

# The Power of Co-Creation for Inclusive NbS



Co-creation can help cities develop Nature-based Solutions (NbS) that better reflect local needs, but participation alone does not make a process inclusive. Evidence from three European Micro Urban Living Labs shows that meaningful co-creation depends on trust, flexibility, continuity and support for people whose resources or capacities to participate may be limited.

## KEY FACTS

1. **Participation does not automatically create inclusion.**
   Meaningful co-creation requires accessible conditions and real opportunities for participants to influence outcomes.

2. **Trust grows through continuity.**
   Regular communication and recurring formal and informal interactions help sustain relationships beyond one-off consultation or project events.

3. **Participation capacity changes over time.**
   Students, residents in rehabilitation and families of children with disabilities may all require different forms of engagement and continuity.



The Naturo Micro Urban Living Lab at Källan, a municipal residence for people recovering from addiction, turned an underused outdoor area into a restorative green space for rest, play, and shared maintenance. Residents, staff, and several municipal units, including landscape architects and an educator in inclusive meeting places, co-created it through workshops and hands-on redevelopment, and the positive results mean the initiative will continue beyond the project.

**Nature-based Solutions are increasingly developed through participatory and collaborative approaches. Yet involving people in a process does not automatically mean that different groups can influence decisions or benefit equally. This is particularly important when working with people whose time, resources, confidence or capacity to participate may be constrained. The three cases explored in the study involved residents in assisted housing, high school students and children with disabilities and their families.**

## Why co-creation matters

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are shaped not only by design and technical choices, but also by how people use, experience and manage urban spaces. Co-creation brings users, practitioners, communities and public organisations into the process so that local knowledge and lived experience can influence decisions.

## Participation is not the same as inclusion

Across three European Micro Urban Living Labs, co-creation involved residents in assisted housing, high school students and children with disabilities and their families. The cases show that inviting people to participate is only a starting point. Inclusive co-creation also requires attention to time, energy, accessibility, confidence, resources and changing life circumstances.

For some groups, standard workshops or surveys may not be enough. A parent caring for a child with disabilities may have limited time and energy. Residents in recovery may experience changing capacities and priorities. Students participate through school-year cycles, meaning that new participants need to be engaged as cohorts change. These conditions need to shape the process.

# Co-creation works best as an ongoing relationship, not a one-off consultation.

## Build relationships, not one-off events

Trust develops through repeated interaction. The cases show the value of combining formal arrangements with informal but structured spaces for communication. Recurring school collaborations, neighbourhood contacts, environmental cafés and regular follow-up can make collaboration more continuous and reduce the distance between communities and public organisations.

## Give participants meaningful influence

Co-creation is strongest when participation can affect decisions, rather than simply collect opinions. Municipalities and project teams should be clear about what is open to change, what constraints exist, and how input will be used. This helps avoid participation becoming a procedural exercise.




Photo: Marr Durieux

The Naturo Micro Urban Living Lab (MULL) in ’s-Hertogenbosch centres around the development of an inclusive playground for children with special needs. The initiative was citizen-led and enabled by the municipality. Once designed and developed, the playground was placed at Burgemeester het Loeffplein in the city centre, with a new green area developed right next to it.

## Design for different pathways

There is no single participation format that works for everyone. Cities can combine formal meetings, informal conversations, community networks, targeted outreach and recurring engagement. Different pathways can help reach people who are not already organised or connected to municipal structures.

## Make co-creation sustainable

The cases also highlight the importance of continuity after the initial engagement phase. Co-created ideas can lose influence when projects are outsourced, responsibilities become fragmented, or staff and participant groups change. Follow-up roles, resources and monitoring can help carry learning and agreed outcomes into implementation and management.

## What this means for practice

For practitioners, the key question is not simply “How many people participated?” but “Who was able to participate, under what conditions, and what changed because of their input?” For municipalities, this means providing time, roles, budgets and processes that support inclusive engagement. For community partners, it means creating accessible routes into the process and recognising that participation capacity varies.

Co-creation therefore works as an ongoing relationship rather than a single consultation step. When it is supported by continuity, flexibility and meaningful influence, it can help NBS respond more closely to diverse needs while strengthening relationships between communities and the organisations responsible for urban development.

## Conclusions

**Lesson 1** ▸ Inclusion requires meaningful influence, not just participation.

**Lesson 2** ▸ Different groups need different participation pathways.

**Lesson 3** ▸ Trust and continuity are essential for lasting co-creation.

**Lesson 4** ▸ Co-created outcomes need support beyond the project phase.



The Naturo Mirco Urban Living Lab (MULL) in Velenje has been dedicated to designing future solutions for an urban park by an inclusive and participatory approach. Guided by academic researchers, students at the local school in Velenje conducted behavioural mapping of the park visitors and participated in design workshops; developing a plan for how to create a more inclusive and climate resilient park.

## References


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Co-funded by the European Union