week).

4.2.

EVALUATION FORM: INTERACTIVE METHODS

Cities fill out this evaluation form to give their feedback on the interactive methods for city-to-city exchange. Their feedback will help to improve the city-to-city exchange.

INTERACTIVE METHODS

- 1** Was the interactive method of identifying challenges and solutions via a visualized tree structure clear to you?
 - Yes, it was clear to me.
 - Partly, I had some open questions.
 - No, it was not clear to me.
- 2** Did the method mainly contribute to:
 - Peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.
 - Warm-up and getting to know other participants.
 - Joint finding of solutions .
 - Brainstorming new ideas.
 - I don't know.
- 3** Do you think that the method benefitted the goal of the session?
 - Yes, it benefitted the session overall.
 - In parts yes, but other methods could have been more successful.
 - No, it was counterproductive.
 - I don't know.
- 4** In your opinion, were the results obtained via the method useful?
 - Yes, very useful.
 - Yes, but results were incomplete due to the chosen method.
 - No, the method was not suited to obtain relevant results.
 - I don't know.
- 5** Did you feel uncomfortable during any part of the interactive session?
 - Yes.
 - No.
- 6** If you answered „yes“ in the previous question, why and when?
 - Open text box
- 7** Would you apply the method within your work if the occasion arises?
 - Yes.
 - No.
 - I am not sure yet, I need more information and practice with the method.

INTERLACE is a four year project that empowers and equips European and Latin American cities to restore urban ecosystems, resulting in more liveable, resilient and inclusive cities that benefit people and nature.

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INTERLACE es un proyecto de cuatro años que busca empoderar y apoyar ciudades de Europa y América Latina en la restauración de ecosistemas urbanos, resultando en ciudades más vivibles, inclusivas y resilientes para el beneficio de la gente y la naturaleza.

