**INTERLACE**
RESTORING URBAN ECOSYSTEMS
RECUPERANDO ECOSISTEMAS URBANOS

This brief presents actionable insights gained from the EU-funded **INTERLACE** project and its four city network partners, with the objective of supporting city network staff in optimizing network activities to empower local authorities to **mainstream and implement NbS**. Based on the lessons learned during the project, the paper lays out four main strategies for city network action:

# City Networks as Change Catalyzers:

## Strategies to Drive Action Around Nature-based Solutions in Municipalities

**City networks play a crucial role in promoting and supporting local authorities in the implementation of nature-based solutions (NbS).** By facilitating knowledge-sharing, peer-to-peer learning, and collective efforts, city networks enable local authorities to exchange insights, build capacities, and collaborate on NbS design, implementation, monitoring as well as maintenance.

### Aim big:
Continue strengthening the city network's existing structures and qualities that ensure that they and their members work on durable urban nature-based solutions, beyond typical short-term project cycles

### Tailor information:
Listen to members to ensure that network offers and information around urban nature (such as peer-to-peer exchanges) are relevant for and tailored to member needs.

### Work together:
Improve synergies and combine different areas of network expertise to save resources and offer high quality, joint capacity-building programmes for members to effectively promote urban nature.

### Think long-term:
Engage with other city networks and local authorities with a long-term perspective and plan for future horizons, including agreeing on shared definitions of NbS as a foundation for this collaboration.

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# City Networks as Change Catalyzers:

**Strategies to Drive Action Around Nature-based Solutions in Municipalities**

As cities worldwide grapple with escalating environmental and social challenges, the urgency to implement effective solutions has never been more critical. Harnessing the potential of nature-based solutions (NbS) offers a promising approach to mitigating these issues, fostering resilience, enhancing biodiversity, and improving the quality of urban life. In response, city networks have emerged as powerful players for leveraging municipal action around urban nature. Networking is the way forward, to upscale and connect NbS.

*Nature-based solutions* are cost-effective actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage ecosystems to effectively address social, economic and environmental challenges, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services, resilience and biodiversity benefits. Such solutions bring more diverse nature and natural features and processes into cities, landscapes and seascapes[1].

In response to an increasing demand for new and actionable knowledge around urban nature, city networks provide an important collaboration platform for cities to *exchange insights as well as build capacities and expertise* by facilitating knowledge-sharing and collective efforts. Such an exchange is particularly relevant in the context of **nature-based solutions**, which often require innovative, participatory, and locally adapted approaches to be successful in delivering their potential benefits. Cities have highlighted the value of learning from each other's successes and failures with NbS and building new skills and knowledge around NbS design, implementation, monitoring as well as maintenance as critical building blocks towards action.

This brief responds to the outlined need for innovative, participatory, and locally adapted approaches, presenting a summary of the lessons learned from the EU-funded INTERLACE project[2] in activating municipalities towards increased NbS mainstreaming and implementation. The brief is intended to assist city network staff in optimizing network activities in support of more widespread nature-based solution uptake across member cities. Four strategies for action have been identified, targeting city networks around the world seeking to improve their support for cities around NbS, local authorities contemplating network participation, and the research community considering integrating networks into their activities. These strategies are to aim big, work together, tailor information, and think long-term. Each of these strategies are described in more detail below.

[1] **https://tinyurl.com/ytwxkoxo**
[2] **https://www.interlace-project.eu**

## Aim big:

City networks have the structures, characteristics and possibilities to ensure that they and their members work on urban nature-based solutions beyond typical short-term project cycles.

## Work together:

City networks are uniquely positioned to identify and foster synergies to effectively promote urban nature.

City networks can guide municipalities to include urban nature restoration in diverse planning processes, ensure long-term funding for maintenance activities, and connect it to different topics. Due to their sustainable structures, city networks can offer key resources and support collaboration between decision-makers and citizens. City networks can also connect urban nature restoration with other topics that offer co-benefits in the network, such as adaptation to climate change, biodiversity, disaster risk management, local resilience or spatial development. In this way, urban nature can also benefit from potential funding available from other areas. The same holds true for the municipalities themselves.

Combining the different areas of expertise of various networks can help to save resources and offers high quality, joint capacity-building programmes for members across different networks. It can also help important information to stand out in times when overstretched municipal staff are overwhelmed with potential offers. Aligned or joint policy recommendations can increase the visibility of the networks' demands to integrate urban nature in policies at national, regional, European and international levels as shown by the example of the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, that articulates subnational governments in the United Nations.

## Tailor information:



City networks make sure that their offers and information around urban nature are tailored to their members' needs.

City networks are active in developing tools, guidelines and campaigns for members and can give technical advice to individual municipalities. Resources responding directly to city needs can compensate for the lack of human and time resources that municipalities often face in urban nature restoration. Networks can organise peer-to-peer exchanges to identify good practices to spread amongst members and thus avoid 'reinventing the wheel'. The exchange can be used to identify regulatory obstacles hindering NbS uptake to be included in policy recommendations. Networks can also include themselves and their members in third-party funded projects and participate in research activities to ensure the outputs are responsive to local governments' needs and contexts.

## Think long-term:



City networks support long-term engagement with their member cities.

Due to constrains in capacities and political support (lack of time, changes in staff and local elections, etc.) long-term engagement of members with the networks can be limited. Networks need to encourage politicians and administrations to communicate their membership internally and to their citizens, so that a strong sense of belonging to the network is created within the municipality. In this context, city networks can provide visibility for the accomplishments and achievements of their member cities as way to shine. Communication guidance to the cities with easy to understand and shared definitions of nature-based solutions and related concepts can improve collaboration and support increased motivation and engagement of policy makers and citizens to implement and maintain nature-based solutions.

# Collaboration is key

## Why is city network collaboration important for nature-based solution uptake?

**Shared efforts can result in more impactful outcomes, wider outreach and application.** Collaboration between cities and their networks is crucial for mainstreaming NbS in municipal policy frameworks, budgets, and activities. As more and more cities apply NbS and gain experience and knowledge in this area, the learning curve shortens and the resources required decrease. Knowledge repositories and knowledge management across networks like OPPLA´s EU Repository of Nature-Based Solutions are good examples for cooperation possibilities. By learning from one another's experiences and joining or establishing diverse city networks and/or collaborating with consultants, we can evolve our ways of working. In this way, city networks can contribute as "knowledge democratizers", as many cities do not have the budget for consulting services.

While city networks have different objectives, focus topics, and strategies, **joint offers by multiple networks can streamline the process for municipalities to identify relevant programs** in light of the often overwhelming number of potential initiatives that a city has the option to become involved in. This especially holds true in Europe, where several city networks promote their own individual webinars, events, and publications on urban nature and where there are numerous EU funding streams available around NbS. Secondly, **policy recommendations voiced by a collaboration of city networks represent a larger number of diverse municipalities and can achieve higher visibility and impact on policy**

makers at national and international levels. An example is the recently published political letter to the secretary general of the Commission, outlining the objectives of seven city networks (CEMR, Polis, Eurocities, Energy Cities, ICLEI, FEDERNE, and Climate Alliance) for the next 5-year policy cycle, underscoring the importance of staying on course to implement the European Green Deal under the current and the next mandate of the European Commission. Furthermore, city network cooperation on the global level such as the UN Conference of the Parties for the Convention on Biological Diversity or the Convention on Climate Change has been successful in integrating city agendas into global frameworks. Thirdly, **different expertise and focus areas of networks can be combined to achieve more holistic approaches and foster effective actions.** While some networks have expertise in developing tools and methodologies for local administrations, such as practical guidelines on how to include nature in the cities, others are experts in supporting the local political leaders in becoming involved in international processes, such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. At the same time, some networks focus on resilience, while others prioritize adaptation to climate change or financing. Finally, city networks are well advised to cooperate in order to make the most of their financial and human resources.

# How can city networks support municipalities to increase urban nature?

Exchange between municipalities is crucial for NbS uptake. Municipalities receive insights first-hand from other municipalities on effective strategies for addressing shared challenges and funding solutions, or other opportunities and potential resources. City networks are crucial in this context as they provide a platform for exchange, networking, and peer-to-peer learning.  To upscale the impact of NbS and share lessons learned and insights with even more municipalities than those directly participating, **city networks can capture the knowledge in easy to understand and visually appealing formats to share with all members.**  In particular, the **identification of good practices** that can be adapted to local contexts to support NbS mainstreaming amongst all members can help to avoid misplaced efforts to 'reinvent the wheel' or 'learn by failure'. Inter-city exchanges also enable networks to **identify regulatory obstacles that hinder NbS uptake, as well as policy demands from their members.** This is important for city networks lobbying for the integration of NbS in policies on national and international levels.

Municipalities create innovative solutions that need to be implemented in diverse contexts. Besides knowledge management around practices, active networking is critical for sharing and obtaining feedback, reacting, and applying adapted measures. For this, the different municipal teams need to be connected.  Therefore, **network community management** is a crucial task that requires time, vision, dedication, and maintenance of contacts, so newcomers can quickly get oriented, and the network can benefit and continuously grow.

Networks also support municipalities in the uptake of NbS by **developing tools and guidelines tailored to their target group.** One example is the "Renaturing Pathways" game (part of UCLG's Resilience Learning Modules), which can foster discussion among city officials and other stakeholders on what types of NbS can help tackle specific challenges in their city, and how they need to be part of comprehensive strategies integrated into the local government's overall policies and plans. **City networks can also be part of NbS research**, providing the scientific community with information about the municipalities' needs and perspectives, and ensuring that the results are applicable to the local context. To a lesser extent, **city networks give direct technical support**, for example with regards to the elaboration of municipal adaptation or heating and cooling plans. This is due to the sheer number of members in a network compared to the limited number of staff working in the city networks.

Some city networks have the capacity to **develop NbS project proposals and apply for third-party funding from national or international funding bodies**, such as the European Union. In this case, their network members are either involved in the projects directly and thereby receive technical advice and additional funds directly, or the project results are validated and disseminated with all the network members to give them increased access to valuable resources. In INTERLACE, for example, the six INTERLACE cities are given technical advice on how to improve the governance of restorative NbS in their administrations and staff costs are compensated. Additionally, INTERLACE developed the Urban Governance Atlas (UGA), showcasing over 250 good practice policy instruments supporting nature-based solutions and ecosystem restoration from around the world. City network members of the INTERLACE city network partners had the opportunity to include their policy instruments in the UGA and gain recognition and visibility, as well as learn from the examples provided by other cities.

Sometimes city networks support the uptake of NbS in a more indirect manner, namely by **giving external legitimacy**. As city networks are recognized as entities with expertise by local politicians, administrations, and citizens, a city network's approval of NbS friendly policies and measures can promote the uptake of these within municipalities.
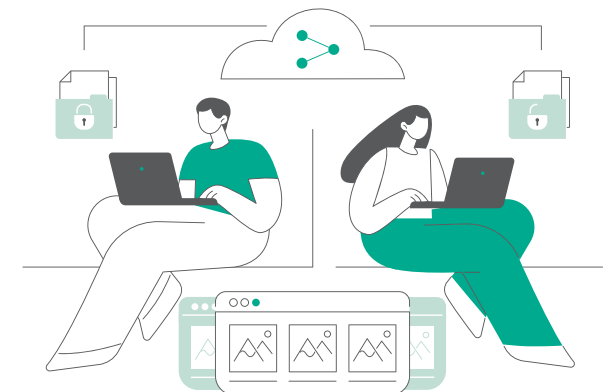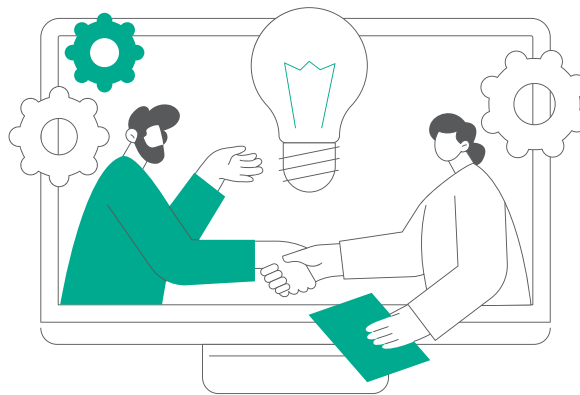
# What challenges and solutions exist for city-to-city network collaboration around urban nature restoration?

**Cities need capacities to engage meaningfully in city networks**. The lack of time available within municipalities for active participation in networks is a challenge to achieving the outlined potential positive impacts. This is especially true regarding the topic of nature restoration, which often does not rank highly on municipal agendas and is frequently under-staffed or under-financed. Especially in this case, **good practices, tools, and other resources provided by the networks can be very beneficial and complement the scarce resources of the municipalities themselves.** City networks have financial constraints as they need resources to function and the resources come from member cities, donor contracts, or projects and are, to some degree, in competition with each other to attract members and apply for the same restricted funding opportunities.

Therefore, it is important for city networks to be transparent and clearly communicate the objective, time needed, and other commitments of offers such as webinars, guidelines and peer-to-peer exchanges. City networks are also advised to ensure that their offers correspond to the needs of members in terms of content as well as format and language. **Through effective policy work, city networks can in turn support the mainstreaming of urban nature restoration and give it a higher level of priority on the municipal and supra-municipal agendas,** which would mean

more availability of human and financial resources. For example, the city of Berlin launched the Berlin Urban Nature Pact with support from the city network ICLEI. This is a pact "by cities, for cities", an initiative by a number of cities building on and partnering with the Edinburgh Process in an ongoing, comprehensive consultation process for local and regional authorities around the world that are ready to lead the transition towards implementation of bold biodiversity action.

In the CELAC region, these challenges are further exacerbated, as changes in local governments are often accompanied by changes in local administrations. This makes it difficult to create a continuous working relationship between municipal staff and city networks. City networks can minimize the negative effects of this by **supporting the administration and the local politicians in communicating their network membership and its advantages internally with the local administration and externally with the citizens.** This can improve long-term engagement of the administration, the politicians, and the public with the network's goals.

Another challenge for city networks is to give continuity to activities started in urban nature restoration projects. It can happen that activities are discontinued because once the projects are over, the funding ends. One way to minimize this is for city networks to **identify key areas in which they have expertise beyond project cycles** and reserve financial resources for these areas. Another recommendation is to **connect urban nature restoration with other topics that are important in the network**, such as adaptation to climate change, biodiversity, disaster risk management, or as part of spatial development. The same can be done in the member cities. Here municipalities are advised to try to include urbane nature restoration in diverse planning processes.

In the CELAC region the support system is different. The development financing is more dependent on philanthropies that often **do not see local governments as their target group**. In addition, the long-standing networks in the region have seen NbS appearing and disappearing according to political circumstances. Therefore, a step change from siloed, project-based **thinking towards an integrated, systemic, and stakeholder-led approach** to NbS planning, design, and investment has been shown as criteria for success.

# Outlook and opportunities

Joint efforts among city networks can lead to more impactful outcomes, better policy influence, and more efficient resource use. Addressing issues like limited municipal capacities, financial constraints, and the need for continuity in NbS projects requires transparent communication, effective policy work, and integrating NbS with other urban priorities.

City networks can drive transformative change by supporting NbS implementation, fostering collaboration, and inspiring sustainable urban development through joint initiatives like the Cities Talk Nature Community of Practice. Even with limited resources, city networks and municipalities can give urban nature restoration a substantial push in local agendas and inspire transformative actions towards more sustainable, green, and inclusive cities.

# Acknowledgements

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