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RESTORING URBAN ECOSYSTEMS
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Locally rooted, globally connected

Lessons from Europe-Latin America knowledge exchanges in a transdisciplinary research project

Deliverable 5.8

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Executive summary

This publication captures key lessons learned from the EU-funded INTERLACE project, which brought together a consortium of cities, researchers, and stakeholders from Europe and Latin America to promote the use of nature-based solutions (NbS) for urban ecosystem restoration. Spanning six cities across both regions, INTERLACE fostered collaboration, the co-creation of solutions and mutual learning to address shared challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and urban sustainability.

Through its transdisciplinary and international approach, INTERLACE demonstrated the importance of tailoring solutions to local contexts while balancing the need for comparability across regions. The project underscored that while cities face similar challenges globally, solutions must be adapted to unique governance structures, socio-cultural contexts, and environmental conditions.

The publication is organized into eight chapters that bring together the INTERLACE project's lessons and insights on fostering cross-regional collaboration, promoting inclusive knowledge exchange, and advancing NbS. The two introductory chapters present the values and practices that defined the project's collaborative culture. Chapter 1 introduces the conceptual framework of NbS, examining its varied applications across the two regions. Chapter 2 reflects on the balance of leadership between Europe and Latin America and the mechanisms that cultivated trust, inclusivity, and adaptability across the consortium.

Chapters 3 and 4 investigate the different facets of the project's action-research work. Chapter 3 delves into the project's strategies for navigating working between cultures and in complex socio-political landscapes in a sensitive and mindful manner. It emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, mutual learning, and culturally sensitive approaches.

Chapter 4 focuses on the project's efforts to co-create tailored solutions with partner cities. It illustrates the significance of leveraging local knowledge and adapting frameworks to specific governance, social, and environmental contexts.

Chapters 5–7 focus on the different aspects of collaboration, exchange, and cooperation present in the project. Chapter 5 presents the lessons gained from the city partnerships and knowledge exchange activities. It highlights how the collaborative formats, such as city pairings and regular City Focal Point meetings, enabled mutual learning and innovation. Chapter 6 discusses the role of regional and global city networks in amplifying the project's reach and impact. It explains how these networks supported capacity-building, peer learning, and advocacy for sustainable urban development. Chapter 7 reflects on the human connection as a key element of project success. The chapter underscores how in-person meetings and site visits strengthened trust, collaboration, and mutual understanding, enriching the co-creation process.

Chapter 8 examines the logistical challenges and solutions in coordinating a multilingual, transdisciplinary project. It highlights practical measures such as real-time translation, flexible communication tools, and inclusive document-sharing systems to foster equitable participation. Drawing on interviews, surveys, and practical case studies, this document provides actionable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers navigating the complexities of transdisciplinary, international research projects focused on urban nature. The lessons learned from INTERLACE serve as a practical guide for fostering effective collaboration across diverse cultural and institutional contexts to enable creation of research results that foster more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments.

Introduction

The INTERLACE project brought together representatives of local governments, research institutes, city networks and other organisations across Europe and Latin America. The objective of the project was to tackle the shared challenge of restoring urban ecosystems by fostering increased knowledge and capacities around restorative nature-based solutions (NbS). By fostering collaboration across continents between the project partners, INTERLACE sought to bridge gaps between scientific research and practical application, ensuring that local contexts of the six partner cities shaped and informed the NbS and wider resources developed within the project.

At the heart of INTERLACE was a commitment to co-creation, inclusivity, and adaptability (see Chapter 4). Recognizing the diversity of governance structures, socio-economic realities, and cultural perspectives across its partner cities, the project adopted an agile, transdisciplinary approach to knowledge exchange and co-creation of solutions - with a focus on user-driven development of the project's products. This ensured that each city could benefit from the project's insights and contribute to a wider understanding of how NbS can drive urban resilience and sustainability.

This report captures the key lessons learned, challenges faced, and successes achieved throughout the project. It reflects on how INTERLACE facilitated knowledge exchange across regions, tailored frameworks to local needs, and strengthened partnerships to foster long-term collaboration. It focuses primarily on the cooperation between the project partners - as opposed to exchanges with stakeholders external to the project, that were also facilitated by INTERLACE. The publication is not only a testament to the power of cross-regional cooperation, but also a guide for practitioners and researchers aiming to navigate the complexities of implementing NbS in varied urban contexts and foster knowledge exchange within a cross-cultural and particularly transdisciplinary projects.

Image 1: INTERLACE's first in-person consortium meeting in Costa Rica in May 2022.

Image 2: Mamey Park represents an important element of green infrastructure of Portoviejo, Ecuador, one of INTERLACE's project sites.

1. Nature-based Solutions in Europe and Latin America

Figure 1: NbS definition adopted by the United Nations Environment Assembly in 2022

The potential of NbS to tackle global challenges has never been more relevant. With the growing threats of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, exacerbated by pollution and urban sprawl, there is an urgent need to rethink how we modify ecosystems, utilize their benefits, and protect against natural disasters.

NbS is an umbrella term bringing together a variety of interventions and approaches that involve harnessing natural ecosystem processes to address different societal challenges. As the term is quite broad and all-encompassing, it can be viewed and understood differently, depending on the user's disciplinary background and experiences (Lierop et al., 2024). Whilst the term is used in both Europe and Latin America, its application reflects distinct regional contexts and priorities: in Europe, NbS often focuses on integrating green infrastructure into urban planning and addressing policy-driven climate goals, while in Latin America, it tends to emphasize community-driven approaches and the preservation of biodiversity in rapidly urbanizing areas (Burgos et al., 2024, Gobatti, 2021). By recognizing these differences, both regions can enhance collaboration and tailor NbS strategies that are effective across varying environmental and social landscapes.

The term NbS was first used by the World Bank in 2008 and has grown in popularity in the last 10 years, with the European Commission, IUCN, and UNEA adopting their definitions of the term in 2015, 2016 and 2022 respectively (Reise et al., 2022; UNEA, 2022).

The proliferation of the concept of NbS in Europe has been initially driven by the EU Research and Innovation policy agenda on NbS and Re-Naturing Cities. With nearly 300 million EUR invested in NbS projects via the Horizon2020 research funding programme alone, the EU wanted to establish itself as a leader in “innovating with nature” to support more sustainable and resilient societies (Bulkeley et al., 2020). The European Green Deal, Europe’s flagship strategy document aimed at making the EU climate-neutral, which steered much of the EU policymaking in the years 2019-24 has firmly embedded the concept of NbS in European policy frameworks. It places NbS at the heart of its biodiversity protection and climate adaptation and mitigation efforts and integrates it across policy agendas from farming to bioeconomy (EEA, 2021). The term NbS in Europe is often used in the context of addressing urban sustainability challenges such as air pollution, biodiversity loss, and increased vulnerability to climate change impacts such as flooding and heatwaves. European cities have increasingly integrated green infrastructure into urban planning, including projects like urban forests, green roofs, and sustainable drainage systems. This approach not only enhances urban resilience to climate change but also promotes biodiversity and improves the quality of life for citizens.

As NbS continue to evolve as a global paradigm, the distinct regional approaches seen in Europe and Latin America underscore the importance of context-specific strategies. The focus on integrating NbS into institutional frameworks and urban planning present in many European examples offers valuable lessons in upscaling and promoting policy coherence. The emphasis on community-driven approaches and the incorporation of indigenous knowledge seen in many of the Latin American cases, on the contrary, highlights the importance of social inclusion and cultural relevance.

These complementary strengths present an opportunity for mutual learning and collaboration that can enrich the global application of NbS.

Looking ahead, fostering stronger connections between regional priorities and practices will be crucial in advancing the effectiveness of NbS. By leveraging the strengths of both regions, future NbS initiatives can become more inclusive, adaptable, and impactful in addressing complex urban and environmental challenges. Through sustained dialogue and knowledge exchange, regions can move beyond adapting NbS to their own contexts and work toward co-developing solutions that resonate globally while remaining deeply rooted in local realities.

As this publication will further explore, the potential of NbS lies not only in their technical application but also in their ability to foster collaboration, mutual learning, and context-sensitive innovation. Upcoming chapters delve into how these principles were realized through the co-creation of locally tailored solutions, the facilitation of cross-regional knowledge exchange between Europe and Latin America, and the development of governance instruments and participatory processes that prioritized inclusivity and adaptability. Together, these insights illustrate how NbS can be leveraged to address intersecting challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequalities while empowering cities to take ownership of sustainable urban transformations. By integrating these lessons, future initiatives can build on the foundation laid by INTERLACE and its sister project CONEXUS to create truly transformative impacts.

Image 3: Blonia Niepolomickie in Metropolia Krakowska, Poland: features like layered plantings, rain gardens, and wildlife infrastructure, including birdhouses and insect hotels, support local ecosystems while improving water retention and creating a haven for flora and fauna.

Image 4: Citizen scientists participate in a bird counting activity in CBIMA, Costa Rica

2. Fostering "the INTERLACE spirit"

INTERLACE was an international, transdisciplinary action research project about urban ecosystem restoration with NbS, funded by the European Commissions' HORIZON2020 research programme. The project, running in years 2020-2024, brought together partner organisations from 10 countries in Latin America and Europe. The partner organisations included research institutions, local governments, city networks and communication experts.

Already as the project was being designed, and the project consortium was being brought together, we sought to balance the roles and responsibilities in the project between the two regions. In doing so, we aimed at combining knowledge, experiences, insights and approaches from both regions to inform the project's activities. Each of the project's six Work Packages (WPs) had dual leadership, with one co-lead based in Europe and the other in Latin America. This balanced leadership structure extended to the project's steering group, ensuring a 50:50 representation of both regions. Consequently, all activities – ranging from agile cooperation and research methods to governance, monitoring, assessment, communication, networking, and even project management – were shaped by insights from both European and Latin American perspectives.

The project's Advisory Board, which also formed part of the project's Steering Group, included experts from both regions - including from countries other than the ones directly involved in the project. The same applied to the reviewers that accompanied the project's review rounds. This was to ensure that the external feedback we have received throughout the project aligned INTERLACE's work with regional priorities in both areas – all with the goal of making the results more relevant and actionable in different contexts.

The project's engagement with cities was similarly balanced. INTERLACE included six city partners: three in Europe (Granollers, Spain; Chemnitz, Germany; Metropolia Krakowska, Poland) and three in Latin America (Envigado, Colombia; Portoviejo, Ecuador; and CBIMA, Costa Rica). These cities represented a diverse group of small and medium-sized urban areas, including peripheral cities like Envigado and Granollers, intermediary cities like Chemnitz and Portoviejo, and associations of smaller municipalities near major urban centers, such as Metropolia Krakowska and CBIMA. Each of the cities collaborated closely with a Knowledge Broker – a local scientific or research partner based in their respective countries – who helped facilitate the integration of research insights into practical, locally relevant solutions.

Four city networks played an active role in INTERLACE: Climate Alliance in Europe; FLACMA in Latin America, UNGL, a national-level city network in Costa Rica, and UCLG, a global city network with a wide-reaching membership base. This combination of regional and global city networks was crucial for broadening the project's outreach, allowing INTERLACE to disseminate its findings and engage municipalities not only within Europe and Latin America but to a smaller extent also across the globe. The involvement of these networks enabled the project to connect with a range of cities in both regions, amplifying the impact and relevance of its results (see Chapter 6: Engaging city networks in knowledge exchange process).

Image 5: INTERLACE's Steering Group included a balanced composition of experts from Europe and Latin America

Image 6: A "family photo" of representatives of INTERLACE's six partner cities.

Image 7: Urban nature in Envigado, one of INTERLACE's six partner cities

Image 8: The project sought to create opportunities to foster inclusive dialogue, mutual respect and equitable co-creation in its transdisciplinary international consortium.

Similarly, the communication experts involved in the project, Oppla and WWF Colombia, played a vital role in ensuring that the knowledge generated and shared within INTERLACE reached diverse audiences effectively, at both local and regional levels. At the local level, the communication partners accompanied the development of citizen engagement programmes to ensure they were tailored to each city's contexts and engagement objectives. At the regional and global level, the two organisations facilitated the dissemination of project outputs and resources across European and Latin American networks, and ensured that the project's messages resonated with audiences in both regions. A strategic decision has been made to create the INTERLACE Hub as a platform to share the results of the project. This was proposed as an alternative to solely relying on Oppla's existing NbS knowledge repository, which, while widely used in Europe, was designed primarily with a European audience in mind and could be considered Europe-centric. One of the major legacies of the project is the creation of **Naturaleza Transformativa**, an NbS portal tailored specifically to the CELAC region, jointly developed by Oppla and the Humboldt Institute. This platform also includes major outputs of the INTERLACE Hub and replaced it after the INTERLACE project ended in March 2025.

Beyond seeking to balance the involvement and leadership of partners from Europe and Latin America, the project sought to foster an atmosphere of trust, inclusion, transparency and cultural sensitivity. As will be explained in the following chapters, this was achieved among others by organising regular meetings in various constellations; creating a number of online platforms for collaboration, including a fully open document structure; providing English-Spanish translation for the majority of project meetings and written communication; developing and following an agile research methodology; and creating opportunities to foster warm, personal connections between colleagues working on the project. Figure 2 "Fostering the INTERLACE spirit" seeks to synthesise the key elements that fostered the open, respectful and inclusive spirit of cooperation within the project.

Figure 2: Fostering "the INTERLACE Spirit"

How to cultivate an equitable and just learning environment across cultural contexts within a project consortium? According to the various feedback rounds, reflection exercises and formal and informal conversations conducted within the project, many of the project partners appreciated the open, respectful and inclusive spirit of cooperation within the project. This spirit was often informally referred to in the consortium as the "INTERLACE spirit.". Whilst the project did not have a formal code of conduct, here are some of the principles and approaches that were informally followed throughout the project to foster such a spirit of respectful and equitable collaboration:

1. Balanced and inclusive leadership structure:
The co-leadership model, where each work package was jointly led by European and Latin American partners, ensured equitable representation and fostered collaboration across regions. This dual coordination structure allowed partners to learn from each other, share responsibilities, and bring regional insights to project activities.

2. Trust and ownership:
Trust in partners to take initiative and deliver results fostered a sense of ownership and commitment across the consortium.

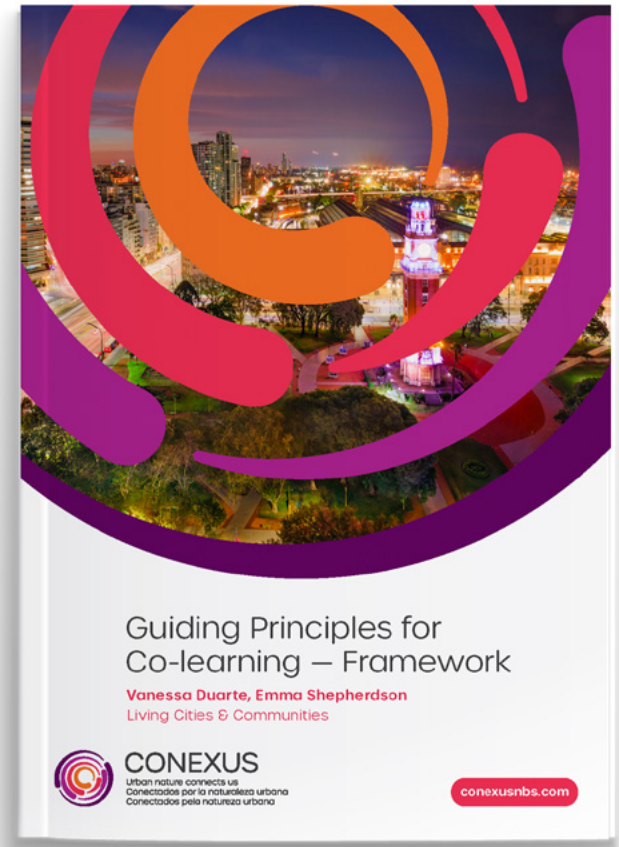
3. Transparency:
Transparent processes, accessible shared documents, and bilingual communication ensured that partners felt included and informed. This culture of openness fostered mutual trust and supported the development of a well-informed, collaborative project consortium.

4. Frequent, inclusive communication:
Regular meetings between Work Package leads and interactive City Focal Point sessions enabled systematic knowledge sharing and collaborative problem-solving. Bilingual communication in English and Spanish in both small and large meetings reinforced a sense of belonging for all partners, ensuring language barriers did not exclude anyone. Inside Work Packages, frequent meetings between European and Latin American partners working together on project tasks helped to align thinking and create shared understanding.

5. Flexible and adaptive management:
The project's agile methodology provided the foundation for iterative planning, flexible adjustments, and responses to challenges, which allowed the team to adapt to evolving needs and changing external and internal factors.

6. Cultural sensitivity:
Cultural differences were treated as strengths rather than barriers. Efforts to understand and adapt to diverse working styles created bridges between partners and enriched project outcomes.

7. Human connection:
Creating opportunities to develop warm personal relationships played a pivotal role in the project's success. In-person meetings (once feasible post-pandemic) and shared social activities strengthened interpersonal bonds, creating trust and camaraderie that carried over into professional interactions.



Source: Duarte, V., Shepherdson, E. (2024), **Guiding Principles for Co-Learning - Framework**

Figure 3: CONEXUS - Guiding principles for co-learning

INTERLACE had a sister project – funded under the same funding call and following the same objectives – that developed its activities in parallel to INTERLACE and brought together a transdisciplinary consortium of partners from across Europe and Latin America. Based on its learnings, the CONEXUS project developed five Guiding Principles for Co-Learning: a framework that aims to inform knowledge exchange for co-learning with international, transdisciplinary research for sustainable development in cities:

1. Mutual learning:
Balancing learning directions to avoid one-way knowledge transfer promotes equitable exchanges across disciplines, sectors, and geographies.

2. Context-based learning (local knowledge):
Incorporating local knowledge and ensuring that learning is sensitive to the social, environmental, and political contexts of the regions involved allows for creation of more effective local solutions.

3. Citizen involvement/ownership:
Actively involving civil society, marginalized groups, and local communities in the co-production of knowledge is essential to ensure ownership and inclusivity in the learning process.

4. Gender equality:
Addressing gender and intersectional inequalities within co-learning spaces is key to ensuring that solutions and governance structures empower underrepresented groups.

5. Openness and inclusiveness:
Creating welcoming, participatory spaces that respect diverse cultural perspectives ensures that all participants can contribute meaningfully regardless of background or experience.

The five guiding principles developed by CONEXUS align closely with the approaches taken in INTERLACE and provide additional context for the reflections in this publication. They emphasize the importance of equitable, inclusive, and context-sensitive processes in transdisciplinary collaboration. Together, the insights from both projects underscore the value of co-learning and mutual exchange in addressing urban challenges. These principles offer a foundation for future initiatives to build effective partnerships and advance sustainable urban development in diverse contexts.

3. Navigating cultural and knowledge differences in NbS research

NbS researchers work alongside communities and stakeholder groups to address environmental challenges while uncovering their connections to societal issues. These collaborations aim to empower diverse groups and ensure that NbS deliver equitable benefits across society (Øian et al., 2021). Central to this effort is achieving context sensitivity (as also highlighted in the CONEXUS principle on context-based learning), which involves tailoring solutions to the environmental and cultural nuances of each region, enhancing their relevance and encouraging local adoption. This approach requires moving away from universal strategies toward flexible, locally adapted ones. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive dialogue spaces that embrace diverse perspectives — similar to the suggestion prescribed by the CONEXUS principle on fostering openness and inclusiveness.

The INTERLACE project placed a strong emphasis on context-sensitive research outcomes, ensuring that its initiatives were thoughtfully designed to adapt to local conditions. This approach shaped activities such as collaborations with city partners, co-creati on of deliverables, co-learning initiatives, and city exchange formats, as explained in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Focusing on context sensitivity facilitates knowledge exchange and innovation by weaving together varied practices and insights, resulting in hybrid solutions with broader applicability. Additionally, adapting to language and cultural differences to reflect local priorities ensures that NbS outcomes align with local values and needs.

Building on this foundation, this section provides an overview of the experiences and insights gathered by project partners in achieving context sensitivity within an NbS research project.

Unpacking the NbS umbrella:

Diverse understandings across contexts

As explained in Chapter 1, NbS is an umbrella concept encompassing related ideas such as green infrastructure, ecosystem services or ecosystem-based adaptation (see Figure 4). The previously-outlined origins of the term, initially developed through international efforts led by institutions like the World Bank and IUCN and then heavily supported by the European Commission, highlight a tension between universal frameworks and the need for localized approaches (Burgos et al., 2024).

Figure 4: Different concepts related to the umbrella-term of nature-based solutions

- Ecosystem-based approaches / adaptation / mitigation / disaster risk reduction
- Green / blue infrastructure
- Working with nature
- Renaturing (urban areas) / rewilding (landscapes)
- Green building, façade, roof and wall
- (Urban) park / forest / river / lake / wetland
- Green corridors / areas / spaces / fields
- Community gardens / allotments
- Flood management / water management
- Sustainable urban drainage systems, rain gardens, natural water retention measures
- Integrated landscape / coastal / rainwater management
- Ecosystem / nature / stream / river / etc restoration
- Nature and biodiversity conservation; protected area management
- Ecosystem services
- Sustainable urban development / planning
- Green / resilient city
- (Urban) reforestation / urban canopy cover / urban tree cover

Source: Davis, M & Burgos, N .2022. **Urban Governance Atlas: Guidance on how to enter a policy instrument**

This dynamic is particularly evident in CELAC, a region with diverse environmental, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. A key aspect of unpacking the NbS concept lies in recognizing that in CELAC, many ongoing efforts and traditional practices aligning with NbS principles are not formally identified as such. These initiatives are often embedded within technical and governmental spheres, such as climate change adaptation, disaster risk management, and urban planning. Additionally, the region's deep-rooted connection to nature — shaped by cultural and spiritual values - stands in contrast to the predominantly ecological and technical framing of NbS in European contexts.

Interviews with researchers and practitioners involved in the INTERLACE project provided further insights into these dynamics. Participants noted that the global NbS discourse typically emphasizes standardized metrics and approaches, which may overlook the ecological, social, and cultural particularities of regions like Latin America. As one interviewee explained: "At the end of the day, the importance of nature, we both have it in Latin America and Europe; we are just exchanging knowledge on how to do it better or more cost-effectively."

Unpacking the NbS umbrella also involves challenging technocratic interpretations that risk excluding local voices. The term itself, described by some as "Europe-driven," can sometimes clash with diverse worldviews that do not separate humans from nature and do not see nature as a solution. One participant observed: "In indigenous communities, the term NbS is seen super critically; for them, there is no separation — they are one with nature."

To address these challenges, the INTERLACE project prioritized co-creation and mutual learning. Through activities like City Focal Point meetings, field visits, and cross-regional exchanges, stakeholders began to see that NbS-like practices had been implemented long before the term existed. This process, described as “spaces of interaction, open communication, and a good attitude to help and clarify,” emphasized flexibility and respect for local contexts.

Ultimately, the origins and global adoption of NbS underscore the need for a flexible and inclusive approach. By embracing diverse interpretations and acknowledging local traditions, cultural perspectives, and knowledge systems, NbS can bridge global frameworks and local realities, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness across different socio-cultural and environmental contexts.

Navigating cultural and knowledge differences in research and implementation

Cultural sensitivity is essential for conducting research with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It involves understanding and respecting the beliefs, habits, values, and needs of the communities researchers engage with. Demonstrating cultural sensitivity requires knowledge of the group’s cultural context, effective communication, and a genuine willingness to learn and adapt (Liamputtong, 2010). During the INTERLACE project implementation, the team observed that successful partnerships require mutual respect, recognition of diverse worldviews, and the integration of traditional and scientific knowledge systems. Addressing these differences with sensitivity ensures that NbS initiatives are inclusive, context-sensitive, and locally relevant.

Image 9: Site visit during the consortium annual meeting in Envigado, Colombia. Site visits were crucial to fostering deeper understanding of the various local contexts of INTERLACE’s six city partners

Image 10: On-site stakeholder workshop and research activity in Chemnitz, Germany

To support this process, the project developed bilingual deliverables and inclusive knowledge exchange platforms, incorporating multilingual materials and resources. A notable practice was linking the Oppla NbS European repository with the newly launched **Naturaleza Transformativa**, serving as the CELAC NbS repository. This step was a significant advancement in highlighting the importance of accessible resources for promoting cross-regional cooperation. Furthermore, translation efforts ensured that all participants could actively engage in discussions and decision-making processes. Below, we present key considerations and lessons learned from the project's implementation:

- **Recognizing knowledge asymmetries and language barriers:** Addressing knowledge asymmetries and language barriers requires intentional efforts to facilitate mutual learning and engagement. Throughout the INTERLACE project, it became clear that European and CELAC stakeholders needed time and a diversity of collaborative spaces to actively learn from each other's governance practices, challenges, and cultural contexts to achieve shared goals. As a lesson learned, it can be mentioned that meaningful collaboration takes time and requires a sustained effort, mainly on aspects such as simultaneous translation of meetings, deliverable translation and bilingual communications.

- **Investing in trust:** Trust is the foundation of participatory processes and successful collaboration. Stakeholders are more likely to engage meaningfully when they feel respected and included. As a lesson learned in this respect for the INTERLACE project, it can be mentioned the value of employing local facilitators or "knowledge brokers" that can effectively bridge potential communication gaps between researchers and city partners. The City Focal Point exchanges (see Chapter 5) was an example of a space for open dialogue, where city partners built trust and developed mutual understanding. Demonstrating commitment to shared goals is essential for fostering trust. The agenda for these recurring dialogue sessions was always pre-agreed, but flexible enough to adapt to the evolving priorities of the project. These efforts ensure that discussions are inclusive and productive, paving the way for trust-based long-term cooperation.

- **Promoting reflexivity in research:** Reflexivity is crucial in addressing the inherent power dynamics of bi-regional collaborations. Researchers must continually evaluate how their positionality and institutional priorities shape project outcomes. This means that teams should incorporate regular opportunities for critical reflection, such as facilitated workshops or journaling, to identify and address biases. In the case of INTERLACE, these reflective spaces were typically held during the Annual Project Meetings, where a blend of content-focused sessions with cultural activities and reflection time proved effective in fostering deeper understanding and personal reflectivity. Moreover, transparent decision-making processes are essential for ensuring equitable partnerships. In the INTERLACE project, the establishment of an advisory group allowed for regular consultations with external experts, promoting informed decision-making. In addition, communication challenges were being addressed at various levels, including WP lead meetings, city exchange meetings, and routine coordination sessions as ongoing efforts to improve clarity and collaboration.

Moving from solution export to co-created solutions

When implementing NbS, it is essential to consider local socio-cultural, historical, and economic contexts to ensure effective and just solutions. This means engaging with diverse stakeholder groups, integrating culturally grounded practices and knowledge systems, and creating space for local perspectives that challenge global narratives. Co-creation emphasizes the collaboration of stakeholders and can be considered as a systematic process of creating new solutions with people (not for them), involving citizens and communities in policy and service development (Naumann et al., 2023). The implementation of co-creation processes presents an opportunity to design context-sensitive research work from the beginning, fostering shared ownership of goals and processes where all stakeholders contribute equally to defining priorities, methodologies, and evaluation frameworks. A good practice example of hands-on co-creation within the INTERLACE project occurred as part of the co-creation process for NbS governance instruments. To ensure context sensitivity, a range of methods were integrated into the co-creation process (see Figure 5).

Image 11: Creating opportunities to experience local culture was instrumental in fostering deeper understanding of the different contexts being studied in the project

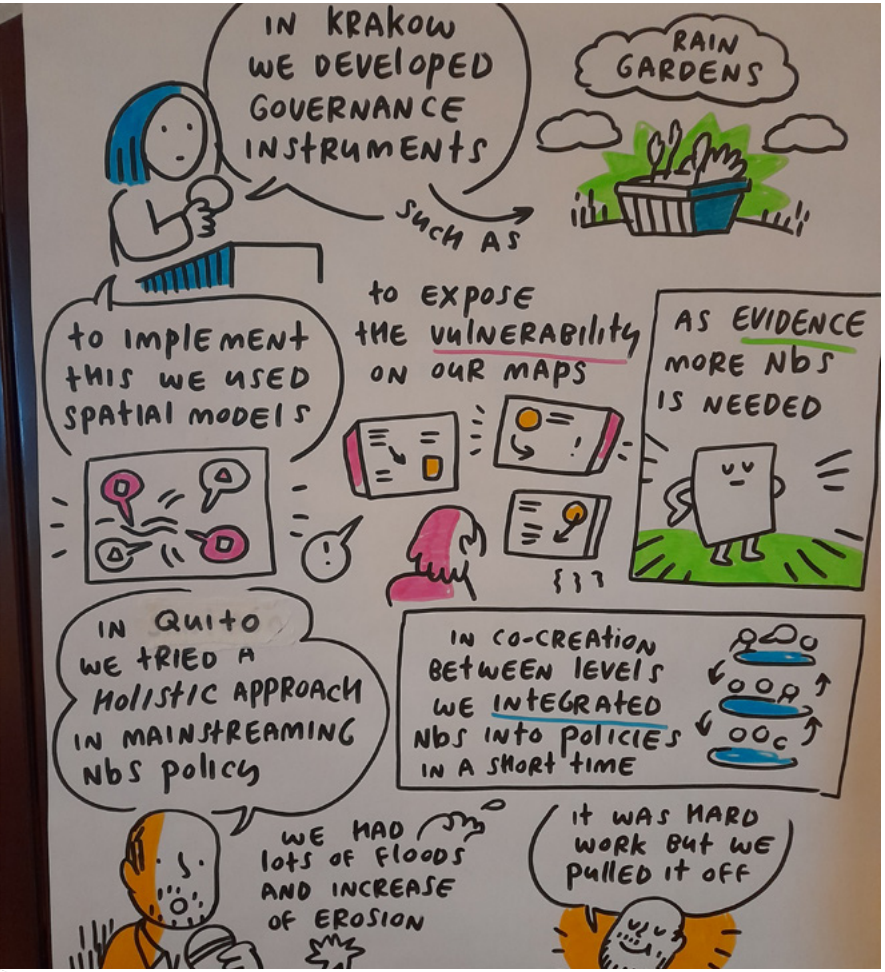


Image 12: Visual reporting from the Metropolia Krakowska's co-creation of governance instruments, as presented at the CLEVER Cities Final Conference in September 2023

Figure 5: Insights from co-producing governance instruments for restorative NbS in INTERLACE.

The following points summarise key insights from the co-creation of governance instruments to support NbS uptake in the project's six partner cities:

1. The importance of **stakeholder involvement** was highlighted as a key factor in the success of the governance instruments co-creation process. Balancing expert input with citizen participation was essential for maintaining the relevance and inclusivity of the co-created instruments. All the project's city partners engaged a wide range of stakeholders in the co-creation of the policy instruments, including community members, experts, municipal technicians, civil society organizations, and, in some cases, stakeholders from the private sector. This diversity enriched the co-creation process, ensuring that the policy instruments developed were relevant to the challenges of urban ecosystem restoration. Additionally, the personal commitment of administrative staff played a crucial role in ensuring the successful implementation of governance instruments.
2. Both Latin American and European cities shared a commitment to **transparency and flexibility** throughout the co-creation process. They ensured stakeholders were kept informed and were adaptable to changes, such as shifts in local authorities or delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This flexibility allowed the process to continue despite external disruptions.
3. The research team developed a range of **tools to support the co-creation process**. A central resource was the co-creation protocol, which played a crucial role in structuring and refining governance instruments, ensuring consistency and alignment throughout the policy-making process. Additional tools, such as the Urban Governance Atlas and Policy Coherence Analysis, were also used to support the co-creation efforts. The process also included a "buddy system," where researchers coordinating each task closely followed the cities' progress, offering bilateral support and facilitating access to resources and expertise from other project partners

These strategies together created a co-creation process that was both flexible and inclusive, enabling the development of context-sensitive policy instruments tailored to the unique needs of each city.

Source: Insight notes on co-producing value-added governance instruments for restorative NBS (Milestone 2.3 – English version - internal)

4. Localised approaches to transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge

An important part of INTERLACE's work was to create locally-tailored solutions to support urban ecosystem restoration in the project's six partner (peri)urban areas. The six city partners share many of the challenges related to urban ecosystem restoration but are characterised by different climates, geographies, governance structures, socio-economic characteristics as well as many of the specific challenges. Therefore, creating locally specific recommendations was essential, for the project's outputs to be relevant. At the same time, it was important for the project to synthesise the local findings into more general recommendations that could be shared with cities and stakeholders outside the project.

The locally tailored products of the project included, among others, the co-creation of governance instruments (see Figure 5); development, deployment, and testing of the project's NbS assessment framework (see Figure 6), development of citizen engagement programmes; as well as the project's work on policy mix to support private sector provision of NbS.

These processes followed a similar pathway: first, a common framework and a set of centralised resources were created at the project level. Secondly, the respective task leads created structures to work directly with each of the project's cities and their Knowledge Brokers to develop the concrete local solutions (e.g. governance instruments for each of the cities, NbS monitoring and assessment tools specific to each of the cities). In some cases, a buddy system was established – to ensure each of the cities had a "contact point" that closely guided them through the development of the local solutions. In some cases, the task leads were able to visit all the cities in- person, to conduct research or support the launch of citizen engagement programmes. Finally, we sought to synthesise the lessons learned from applying theframeworks in the local context, to provide insights that cities and researchers beyond INTERLACE could learn from and replicate or apply themselves.

It is important to remark that it is possible to discern some EU-CELAC regional patterns. For example in the context of the INTERLACE city partners, European cities were working within highly regulated environments, where NbS must be aligned with existing policies and formal processes. Some of the CELAC cities, on the other hand, operated in less formalised but more flexible contexts, where gaps in governance and data presented both challenges and opportunities for innovation. More specifically, each of the six cities differ in terms of governance frameworks, institutional capacities and socio-cultural context. Therefore, it was at the heart of INTERLACE's approach to ensure a flexible, tailored, localised approach to designing and implementing solutions in each of the project's cities.

Image 13: Locally specific approaches aim to take into account the socio-economic, governance and environmental context of the studied sites, including understanding and catering to the needs of the local population. The photo shows a young girl enjoying the Las Vegas park in Portoviejo, Ecuador.

To this end, the project was designed to not only respect the place-based knowledge held by local actors and embedded in each of the cities' contexts — but to treat this knowledge as the main asset. Such an approach, also highlighted by the CONEXUS principle on **context-based learning,** was essential to ensuring that each of the INTERLACE city partners in Europe and Latin America could benefit from solutions that were both theoretically robust and practically applicable. This was particularly important in addressing immediate needs while maintaining a broader perspective on governance frameworks, and each cities' goals and objectives.

Approach to developing locally-tailored solutions

The INTERLACE's co-creation approach supported by the project's Agile Methodology ensured governance solutions were relevant, actionable, and aligned with the specific needs and realities of each city. The following principles and building blocks helped to operationalise the approach:

- **Needs-based flexibility:** throughout the project, the cities were given freedom to choose and work on solutions that appealed to them and best fit into their local context. This included identifying specific goals and challenges faced by each city at the beginning of the project, or adapting the concrete outputs to the cities' context and current needs (e.g. integrating developed governance instruments into existing strategies or focusing on the specific modules of the NbS Assessment framework).

- **Agile, iterative methods:** the Agile Principles were followed throughout INTERLACE in both formal and informal ways. On the one hand, development of some products followed the **Agile Methodology**, developed for and adapted to the project context, to ensure the end users are involved in the process and their needs reflected in the products. On the other hand, the project's objectives and goals were in some instances being revised to account for the reality of the six cities to ensure the work that is being conducted in the project is actually integrated into the local frameworks and therefore fit for purpose.

- **Citizen involvement:** similarly to CONEXUS (cf. the CONEXUS principle on citizen involvement and ownership) INTERLACE placed significant emphasis on engaging civil society and local communities in the co-production of knowledge and solutions. By involving citizens directly in participatory processes, such as workshops and community-driven initiatives, The project ensured that solutions were inclusive, fostered local ownership, and reflected the needs and aspirations of those most affected by urban challenges.

- **Knowledge brokers:** the knowledge brokers were crucial in bridging the project's research objectives with local contexts, needs and realities, ensuring that solutions were relevant and accessible to local stakeholders. This included the project's formal Knowledge Brokers (scientific partners accompanying each of the city partners) but also individuals that acted as de facto knowledge brokers for specific processes (especially in case of the technically complex NbS assessment framework) or colleagues that acted as "regional knowledge brokers" throughout the project. These included Latin American colleagues based in Europe and vice versa that helped bridge the different contexts, challenges, and ways of working predominant in each of the regions.

- **Balancing generalization and tailored approaches:** One of the core challenges was balancing the need for comparable outputs across cities with the requirement to tailor solutions to specific contexts. While the diversity of cities created a rich foundation for learning, it also complicated efforts to standardize processes. The project addressed this by developing flexible frameworks (e.g. the modular NbS assessment framework) which could be adapted to cities' varying needs and capacities. As one partner reflected, "It's about creating tools that are strong enough to guide cities, but adaptable enough to meet their unique challenges."

Figure 6: INTERLACE modular NbS Assessment Framework

The INTERLACE Modular Assessment Framework, summarised in **Planning, Designing and Monitoring of Nature-based solutions** (Langemeyer et al., 2025) was designed to support cities in transitioning toward sustainable, inclusive, and resilient urban ecosystems. This framework emphasizes a co-creative, participatory approach central to INTERLACE. Developed centrally by leveraging a wide range of research insights and best practices, the framework is structured around flexible, adaptable processes that recognize the unique governance contexts, socio-cultural dynamics, and institutional capacities of individual cities.

The creation of the framework started with a centralized design phase, where key methodologies and tools were carefully defined as the framework's foundation. Once designed, the framework was applied locally in the partner cities through a co-creation process that deeply involved city stakeholders, reflecting their unique challenges, priorities, and institutional contexts.

In practice, the local implementation phase was dynamic and adaptable. Cities could tailor specific components of the framework to align with their immediate needs and capacities.

For example, some cities focused on developing monitoring strategies to track the ecological and social impacts of NbS, such as biodiversity improvements and community participation, while others used the spatial vulnerability assessment to identify areas most at risk from climate impacts, such as urban heat islands or flooding, to prioritise NbS interventions. This co-creation process often involved innovative approaches such as participatory workshops and iterative testing of proposed solutions. The knowledge brokers supported the process by facilitating communication between scientific and local actors and ensuring that the framework's tools were practically relevant in each of the cities' contexts.

Crucially, this local implementation phase highlighted the importance of flexibility within a shared structure. Cities were able to reinterpret and adapt the tools to their specific contexts, allowing the framework to address their distinct socio-political, cultural, and environmental challenges effectively. The outcomes of this local implementation were then synthesized and brought back to the central level, where they informed the refinement of the framework. This iterative process not only validated the framework's applicability but also enriched it with diverse, grounded insights, ensuring its continued relevance and adaptability for other urban contexts.

Figure 7: Lessons learned from knowledge co-production in a transdisciplinary, international project

The following lessons learned that may be applicable to similar international, transdisciplinary projects seeking to develop localised solutions were extracted based on interviews with colleagues that led the development of INTERLACE's locally-tailored products and are illustrated by the interview quotes.

Co-create solutions to strengthen ownership and outcomes: Directly involve city partners in developing governance instruments, tools, and strategies. Co-creation fosters ownership and ensures outputs are relevant and actionable. Use feedback loops and iterative processes to adapt solutions to local realities. Pair cities with mentors (see the "buddy approach" described in Figure 5) to ensure adequate, responsive support and help cities develop solutions at their own pace.

"The cities weren't just recipients — they were co-creators. This ownership made the solutions more meaningful and actionable."

Image 14: Co-creating the local NbS assessment framework in discussion with key stakeholders in CBIMA, Costa Rica

Tailor solutions to local needs and contexts: Engage cities early to understand their specific governance structures, priorities, and capacities. Develop flexible tools that can adapt to where cities are in their policy cycle and NbS implementation. Ensure solutions address real local needs, rather than imposing predefined frameworks.

"Governance means different things in different places. In Europe, it's often formalized and structured; in Latin America, we had to adapt to more informal but equally effective processes."

Balance local customization with cross-city comparability: Develop shared tools or frameworks that provide structure while allowing for local adaptation. Pair cities facing similar challenges or with complementary experiences to encourage meaningful exchanges. Use tools that document processes and outcomes in ways that can be compared and shared across contexts.

"It was a challenge to balance tailored approaches with the need for comparability. Tools like the Urban Governance Atlas helped provide a common framework while allowing cities to adapt solutions to their local realities.

Promote inclusivity through cultural sensitivity and communication: Plan for multilingual communication and provide tools (e.g., AI-based translation services, live interpretation) that support meaningful participation across regions. Allow for cultural differences in work styles - extended deliberation may be essential in some contexts, while structured approaches might suit others. Use regionally preferred communication platforms to engage stakeholders effectively. (see also Chapter 8)

"The bilingual communication and regional work styles made sure everyone was included. It showed respect for both languages and cultures."

Prioritize building trust and relationships: Start with face-to-face meetings or opportunities for personal interaction to establish trust and mutual respect. Use regular meetings to maintain communication and build a collaborative partnership. Recognize that trust is built through shared experiences and consistent dialogue, especially when working across diverse cultural contexts.

"The City Focal Point calls and in-person meetings were essential. They helped us build relationships, which was particularly important given the cultural differences. Trust doesn't come from documents - it comes from working together and understanding each other."

Embed flexibility and iteration into your process: Design processes that allow for adaptation to evolving challenges, such as political transitions, personnel changes, or external crises. Use an agile, iterative approach to refine tools and frameworks based on city feedback and experiences. Plan for delays and unexpected disruptions - buffer time and flexibility can ensure steady progress.

"An iterative process takes more time, but it produces better results. It allowed us to adjust the tools and frameworks based on what cities actually needed."

Navigate regional and cultural differences effectively: Approach differences in governance styles, processes, and engagement methods as opportunities to learn and innovate. Foster mutual respect for diverse methods - solutions may differ, but they can complement one another.

"In Latin America, the focus on community-building and social equity added dimensions we sometimes overlook in Europe, where projects are often more technically driven. It was clear that cities on both continents were innovating in their own ways. CELAC cities were using limited resources creatively, while European cities focused on policy and institutional approaches. Both had strengths we could learn from."

Image 15: Congost River, Granollers — one of the urban ecosystem restoration sites studies in INTERLACE

Be mindful of data gaps and capacity constraints: In contexts where data availability is limited, allocate resources for baseline data collection and harmonization early in the project. Be prepared to navigate fragmented data systems and provide practical solutions for closing these gaps. Recognize that political transitions can disrupt institutional memory - document processes and knowledge to ensure continuity.

"In Latin America, data was often fragmented or unavailable. We had to work creatively to fill those gaps, but it slowed things down. In Europe, the data systems were stronger, but sometimes too rigid. What is more, the loss of institutional memory during political transitions was a challenge. We realized how important it is to document processes and maintain continuity."

Leverage the role of knowledge brokers: Include knowledge brokers as active participants in both scientific and local implementation work to bridge concepts and real-world needs. Ensure they are well-versed in the project's goals and scientific frameworks to communicate effectively with city partners. Locally embedded knowledge brokers can facilitate smoother collaboration and provide essential cultural and logistical insights.

"Knowledge brokers were critical. They understood the local realities and helped bridge the gap between scientific work and city needs. In the process, we learned that it helps if knowledge brokers are deeply involved in the scientific work packages. If they're just intermediaries, the message can get lost."

5. Learning from one-another's strengths: fostering knowledge exchange with and between INTERLACE cities

Although located in six countries in two different continents, the six INTERLACE cities share many commonalities. All six are small and medium-sized cities and four of them can be characterised as peripheral cities — representing urban areas located on the edge of a larger metropolitan region, facing similar distinctive challenges. All six cities are well networked, engaging in horizontal and vertical collaboration with neighbouring municipalities and regional authorities in their desire to advance their urban greening and ecosystem restoration ambitions.

Throughout the project, the INTERLACE city partners have been in constant exchange and dialogue with each other, especially through the City Focal Point calls (all six cities meeting together) and the City Pairing process (city partners meeting in different configurations that changed throughout the project, e.g. EU-CELAC pairs, or regional groupings). These exchanges were organised in a spirit reflective of the CONEXUS principle of mutual learning: ensuring that knowledge flowed in multiple directions, fostering equitable and inclusive collaboration. Additionally, openness and inclusiveness played a crucial role providing a structured yet adaptable format that enabled cities to exchange ideas and co-create solutions based on shared challenges and opportunities. This section outlines some of the key lessons learned from the process, based on a survey and interviews conducted with city partners.

Image 16: Representatives of Granollers, Envigado and CBIMA at the INTERLACE consortium meeting in Costa Rica in 2022

Image 17: Locally rooted, globally connected: representative of Metropolia Krakowska, Poland plants a tree in Envigado, Colombia.

Organising structures for knowledge exchange between case study partners in international, transdisciplinary research project

In most of the project's meetings and activities, INTERLACE city partners were represented by the so-called City Focal Points: representatives of the municipal structures and the Knowledge Brokers, the scientific partners that accompanied each of the project cities. Regular meetings between the six City Focal Points were included in the original project design. However, as the project progressed, the importance of the meetings became increasingly more apparent. They served as a space for exchange between the six project cities, but also as an interface between the city partners and the scientific and other partners of the project. They allowed the project's scientific partners to present, explain, and discuss the upcoming research activities that were to be conducted in each of the cities. They also allowed city partners to exchange between themselves on the work they were conducting at home, share ideas, discuss approaches, and inspire each other.

The city pairing process was another key format for fostering knowledge exchange among INTERLACE city partners. Initially, all six cities were brought together to build trust and establish connections. Once these relationships were established, trans-regional pairs were formed, where each EU city was matched with a CELAC city based on shared priorities and challenges. These pairings, conducted over two six-month cycles, provided a more focused environment for mutual learning, allowing cities to explore solutions to specific challenges collaboratively. Activities ranged from joint stakeholder meetings, like those held by Metropolia Krakowska and Envigado, to creative initiatives, such as a children's art competition implemented in parallel by Chemnitz and Portoviejo. Later in the project, the format shifted to regional groups — EU cities and CELAC cities — enabling partners to delve deeper into region-specific issues and regulatory frameworks. Throughout the process, iterative feedback and regular evaluations ensured the format remained adaptive to the cities' evolving needs, reinforcing the spirit of collaboration that defined the INTERLACE project.

Key lessons learned from the exchange between INTERLACE city partners

While the sample size of cities involved in the INTERLACE project is too small to draw definitive conclusions about CELAC or EU cities as a whole, the exchanges nonetheless provided valuable opportunities for learning across and within regions. The cities discovered that while they face similar challenges, solutions must be tailored to their specific context, instead of copy-pasting approaches. Throughout the project's activities, the three CELAC cities involved in the project demonstrated highly effective community engagement techniques, emphasizing participatory activities and emotional connections to nature. In a survey conducted to inform this publication, European cities recognized the need to enhance their community outreach to include a broader and more diverse demographic and noted the ease with which Latin American cities mobilized large groups for participatory events. Some European cities sought to replicate their inclusive approaches. European cities, on the other hand, shared experiences of working within structured institutional frameworks, which posed both challenges and opportunities for systemic integration of NbS.

Image 18: INTERLACE city partners create a collage reflecting on 4 years of exchange and cooperation at the final NTERLACE consortium meeting in Barcelona, Spain.

Figure 8: Key lessons on organising structures for knowledge exchange between case study partners in international research projects

1. Enable mutual learning from shared challenges: The exchange formats employed in the project were designed to help city partners recognise and learn from shared challenges. These ranged from similar concerns over urban ecosystem degradation and climate risks to governance and technical challenges typical for small and medium-sized cities – or challenges with engaging diverse stakeholders. As in the CONEXUS project, mutual learning was fostered through structured discussions and collaborative, interactive exchange activities. Cities found value in understanding how others addressed similar obstacles, which often sparked ideas for adapting those approaches to their own contexts.

2. Space for inspiration and innovation: The above-described structures allowed city partners to inspire one another and fostered mutual understanding — by creating understanding of each other's realities, sharing innovative practices and creative approaches. Joint projects, such as the organisation of children's art competition in Chemnitz, Portoviejo and Envigado encouraged cities to adapt and replicate successful strategies, while tailoring them to their unique contexts, fostering a spirit of continuous learning.

3. Space for regional specificity: Whilst the exchange structures created space for dialogue between partners from the EU and CELAC regions, the importance of recognising and addressing regional-specific challenges was also addressed as the City Pairing process shifted to regional groupings. This approach allowed EU and CELAC cities to focus on shared regulatory frameworks, governance systems, and environmental issues. For instance, CELAC cities could delve deeper into challenges related to informal settlements and biodiversity preservation, while EU cities explored regulatory compliance and climate adaptation. This regional focus enhanced the relevance and impact of the exchanges.

4. Interface between research and practice: The ongoing opportunity for exchange between the six project cities and scientific partners created an interface between the theoretical research plans and the practical realities of urban governance, also in context of leadership and administration changes. This interface allowed the city partners to gain context to the scientific methods and approaches applied in the project, and provide feedback to researchers as they tested innovative approaches in local settings. The two-way flow of information allowed researchers to adjust their approach, helping to implement evidence-based, locally adapted solutions in the project cities.

5. Key role of Knowledge Brokers: All Knowledge Brokers played a double role in the project: on one hand, they accompanied city partners, acting as critical intermediaries between research and municipal practice. On the other, each Knowledge Broker led on or took active part in implementing the project's research activities. Their understanding of both local contexts and broader scientific methodologies enabled them to bridge knowledge gaps, foster trust, and facilitate productive collaborations. Knowledge brokers also played a vital role in identifying synergies between city partners and aligning project activities with local priorities.

6. Adapting exchange formats to evolving needs: In line with the "INTERLACE spirit" the exchange formats evolved in response to participant feedback and the evolving cooperation dynamic in the project. The city pairing process, for example, shifted from bilateral exchanges to regional groupings to better address emerging priorities, whilst the City Focal Points's frequency was adapted to current needs. This adaptability helped ensure that the formats remained relevant, engaging, and aligned with participants' expectations.

7. Combining formal and informal methods: A mix of formal (presentations, structured workshops) and informal methods (unstructured discussions, cultural exchanges) provided a clear framework for collaboration and knowledge sharing, whilst allowing participants to build personal connections and explore new ideas in a relaxed setting.

8. Reflection and feedback opportunities: Feedback loops helped refine exchange formats and ensured activities remained relevant for participants. These reflective practices also contributed to building trust and maintaining open communication among all partners.

Figure 9: Envigado's lessons from international collaboration

The following narrative outlines the key lessons and outcomes that the city of Envigado shared about their time in the project. Envigado joined the project with the aim of sharing its local experiences and learning from European approaches to governance and environmental management. Through its participation, the city improved its ability to monitor and evaluate NbS projects, explored new tools and frameworks, and built valuable international partnerships. Envigado's involvement illustrates how smaller municipalities can benefit from global exchanges to strengthen their practices and approaches.

For Envigado, the initial expectations regarding the exchange process with the European partners were focused on several key aspects. Firstly, we wanted to share our city's experiences in internal management, environmental policies and successful processes that we have implemented. This knowledge exchange also sought to explore the differences between European and Latin visions on these issues, to identify which lessons could be adapted and applied in our local reality. In addition, we hoped to learn about other forms of territorial governance and management, with a particular focus on nature-based solutions.

The idea was not only to draw inspiration from European models, but also to contribute our own perspective, fostering a mutual learning relationship that would enrich both our practices and those of European partners. In short, our expectations were to establish a collaborative dialogue to improve our environmental strategies and policies through the exchange of innovative and sustainable ideas.

Image 19: As part of their participation in INTERLACE, the city of Envigado developed a monitoring strategy for their flagship programme "Envigado Florece".

Image 20: European city partners highlighted the amount of inspiration they received from their CELAC counterparts when it comes to creative and effective approaches to community engagement.

The space provided by the INTERLACE project for exchange between cities in the Americas and Europe has been extremely valuable, both to assess local management and to find inspiration from the experiences of other regions. This exchange has shown that the gaps that might initially seem significant are not as large as perceived, and that, on the contrary, we share a common cause: nature conservation.

This type of collaboration has allowed us to see that regardless of geographical or cultural differences, we are all working towards the same goal, which strengthens our capacity to innovate and improve the management of our territories.

Beyond the exchange between cities, we especially highlight the accompaniment provided by the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research and their experience from Norway with the Green-Blue Index. Although this index has not yet been implemented in the municipality of Envigado, it has served as a great source of inspiration to promote new building policies that are currently under development. Their approach has allowed us to visualise how we could adapt these ideas to our local reality, and definitely constitutes an important reference for future implementations in the municipality. Implementing such a tool in Envigado would be key to strengthening territorial planning and the sustainability of our urban environment in the coming years.

The cultural differences, far from being barriers, actually strengthened the group, which, for four years, maintained a continuous relationship. These differences allowed us to learn from each other and further enriched the collaborative experience. Each view brought a new perspective, generating a more diverse and productive environment of exchange. This cultural diversity was undoubtedly a key factor in the collective success and growth of the project.

The four most important lessons learned by the city of Envigado in this process are the following:

Mainstreaming NbS: Prior to this project, the concept of NbS had not been used publicly in the municipality. Although strategies aligned with these solutions were already in place, they were not recognised as such. The exchange allowed Envigado to identify and recognise these strategies as NbS, giving them the importance and focus that they had not received in previous years. This has been key to understanding the impact of these solutions on the management of the territory.

Assign concrete results and products to the NbS: Another fundamental lesson was the need to give order and tangible results to the NbS. For Envigado, it was enriching to work on projects such as the management plan of the Local System of Protected Areas of Envigado (SILAPE), the Biodiversity Policy, the Water Management Board, the monitoring of the renaturalisation process "Envigado Florece" and the environmental education strategies implemented in schools. These actions led to concrete products that benefit the municipality and consolidate its commitment to the NbS.

Establish strategic relationships: The exchange also opened the door to relationships that the municipality of Envigado had never had before, with entities such as Oppla, Ecologic, NINA, Tecnalia and other partners, and especially the technical and human accompaniment of the Humboldt Institute. This process demonstrated that Envigado can build long-term alliances, not only through the INTERLACE project, but also in future meetings and collaborations with these institutions and international partners.

Learning to monitor: For many years the municipality of Envigado had been carrying out a renaturalisation process called "Envigado Florece", but no record was kept of the effectiveness of this NbS. Monitoring will be implemented for the first time in the municipality, and for the first time we will have results of biodiversity, climate comfort and citizen participation indicators.

These lessons strengthened Envigado's capacity to manage its territory in a more sustainable and collaborative way. The INTERLACE project has allowed such a small city, which occupies only 0.007% of the Colombian territory, to be recognised at an international level. Through this project, Envigado has been able to make itself known in other countries in Latin America and Europe, inspiring and motivating to continue working on solutions based on nature and the conservation of our ecosystems. This experience has been a great boost!

Image 21: Field visit in Envigado, Colombia during the Cities Talk Nature event held in November 2023. Throughout the project, 3 global and 3 regional events co-organized with city network partners brought together over 400 practitioners to exchange and learn from each of the project's city partner processes, as well as the overall INTERLACE products and results.

6. Engaging city networks in knowledge exchange processes

City networks play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and capacity-building among local and regional governments, particularly when addressing complex challenges such as implementing NbS and restoring urban ecosystems. A unique aspect of the INTERLACE project was the fact that it brought together four different city networks from Europe and the CELAC region. This allowed the project to demonstrate the unique value of such networks in advancing local action through international cooperation. This chapter highlights why and how engaging city networks in knowledge exchange processes can be meaningful and beneficial, drawing on lessons learned from the project — including those identified in the publication **"City Networks as Change Catalyzers: Strategies to Drive Action Around Nature-based Solutions in Municipalities".**

The value of city network collaboration

City networks serve as catalysts for change by facilitating collaboration and exchange among local and regional governments, fostering policy discussions among political leaders, and connecting them with partners with shared goals and challenges.

By facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges and providing tailored support, city networks empower local and regional governments to:

Scale up innovation: Networks enable cities to learn from one another's successes and failures in real-time project development, reducing the learning curve for implementing innovative solutions.

Build capacity: By co-developing, offering and sharing training, tools, and guidelines, networks help cities overcome common barriers, such as limited technical expertise or funding mechanisms for urban nature projects.

Amplify impact: Collaboration across networks ensures a broader reach, enabling joint advocacy for policy changes and aligning efforts to maximize the benefits of projects. Networks can advocate for more attention to topics also in front of international stakeholders (such as development banks, etc).

In the context of INTERLACE, collaboration between city networks enriched the project's outcomes by bringing diverse perspectives and expertise. The project underscored how networks act as "knowledge democratizers", ensuring smaller or under-resourced municipalities benefit from access to cutting-edge practices and global conversations.

City networks also serve as a bridge between the scientific community. They ensure that the knowledge exchange explicitly addresses and analyses the specific practical challenges and characteristics of local governance processes, so that the findings, tools and other resources coming out from it are relevant and accessible to policymakers.

The transformative change that knowledge exchange processes can foster requires time and continuity, while also raising the flag for long-term trends that should be integrated into policy and decision-making.

Functioning beyond funding cycles and project timelines, city networks can provide continuity to knowledge exchange processes beyond their end date. For this, it is important to recognize that city networks are key actors in the designing of knowledge exchange processes and not only disseminators of resulting products.

Key lessons from engaging city networks in knowledge exchange on NbS:

1. City networks are uniquely positioned to **support sustained engagement, even beyond individual project lifespans**. Working together with local networks and universities, city networks can help build awareness and capacity of leaders and practitioners towards NbS. By embedding NbS into broader urban development priorities and strategies, the project's results can unfold despite shifts in political or administrative contexts.

2. **Collaboration among networks** — as demonstrated by INTERLACE — saves resources and enhances the quality of support offered to cities. Combining expertise in areas such as biodiversity, resilience, and climate adaptation can lead to holistic approaches that better address urban challenges.

3. The differing political and financial landscapes of EU and CELAC regions highlight the need for **context-sensitive approaches** (See Chapter 3 and cf. CONEXUS principle **on context-based learning**). For instance, in CELAC, engaging political leadership is critical to strengthen the political commitment towards NbS and ecosystem restoration, while at the same time building the capacity of local government associations at the national (or regional) level to influence governance frameworks that foster the role and capacities of local and regional governments towards their implementation.

4. Joint initiatives by city networks can **amplify the visibility** of urban nature priorities and make nature-based planning more "trendy" and easier to take up as a local strategy. Collective policy recommendations have greater weight with national and international decision-makers, influencing frameworks such as the European Green Deal and global biodiversity agreements.

Figure 10: Key guiding points for successful city network engagement

To maximize the potential of city networks in international cooperation projects, consider these guiding points:

- **Identify complementary strengths:** Align networks with varied expertise aligned with thematic area to provide comprehensive support to member cities.
- **Build on city - city network synergies:** Suggest already engaged cities to bring their network(s) into the projects, or vice versa, in order to root the project within the city network's ongoing work.
- **Invest in knowledge sharing:** Build on the city networks' existing knowledge, facilitating exchanges that highlight actionable lessons and adaptable practices.
- **Prioritize member needs:** Tailor activities and tools to address the specific challenges faced by member municipalities and political leadership.
- **Build institutional memory:** Ensure continuity by documenting and disseminating project outcomes within and across networks.
- **Promote co-benefits:** Integrate NbS into broader urban agendas such as climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and biodiversity conservation.

Engaging city networks in transdisciplinary and international cooperation unlocks transformative potential for urban nature restoration and NbS implementation. By acting as facilitators, advocates, and knowledge hubs, networks not only support their member cities and political representatives but also contribute to broader systemic change.

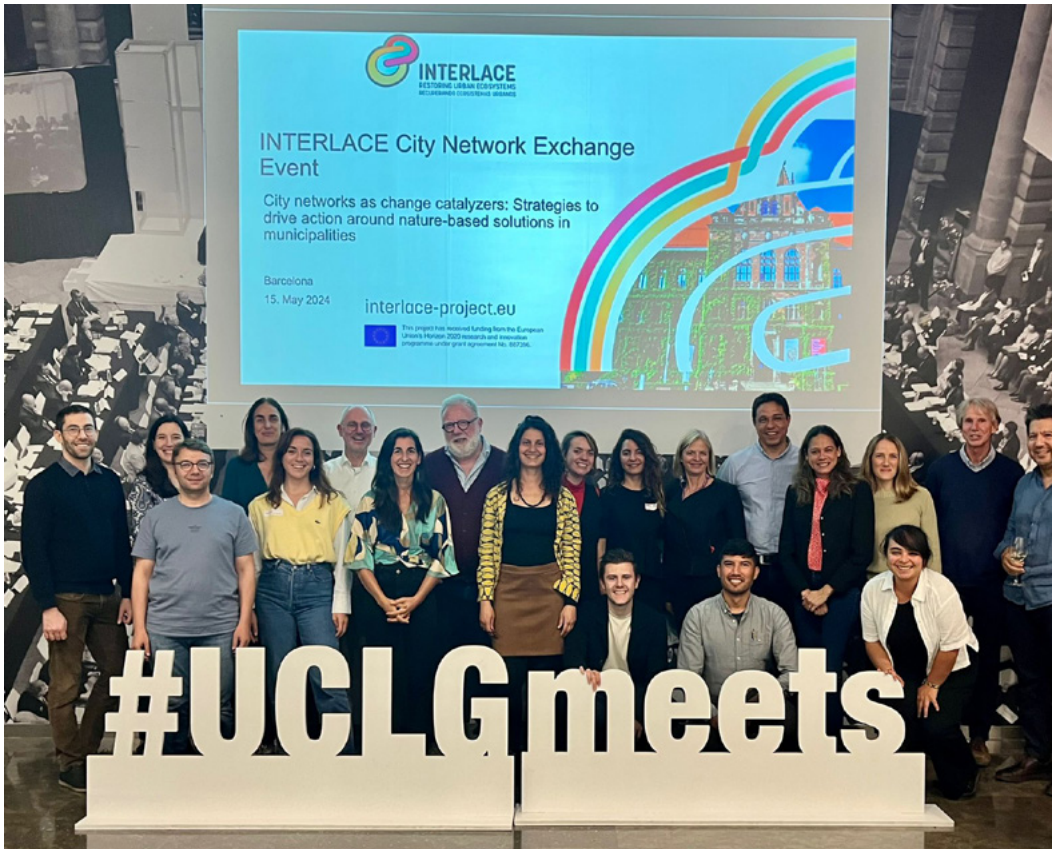


Image 22: In May 2024, 20+ representatives from city networks and partner organizations came together to discuss the role of city networks as change catalysers, and the strategies available to drive action around nature-based solutions in municipalities, based on the insights provided by the INTERLACE City Network Impulse Paper.

[1] City networks refer broadly to collaborative platforms, associations, or organizations that connect cities (and regions) across regions, countries, or globally to address common challenges and share best practices. Local (and/or regional) government associations here refers to formal organizations that represent the collective interests of subnational governments (cities, towns, provinces, etc) within a specific region, country, or state.

7. Importance of relationship building and face-to-face interactions

One of the key components of the INTERLACE Spirit, a key element identified by the project partners as pivotal to INTERLACE's success, is the human connection. As one of the partners remarked in the interview: "...friendship has been a great motivator in the project. We developed loyalties, we did not want to let each other down. We were excited to work together and were supported by the inclusive approach and an atmosphere of trust".

Image 23: INTERLACE partners at the project's first consortium meeting in Costa Rica, 2022

As shown by INTERLACE, developing strong interpersonal relationships can be crucial to fostering success of an international transdisciplinary project. In-person meetings and visits were often an important foundation of the success of the project's research and citizen engagement work. At the same time, it represents a major challenge — with project partners spread across two continents, opportunities for in-person meetings and collaboration are few and far between and the necessary air travel is expensive, time-consuming, and heavy in carbon emissions. The INTERLACE project started in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, which represented another challenge and meant the consortium did not gather in-person until almost two years into the project.

Despite the challenging context, the consortium sought to maximise the opportunities for in-person interactions:

- **Consortium meetings:** the annual consortium meetings were planned to take place in four of the six case study cities. Additional international events were planned in the other two cities. This allowed all consortium partners to visit most of the local areas at the heart of the project, and allowed the local stakeholders an opportunity to interact with the project's international team. An extensive site visit to key NbS and urban ecosystem restoration sites was an integral part of each of the meetings. The meetings were planned in a way to promote interaction, co-working, and discussion among consortium partners in various constellations. Additionally, they included plenty of opportunity for informal interactions, networking and socialising, to strengthen the interpersonal relationships in the project

- **Knowledge brokers:** whilst all the Knowledge Brokers were located in the same country as the city partners, they were not always in the same city. The project plan and budget allowed for frequent visits and in-person meetings between the KBs and city partners — to ensure continued deepening of understanding of the local context, building relationships beyond the immediate project team and strengthening of interpersonal relationships.

- **Research and project work visits:** some task leads were able to visit all the city partners in the course of their work, often using the back-to-back opportunities connected to other project travel. According to the testimonials shared in the interviews, in-person visits provided insights that could not be fully captured through remote communication, such as experiencing the physical spaces, observing local urban ecosystems, and engaging directly with city stakeholders. These visits allowed to build stronger relationships with local partners, foster trust, and better tailor the project's tools and frameworks to the unique needs of each city. Additionally, the face-to-face interactions helped bridge cultural and institutional differences, making the co-creation process more effective and grounded in the realities of each city. By seeing the sites and meeting the people involved, they gained a richer perspective that enhanced the project's outcomes and strengthened collaboration across the regions. As one of the partners remarked, "Travelling to each city wasn't just about understanding their local contexts — it was about showing commitment to their work and the project. It built a sense of partnership".

- **Creating additional opportunities:** finally, the project partners sought additional opportunities for in-person meetings where possible — for example at thematic conferences, or using the annual consortium meetings to visit other sites in the same region. Although not initially foreseen in the project design, such visits often proved to be some of the most fruitful and inspiring experiences for the project partners. Figures 11 and 12 highlight stories from two such visits — a visit of the representative of the city of Granollers to Quito, that happened as a result of a planned event in Ecuador being postponed, and a visit of the representatives of CBIMA to Oslo, building on the inspiring cooperation with the researcher from the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research and his earlier visit to Costa Rica.

The ongoing virtual meetings and virtual tools used throughout the project were, of course, essential in maintaining the ongoing communication and collaboration throughout the project's lifetime. However, according to the survey and interview answers, the in-person settings promoted where possible in the project were crucial to the project's co-creation processes, providing a more open and collaborative atmosphere and enabling spontaneous idea generation and stronger interpersonal connections. Workshops, participatory activities, and informal conversations during site visits allowed for more inclusive engagement, providing different arenas to have one's voice and ideas heard.

Image 24: Workshop discussion at the consortium meeting in Chemnitz, Germany

Image 25: In-person meetings were pivotal in fostering trust and building personal relationships among project partners

In-person meetings were pivotal in fostering trust and building personal relationships among project partners. Stakeholders frequently emphasized that trust cannot be fully developed through virtual communication alone. Face-to-face interactions allowed participants to engage more deeply, creating a sense of partnership that carried through the project. Many interviewees and survey respondents noted that in-person meetings and site visits reinvigorated their commitment to the project. As one partner remarked, "The trust and personal bonds we built through in-person meetings were crucial for navigating challenges later in the project".

Moreover, visiting the local sites at the heart of the project's work, seeing the tangible impact of the work and connecting directly with local communities created a sense of momentum and shared purpose. As mentioned in one of the interviews: Site visits enabled project partners to gain first-hand insights into the unique challenges, opportunities, and contexts of each city. For example, participants noted that seeing urban green spaces, infrastructure, and community engagement efforts on the ground provided a much richer understanding than remote discussions or documentation ever could. These visits helped tailor project outputs to local realities more effectively. As one researcher remarked, "seeing the sites in person made the challenges and opportunities tangible — we could really understand what the cities were dealing with and adapt our tools accordingly."

In-person meetings allowed participants to navigate cultural and institutional differences more effectively. Partners from different regions and working traditions found that personal interactions helped them better understand each other's perspectives, approaches, and constraints. Face-to-face interactions created a dynamic environment for collaboration, where ideas could be shared and refined in real-time. Participants often highlighted the positive effect of being physically present with colleagues and stakeholders, which helped break down barriers and facilitated smoother communication.

Figure 11: Lessons learned from the city of Granollers' in-person visit to Ecuador By Xavier Romero Hidalgo, City of Granollers

In June 2024, an exchange of experiences took place between the City of Granollers (Spain) and a wide range of Ecuadorian stakeholders in the City of Quito. These events were organised by INTERLACE partner Yes Innovation and consisted of three activities on the management and recovery of urban rivers. They addressed the urban challenge of preventing the degradation of rivers as they pass through cities, a problem that is present in both Ecuador and Spain, but which certainly represents a challenge for cities in much of the world.

The first exchange event was a conference at the Universidad de las Américas (UDLA) entitled Ecological restoration of urban ecosystems. About 80 people learned about the benefits of NbS in urban environments and the practical case of how the Congost river was recovered in Granollers. The attendees were mainly students, a great learning opportunity for future city managers to learn about the main strategies for the recovery of degraded natural spaces and the new trends in the application of innovative NbS.

The second event on urban rivers was an exchange with the Guayllabamba association. A visit was organised to the San Pedro river as it passes through Los Algarrobos Park, where points of view and successful experiences in the recovery of river spaces were exchanged. In the case of Quito, the Guayllabamba association was very proactive in its efforts to achieve ambitious objectives for the recovery of the San Pedro river through various actions that can be grouped as follows:

Image 26: Site visit to the Congost river basin, Granollers, Spain.

Image 27: Conference in UDLA

Image 28: Visit to San Pedro river with Guayllabamba association

Image 29: Exchange meeting between Quito and Granollers municipalities

- **Citizen involvement:** Citizen participation is playing a key role in accelerating the ecological and social recovery processes of Quito's urban rivers. The activities of the Guayllabamba association are able to mobilise many residents of Quito's neighbourhoods near the river to participate in activities to discover the river. Especially significant are the activities called 'Mingas', which are mass river clean-up days that have a great local impact.

- **Linking private actors:** The association also promotes the achievement of agreements with private companies to advance the recovery of the river and of Los Algarrobos Park, a very beautiful place that is becoming an iconic place for the recovery of the San Pedro river in Quito.

- **Legal advocacy for river protection:** Guayllabamba has also taken legal action to demand that the river's management authorities act to prevent Quito's sewage from continuing to affect the river's natural habitats. This has led administrations such as the Municipality of Quito to give higher priority to the recovery of their urban rivers.

Finally, the third event consisted of a workshop between the technical services of the municipality of Quito and the City Council of Granollers. The realities of the urban rivers of both cities were presented and the programme for the recovery of the Congost river in Granollers, which began in the 1990s and is still in progress, was presented in depth. In a very fruitful exchange of experiences, it became clear that the river restoration strategy in Granollers was based on the recovery of water quality through water treatment plants. It thenproceeded to the recovery of natural habitats in the riverbed together with the consolidation of sustainable recreational uses with biodiversity on the riverbanks. This model was of great interest to the Quito city authorities, who appreciated the long-term viability of this type of river regeneration process.

From the European perspective, it was very noteworthy that this type of initiative was in the public interest and was also demanded by local communities, as in the case of the Guayllabamba association.

To conclude, the city of Granollers learned a great deal about how to continue recovering rivers and involving citizens during the face-to-face meetings with technical experts from Quito, such as researchers from Yes Innovation, the leaders of Guayllabamba, professors from the UDLA university and municipal technicians from the municipality of Quito.

Figure 12: Inspired by Oslo: The first mini forest of CBIMA is born
By Ericka Calderón, CBIMA

In May 2023, following a meeting of the INTERLACE Project, a delegation from the Local Committee of the María Aguilar Interurban Biological Corridor (CBIMA) travelled to Oslo, Norway, to observe first-hand the successful nature-based solutions implemented in the city. The visit, led by David Barton of the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA), allowed the team to explore various initiatives, including rain gardens, urban parks, and the expansive Marka nature reserve.

The experience in Oslo inspired us to replicate this model in Costa Rica. Impressed by Oslo's ability to integrate nature into urban life and the benefits this brings to the community, we decided to create CBIMA's first Mini Forest.

Image 30: CBIMA delegation's visit to Oslo, Norway

Image 31: Planting of CBIMA's first mini forest in September 2023

Image 32: Engaging the citizens with the idea and the potential of an urban mini forest

To select the ideal location for our Mini Forest, we sought a site close to the María Aguilar River that was easily accessible to the community and had a strong educational component. Ultimately, we chose a plot of land owned by the National Institute of Housing and Urban Development in Paso Ancho, San José, where a well-established community dynamic already existed.

In September 2023, with the participation of local scouts and the Paso Ancho Norte development association, we planted CBIMA's first Mini Forest. Since then, the community has shown great enthusiasm and has actively participated in its care.

A pilot project for urban nature-based solutions in Costa Rica

The CBIMA Mini Forest is a pilot project designed to demonstrate the benefits of nature-based solutions in an urban Costa Rican context. In the future, we plan to transform it into a food forest, further enhancing its benefits for the community.

This project exemplifies how cooperation and innovation can create more sustainable and resilient cities. We invite other communities to follow our example and join this global movement for nature.

8. Managing logistics and organisation around diversity

Last but not least: organising structures and selecting the right tools for communication is essential to fostering inclusive and open collaboration across languages and cultures in a transdisciplinary research project spanning multiple continents (as also reflected on in the CONEXUS principle on openness and inclusiveness).

Here are some of the key ways in which the INTERLACE project managed the logistical aspects in a diverse, multilingual environment:

- **Simultaneous translation:** The use of simultaneous English-Spanish translation in meetings, workshops, and events, including all online meetings, ensured equitable participation across partners speaking the two languages. At the same time, it is worth noting that most of the participants in the project spoke either Spanish as a first language or English as a second language. Some participants, especially those speaking English as a second language, found following the translation into their second language during the long meetings tiring and difficult. It also meant that only English-speaking participants from these locations could participate in meetings, whilst the Spanish translation meant that a wide pool of participants from Spain and Latin America could join, e.g. the project's calls. If the project budget allowed for that, it could have been beneficial to ensure translation into more languages. Another relevant detail is that for most of its meetings, both online and in-person, INTERLACE worked with the same team of interpreters — who, in time, became highly aware of nuances and details relevant for the project, aiding the communication further.

- **Bilingual documents:** Key documents, presentations, and materials were provided in both English and Spanish. It is worth including the costs of licences for high-quality, AI-powered translation tools such as DeepL or ChatGPT in budgets of similar projects.

- **Coordination across time zones:** The project navigated the logistical challenge of coordinating meetings across multiple time zones. Meetings were scheduled at a time most suitable for the widest pool of project partners, though this required flexibility and working outside of standard working hours for some partners. Some regular meetings needed to be seasonally rescheduled to accommodate the change to Daylight Saving Time in Europe. The project's public-facing events, webinars, and conferences were also planned in a way to allow participation from both Europe and Latin America.

- **Diverse communication channels:** The project initially used email and Slack as primarily tools for structured, project-wide communication. The Slack application was chosen as a compromise between partners in Latin America, who favoured the use of instant messaging tools such as WhatsApp, and partners in Europe, who found mobile-first applications not suitable for professional communication. With time, however, WhatsApp was increasingly used as a communication tool, especially for sharing successes, photos from events, and quick informal exchanges across regions. The European partners warmed up to the idea of using it as a convenient way to stay connected and resolve immediate questions.

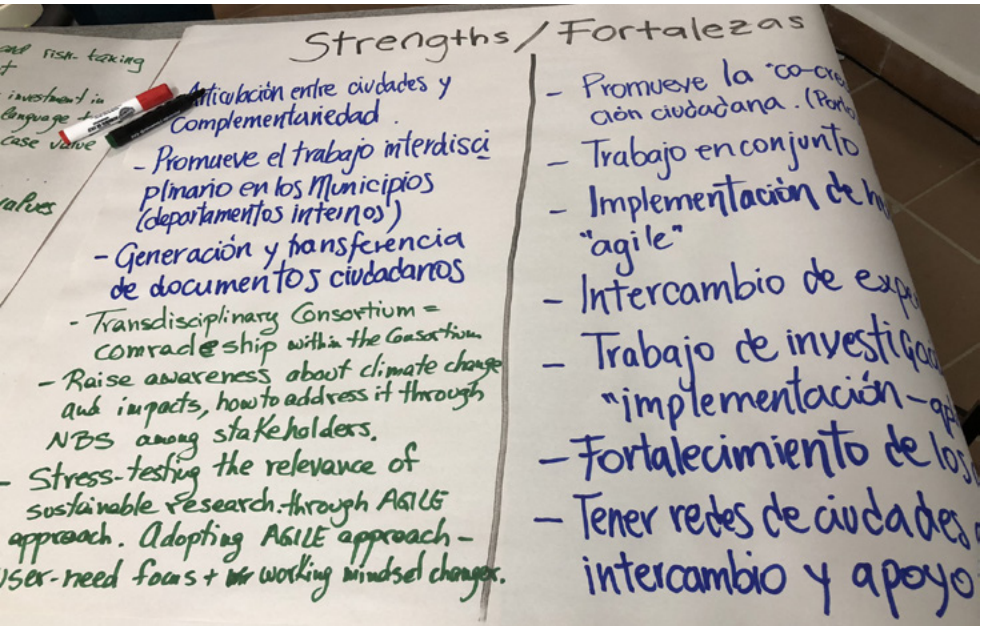


Image 33: Working in two languages and creating bilingual documents became second nature for INTERLACE consortium partners

Image 34: The same team of interpreters accompanied INTERLACE project for most of its duration, both online and during the in-person meetings

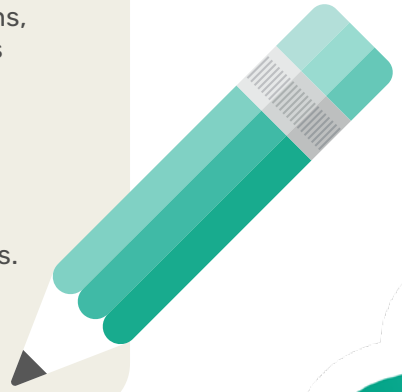
- **Open-access, centralised file sharing:** INTERLACE used Google Drive as a centralised repository for all project documents. All participants, regardless of their role, could access files and updates.

- **Adjusting work styles:** The project adapted to differences in regional work styles. For instance, CELAC partners often required longer deliberation periods in meetings, and this flexibility was accommodated to respect their processes.

In the interviews and survey that informed this publication, participants frequently highlighted the role of bilingual and culturally sensitive communication in fostering inclusivity. By accommodating diverse working styles, providing translated materials, and respecting regional preferences, the project maintained an environment where all partners felt heard and valued.

Figure 13: The INTERLACE checklist for organizing inclusive collaboration in multilingual, transdisciplinary projects:

- [ ] Ensure real-time interpretation in key project languages for meetings and events to promote equitable participation.
- [ ] Whenever possible, retain the same interpretation team. They play a crucial role in ensuring effective communication and capturing the nuances necessary for mutual understanding.
- [ ] Factor in potential fatigue for participants using interpretation in their second language, and consider additional language options if the budget allows.
- [ ] Recognize and respect differing expectations and norms around communication and decision-making. Allow for longer deliberation times when needed, especially in contexts where consensus-building is culturally significant.
- [ ] Ensure that project partners become acquainted with formal requirements for product development set by the funding agency. Provide guidance and examples for writing product reports, as partners may lack prior experience.
- [ ] Schedule meetings at times that accommodate participants in multiple time zones, even if this requires flexibility from some partners. Account for seasonal changes like Daylight Saving Time to avoid scheduling conflicts.
- [ ] Be open to regional preferences regarding communication tools and allow time for partners to adjust to new communication methods. Be open to change communication tools over time, based on user preference.
- [ ] Use a centralized, accessible platform like Google Drive to store all project documents. Ensure all participants, regardless of role, can access relevant files and updates easily.
- [ ] Translate all key materials, such as presentations, reports, and meeting minutes, into the project's main languages.
- [ ] Budget for high-quality AI-powered translation tools, like DeepL or ChatGPT, to streamline the translation process. Consider budgeting for AI-powered tools to take online meeting minutes.



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