

Reflections for establishing Urban Life- Labs for governance of Nature-based Solutions

This factsheet presents the key learnings and strategies from the establishment processes of seven Urban Life-Labs located in seven major cities across Latin America: São Paulo, Bogotá, Santiago, and Buenos Aires; and across Europe: Lisbon, Barcelona, and Turin. Each Urban Life-Lab represents diverse strategies and objectives for applying Nature-based Solutions interventions to address various urban socio-environmental challenges.

Urban Life-Labs (ULLs) are collaborative platforms that address urban socio-environmental challenges. A central aim of ULLs is to foster stakeholder participation, kick-start or enhance dialogue and collaboration across different societal sectors and scales, engage different actors, and provide space for experimentation, learning, and knowledge co-creation. ULLs are ideal for testing and sustaining the implementation of Nature-based Solutions (NbS).

Establishing an ULL is a structured, adaptable, and iterative process aimed at fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, while formalizing the ULL's structure and objectives. In CONEXUS, we identified three key steps for successfully undertaking this process:

1. Forming a nesting group

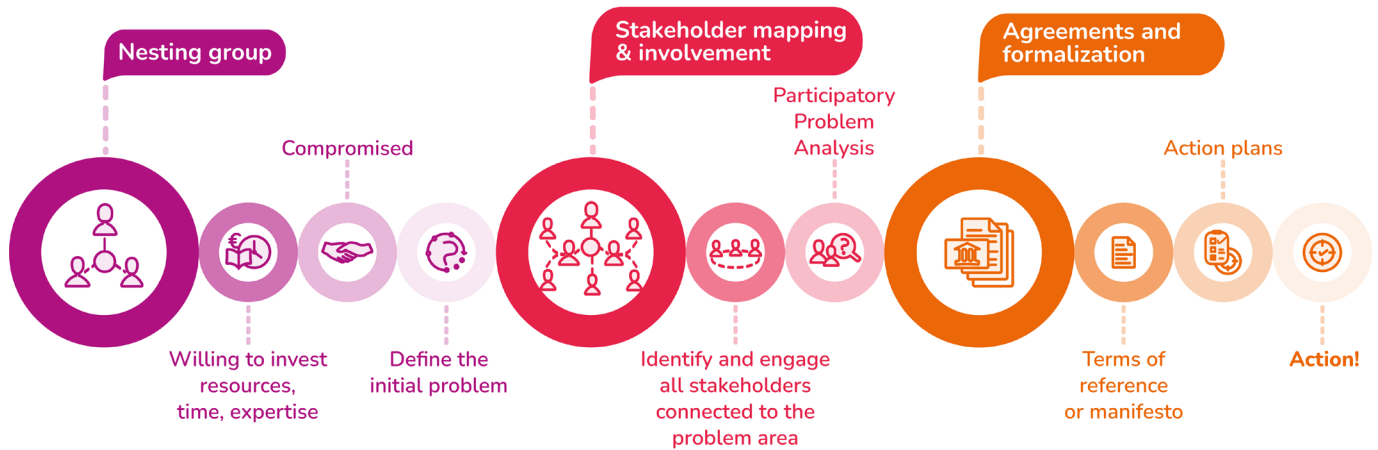
The first step in establishing a ULL for NbS is forming a 'nesting' group of organizations interested in leading and hosting ULL

Key Facts



1. ULLs are collaborative platforms where stakeholders work together to address urban socio-environmental challenges and test innovative (NbS) solutions.
2. ULLs engage diverse stakeholders, including municipal officers, researchers, citizens, and non-profits, to foster collaborative participation in problem-solving.
3. ULLs prioritize flexibility, iterative processes, and active stakeholder involvement to adapt to changing urban landscapes and to effectively implement NbS.

Timeline for establishing Urban Life-Labs



activities. Typically, this group includes local governments, research organizations, and private actors who have previously collaborated on other projects or initiatives. The nesting group plays a leadership role and provides stability to the ULL by committing to long-term participation and investing resources i.e., in terms of time and expertise. This allows the necessary time for social relations to evolve and for the long-term processes of nature to mature or be adapted. With this premise, the nesting group further plays a key role in defining the critical problem the ULL activities target to resolve and for which NbS will be tested.

2. Stakeholder identification and involvement

The next step involves iterative processes of stakeholder identification. Stakeholders are those segments of the population, who are intricately connected to the problem or whose participation in the ULL is crucial for the successful implementation of NbS. Participation in the ULL benefits stakeholders by providing a space to analyze their situation and to participate in testing and implementing solutions, which in the

long term contributes to ownership and community building. The aim is to identify and engage as many stakeholders as possible due to their relation to the problem the ULL intends to solve. At this stage, it is also essential to engage marginalized populations, including young people and vulnerable groups, in adopting and using NbS.

Different strategies can be used to identify relevant stakeholders, such as interviewing key informants, consulting public documents, visiting the physical sites, and organizing participatory meetings. Several activities can be organized by the ULL to foster connections, disseminate information, and engage diverse stakeholders in building local communities of learning and supporting the NbS development. These activities introduce stakeholders to the critical problem and the purpose of participating in the ULL community. To collaboratively refine the problem's definition and discuss potential solutions, participatory problem analysis events, such as workshops and problem mapping exercises, are organized. These initial events provide forums to exchange

views, set agendas, and invite participants from various backgrounds, including citizens, academics, public and private sectors, and different organizations.

3. Agreements and formalization

In the final step, stakeholders agree on the actions to be taken and the different roles and responsibilities of actors, leading to the prioritization of activities to test potential NbS interventions for the identified problem(s). These agreements form the basis for the ULL's shared vision of achieving positive change. It is important that the agreements are documented and include specific information about the ULL, such as vision, objectives, approach, and organizational structure. The agreements can take different forms, whether as a written Manifesto (typically a vision), a more concrete Terms of Reference describing mutual responsibilities, or even very concrete Action Plans. These agreements must be formulated in a participatory way and agreed upon by all ULL participants. The agreements







also need to provide flexibility and remain open to adjustments to accommodate changing circumstances (climate, funding, etc.) or new members, considering the dynamic nature of ULL, where continuous iterations between planning, action, and learning are expected.

Challenges in the ULL establishment process

Once the initial agreements are reached, several challenges can arise during the establishment process. These challenges, along with suggested solutions, are described below.

- ❗ **Balancing different stakeholder goals and agendas:**
- ✔ Dedicate time to foster discussions and reflections to negotiate and align goals, define problems, and select appropriate NbS.
- ❗ **Formalizing guidelines and procedures to carry on the ULL activities and testing NbS:**
- ✔ Draft documents that contain guidelines and procedures that all stakeholders have agreed upon.

Types of formal agreements

 <p>Memoranda of Understanding</p> <p>agreements that outline the terms and details of a mutual understanding or partnership</p>	 <p>Partnership Agreements</p> <p>detailed agreements defining the partners' roles, contributions, and profit-sharing arrangements</p>	 <p>Collaboration Agreements</p> <p>formal documents that outline the terms and conditions under which parties will work together on a specific project or initiative</p>	 <p>Consortium Agreements</p> <p>agreements among multiple organizations to collaborate on a common project, detailing each member's responsibilities and contributions</p>	 <p>Manifestos</p> <p>public declarations of principles, intentions, and commitments, often used to outline the vision, goals, and values of a group or organization</p>	 <p>Joint Agendas</p> <p>collaborative documents outlining shared goals, priorities, and timelines, ensuring all parties are aligned and working towards common objectives</p>
--	--	---	---	--	--

These could be documents, such as Action Plans or Terms of Reference. This should be ideally done from the start; however, these documents should remain flexible and open to be revisited and changed if necessary.

- ❗ **Securing long-term management and monitoring responsibilities:**
- ✅ The ULL nesting group should be committed to long-term action and planning. However, as a multi-stakeholder platform, ULL membership may vary across time and in relation to the NbS tested. Hence, a flexible approach to ULL needs to be taken.
- ❗ **External factors, such as political instability or changes in public administration:**
- ✅ If the Life-Lab relies solely on public administration, it can become a

weakness during political instability. Therefore, it is recommended that the nesting group includes both public and private actors, as well as community organizations to foster resilience and adaptability in the face of political changes.

- ❗ **Developing effective communication strategies:**
- ✅ Raising public awareness about environmental issues and the benefits of NbS, as well as building community by establishing a shared identity through naming, visual branding, and creating a sense of belonging among ULL members, is vital for legitimizing actions and signaling commitment to internal and external audiences.

Key messages



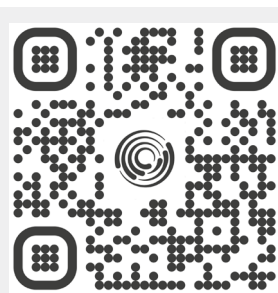
1. The ULL nesting group organizations are crucial in defining urban problems and developing NbS through their leadership and commitment to provide resources.
2. Keeping stakeholders motivated, including young people and vulnerable groups, is key to successfully developing NbS.
3. Developing effective communication strategies legitimizes actions and signals commitment to NbS among stakeholders.

References

MERCADO, G., et al. (2023). Supporting Nature-Based Solutions via Nature-Based Thinking across European and Latin American cities. *Ambio*, 1-16.

MERCADO, G., et al. (2024). Factors influencing urban NBS ULL establishment. (Forthcoming).

RANDRUP, T., et al. (2020). Moving beyond the Nature-based Solutions discourse: Introducing Nature-based Thinking. *Urban Ecosystems*, 23, 4, 919- 926.



Learn more at conexusnbs.com



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

Partners



In collaboration with all Life-Labs