BIO-LINK: Biophilic Urban Transformation

Addressing the Challenge

Across European cities, Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) continue to be implemented predominantly as isolated, project-based interventions, rather than as integrated solutions embedded within broader urban development, regeneration, and renovation processes. At the same time, cities have become increasingly dense, impermeable, and complex, while progressively losing their connection to natural systems and to the wider territory. This growing disconnection limits the capacity of urban environments to benefit from ecosystem services and affects both resilience and quality of life. There is therefore a pressing need to re-establish a functional relationship with nature, one that goes beyond aesthetics and positions nature as an active partner in urban development. Cities today have the responsibility to combine what society does best: innovation, governance, technology, and capacity with what nature provides best ecosystem services in order to enhance wellbeing and urban resilience.

This systemic disconnection from nature is reflected in three key areas. Firstly, there is a lack of integrated approaches within municipal governance, where departments continue to operate in silos and NBS are often perceived as secondary or complementary solutions rather than as efficient, high-return investments aligned with sustainable development priorities. As a result, NBS are rarely embedded in planning processes or systematically linked to regeneration, renovation, or development projects. Secondly, there is a lack of effective mechanisms to engage the private sector, including insufficient public-private partnership models, incentives, and capacity-building efforts that would support the adoption of NBS as standard practice. This leads to fragmented implementation and inconsistent uptake. Thirdly, communities remain largely disconnected from nature, interacting with it mostly at the level of perception and landscape appreciation, rather than through understanding, stewardship, and active participation in ecological processes.

Proposed Approach and Main Scope

In response to these challenges, the project proposes a shift from isolated Nature-Based Solutions towards a **systemic transformation of cities into biophilic urban systems**. In this context, a biophilic city is understood as a city that **integrates nature into all aspects of urban development** spatial planning, environmental performance, and social life working with natural processes to improve microclimate, enhance biodiversity, and support community wellbeing. The network will bring together cities to **co-develop and test practical solutions**, using the URBACT method of transnational exchange, co-creation, and integrated planning to move from concepts to implementation.

The approach focuses on three key aspects. First, it aims to **embed Nature-Based Solutions into everyday urban development processes**, ensuring they are not treated as standalone projects but as standard components of regeneration, renovation, and new investments. Second, it seeks to **transform governance and investment systems**, by restructuring administrative processes and introducing tools such as green budgeting and green labelling, so that public investments systematically support environmental objectives. Third, it promotes **collaboration and capacity**

building across sectors, strengthening cooperation between public authorities, private actors, and communities to co-design and implement solutions.

Overall, the project's main objective is to **build the capacity of cities to plan, finance, and deliver integrated urban solutions that work with nature**, while generating practical, transferable knowledge that can support other cities in adopting similar approaches.

The Action Lab Pillars (Local level activities)

To operationalise the transition towards biophilic cities, the project is structured around three complementary Action Lab pillars. Together, they form a coherent system that connects **governance reform, practical implementation of Nature-Based Solutions (NBS), and community activation**, ensuring that nature is embedded in how cities plan, invest, and operate. Each pillar combines strategic directions with concrete demonstrator actions, allowing cities to test solutions while transforming their internal systems.

Pillar 1: Biophilic-city Governance "Reform"

The first pillar focuses on integrating NBS into municipal governance, decision-making, and investment processes. The core direction is to move from fragmented, department-based approaches towards coordinated, cross-sectoral systems that treat NBS as a standard component of urban development. This may include innovative local policy initiatives, PPP models, or administrative and public acquisition innovation elements.

A key element is the introduction of **green budgeting and green labelling**,

Demonstrator actions include:

- **PPP models: Adopt a Green Space+**, a PPP model where private actors co-manage and upgrade green spaces using NBS in exchange for incentives (e.g. visibility, green credits)
- **Local capacities: Green Task Force ("Brigada Verde")**: a dedicated municipal team trained in planning, implementing, and maintaining NBS interventions. This involves creating cross-departmental task forces dedicated to NBS integration, strengthening internal capacities within municipalities, and establishing local partnership platforms that bring together public authorities, NGOs, and private stakeholders.
- **Administrative and procedural innovations**: Pilot application of **green budgeting and labelling** in public investments (e.g. integrating therapeutic gardens in schools or hospitals), ensuring that public investments are evaluated based on their environmental contribution and systematically include biophilic elements.

Pillar 2: NBS Toolkit and Demonstration

The second pillar focuses on translating the biophilic approach into tangible spatial interventions through a **two-step process: co-creation and testing**. First, partner cities will work together with experts and local stakeholders to **develop a tailored NBS toolkit**, adapted to their specific environmental conditions, urban challenges, and development priorities. This toolkit will bring together a structured portfolio of solutions such as pollinator-friendly meadows, rain gardens, urban orchards, therapeutic gardens, and green corridors along with guidance on their design, implementation, and expected benefits. Building on this common framework, cities will then **select**

and test a set of NBS interventions in real urban contexts. These will be implemented through small-scale, temporary, and tactical actions, allowing for rapid experimentation, local adaptation, and learning by doing. This step ensures that the toolkit is not only theoretical but grounded in practice and refined based on real performance. At the same time, these demonstrator actions will support the **monitoring and evaluation of environmental and social impacts**, generating evidence on the effectiveness, feasibility, and scalability of different NBS solutions

Demonstrator actions include a temporary and tactical **NBS pilot intervention** in public spaces (to be also realised in conjunction with innovative PPP models). Example of NBS:

- *Working with school*
- *Experimental and pollinator-friendly meadows*
- *Rain gardens and small-scale water management solutions*
- *Urban orchards*
- *Therapeutic gardens*
- *Creation of local green corridors or connected ecological spaces*

Pillar 3: Community Activation, Capacity Building & Storytelling

The third pillar focuses on reconnecting communities with nature and building long-term capacity for biophilic urban transformation. The main direction is to shift citizens from passive users of green spaces to active participants in their design, implementation, and stewardship. This involves developing co-design processes and encouraging direct engagement with urban ecosystems. At the same time, this pillar strengthens knowledge and awareness among both citizens and municipal staff, ensuring a shared understanding of the role and value of nature in cities and supporting long-term behavioral change.

Demonstrator actions include:

- **Youth and school involvement**
- **Co-design workshops** for NBS interventions with local communities
- Local engagement formats (e.g. informal “NBS stories” or learning events)
- Training sessions for the employees of the city hall and administrative flat blocks community
- Training sessions for stakeholders on NBS planning and implementation

Overall Logic and Expected Impact

By combining these three pillars, the project creates a clear and integrated logic: **governance systems enable action, actions demonstrate solutions, and communities sustain and scale them**. This structure ensures that NBS are not treated as isolated projects, but become embedded within policies, investments, and everyday urban practices.

At the transnational level, the network will produce an **Action Playbook**, capturing tested governance models, NBS solutions, and implementation tools. At the local level, each partner city will develop and implement an **Action Portfolio**, translating the shared approach into concrete actions adapted to their context. The overall impact is a shift from fragmented, project-based interventions towards a **systemic integration of nature in urban development**, providing a replicable model for cities aiming to become more resilient, sustainable, and biophilic.

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