

Impact Assessment Guidebook



Bringing Cities to Life,
Bringing Life into Cities

Acknowledgments

The Connecting Nature Impact Assessment Framework: developing robust monitoring and evaluation plans for nature-based solutions

This guidebook presents the Connecting Nature process of developing robust monitoring and evaluation plans for nature-based solutions. Robust evaluation supports planners and decision-makers in building solid evidence-based understanding as to the impact of nature-based solutions and enhancing cost-effective and socially beneficial policy, building a foundation for scaled up delivery.

The Connecting Nature impact assessment framework has been co-produced by academic partners and representatives of three European cities in Connecting Nature, which are frontrunners in the implementation of nature-based solutions. The framework aims at contributing to the development of a European standard for nature-based solutions monitoring and evaluation.

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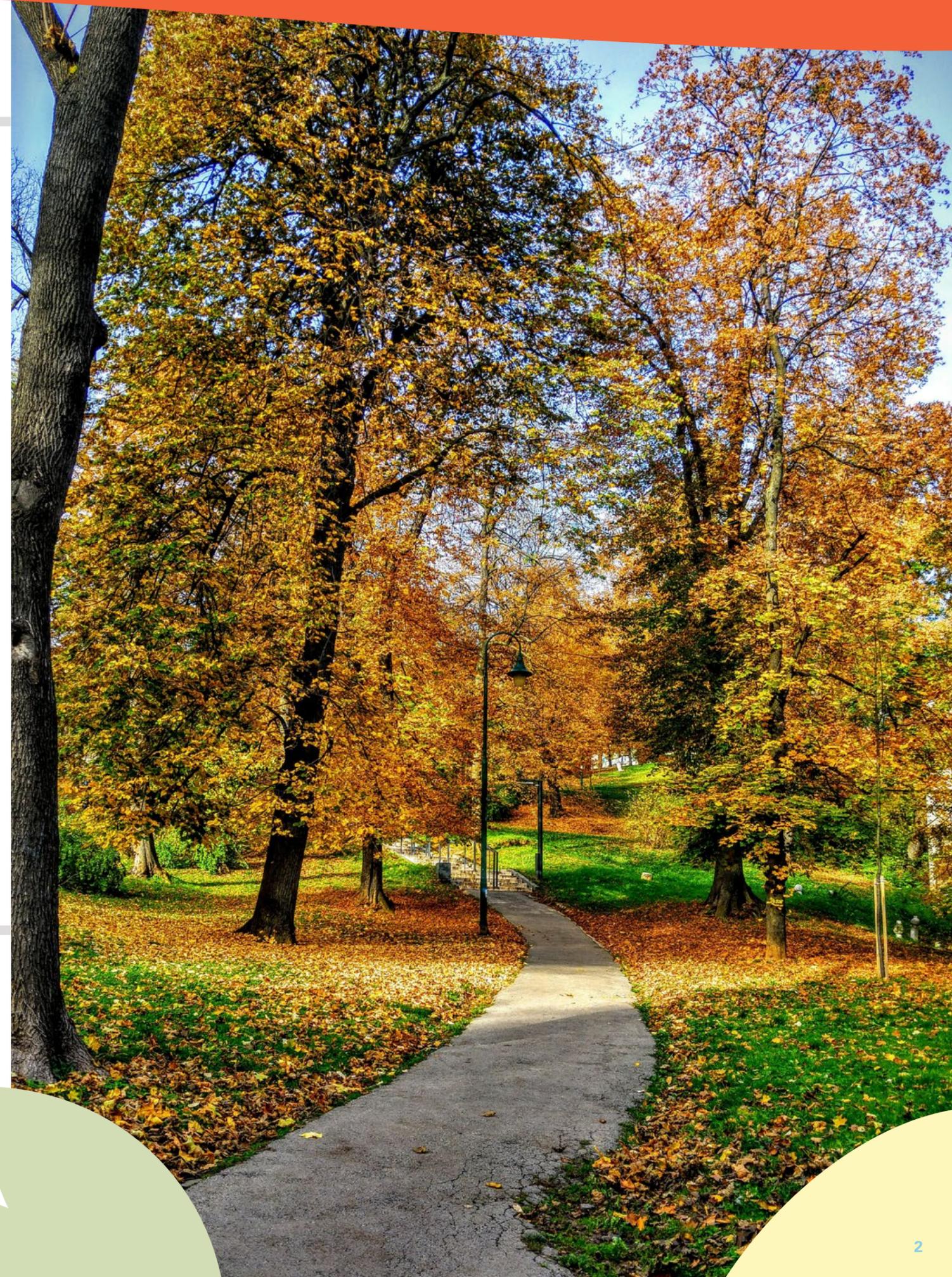
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1 Introduction

What are Nature-Based Solutions?

The European Commission defines nature-based solutions as solutions to societal change that are:

“inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits and help build resilience. Such solutions bring more and more diverse, nature and natural features and processes into cities, landscapes and seascapes, through locally adapted, resource-efficient and systemic interventions.”

Nature-Based Solutions benefit biodiversity and support the delivery of a range of ecosystem services.



What is the Connecting Nature Framework?

Designing and implementing Nature-Based Solutions on a scale that delivers economic, environmental and social co-benefits, while also building resilience and benefiting biodiversity is complex with many different issues to consider.

Many questions arise and need answers.

What is the best solution for the area?

Who will manage it?

How will it be financed?

Who needs to be involved in the planning, delivery and stewardship?

Will it support innovation and generate jobs?

How to measure the economic, environmental and social impact?

How can we manage change?

Even identifying where to start can often be a challenge!

In response to this uncertainty, Connecting Nature has developed a process tool to help cities and other organisations navigate the path towards implementation of Nature-Based Solutions on a large scale: the **Connecting Nature Framework**. The Framework identifies **three distinct phases of development** for a nature-based solution: planning, delivery and stewardship.

Throughout each phase there are **seven separate elements** that cities and other entities need to consider when shaping their individual nature-based solution: **technical solutions, governance, impact assessment, finance, entrepreneurship, co-production** and **reflexive monitoring**.

Cities may choose to start with any element of the Framework process and consider the others in the order that suits their context. What emerges from the Framework process is a comprehensive 360° overview of each stage of development of the nature-based solution.

Guidebooks

To assist you in developing your nature-based solution, Connecting Nature has produced a series of guidebooks. The overall Connecting Nature Framework Guidebook is a good starting point. There is also a guidebook for each element of the framework process describing the implementation steps and providing case studies to show how it works in practice. A step-by-step how-to manual on the Connecting Nature Framework process is also available.

All the Connecting Nature guidebooks and the manual may be downloaded from www.connectingnature.eu.

Connecting Nature Framework



2 | What is the Connecting Nature Impact Assessment Framework?

Developing an impact assessment framework for nature-based solutions

A robust impact assessment framework entails careful reflection and planning of monitoring and evaluation processes which pertain to the design of nature-based solutions. By definition, nature-based solutions are multifunctional. NBS assessment is central to evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of specific interventions against strategic city goals. The ultimate goal is to gather long-term solid evidence about nature-based solutions performance in particular urban contexts and for different social groups. In turn, this evidence can support smart policy decisions and adaptive co-management aspects of the NBS stewardship once installed, as well as enhance sustainability, wellbeing, and resilience in cities.

The Connecting Nature Impact Assessment Framework is a process aimed at supporting cities in developing and successfully implementing robust monitoring and evaluation plans that can

deliver systematic and comparable evidence as to NBS effectiveness. This framework represents an essential tool for adapting NBS design and implementation in real time. Consequently, NBS interventions performance increases and NBS can be maintained and revitalized over time.

Evaluating effectiveness of NBS interventions is also useful in developing cost-effective policies which supports cities in advocating for pertinent investments, including exploitation of broader funding streams. Monitoring and evaluation processes advance the arguments as to the benefits that NBS can deliver. We have also learned that effective assessment will require changing current ways of planning for social resilience and regeneration that are still dominated by redundancies that derive from understanding ecological, social and economic objectives as separate and sometimes at odds with each other and reflected in the siloed thinking and structure of policy practice.

The NBS evaluation and monitoring process is developed along five steps, incorporating indicators selection and assessment. Throughout this mini-guidebook, each step is detailed with examples so that cities and stakeholders can develop their own NBS assessment plans. The five steps are represented in Figure 1.

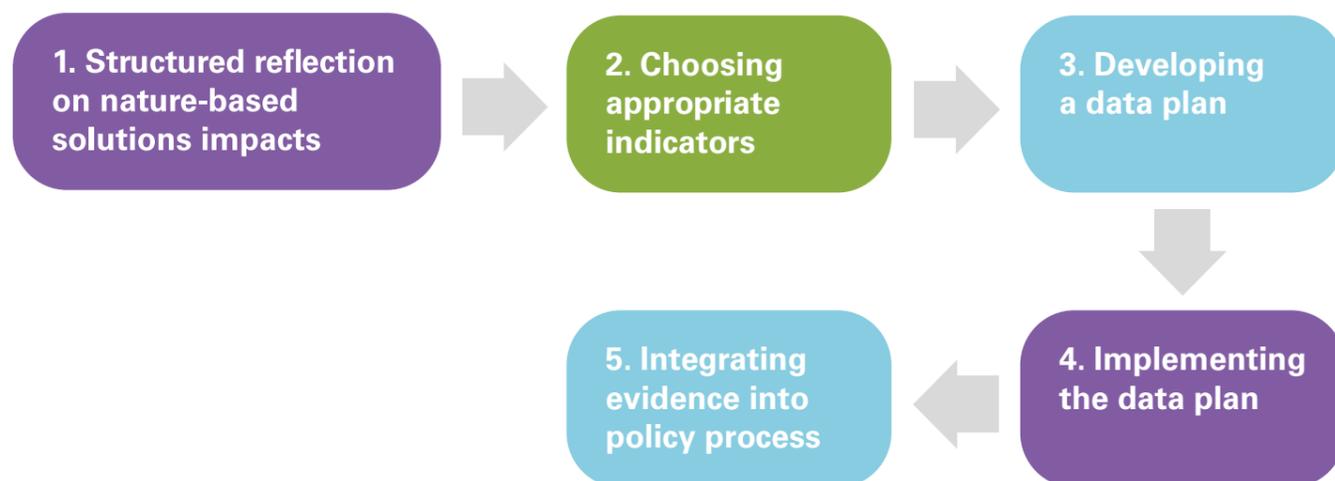


Figure 1. Steps in the nature-based solutions monitoring and evaluation process.

3 | Steps in the NBS monitoring and evaluation process

3.1. Step 1. Engage in structured reflection on NBS impacts, pathways and trade-offs

3.1.1. Matching NBS expected impacts to the city's strategic objectives

Engaging in structured reflection is of paramount importance in designing a functional monitoring and evaluation plan for NBS. Structured reflection supports cities in identifying context-appropriate rationales for NBS implementation and establishing evaluation objectives. Also, it contributes to the transparency and justification of policy decisions. Considering that NBS are interventions that aim to address strategic city objectives, it is important to first identify the objectives targeted by the intervention. Many times, there are some main identified objectives for the intervention (benefits), and others that are considered secondary (co-benefits).

City strategic objectives are normally defined in broad terms, while NBS will need to clarify their expected impact more specifically – geographically, demographically and over time. Nature-based solutions are expected to deliver a multi-layered impact (i.e., increased health and wellbeing for residents, increased social cohesion, new economic opportunities or environmental net gain including biodiversity). However, NBS will not necessarily deliver on all foreseen benefits. Thus, making assumptions explicit helps to identify what might

be missing in NBS design. For example, if a city designs a network of urban gardens, how are these designed to support physical and mental health? Through an increase in physical activity? Through increase in social interactions? Specifying the expected benefits further facilitates appropriate planning, design, monitoring and evaluation.

Therefore, the main NBS intervention impact should be clearly stated. It can be understood as primary and secondary long-term effects resulting from a chain of events, to which intervention has contributed (CGIAR IEA, 2015). The chain of events constitutes the intervention pathway, a course of several actions that should be implemented to obtain expected results. The first phase of the process consists of identifying those expected results based on the city's objectives, while differentiating between outcomes and outputs.

Outcomes are results you want to achieve while outputs are actions that contribute to outcome. Outcomes are the difference made by outputs (Mills-Scofield, 2012). Using a growing space as an example, actions that are implemented to create the spaces would be outputs and outcomes would be impact that the creation of those spaces have (i.e., greater satisfaction perceived by citizens or higher levels of healthy eating). This reflection on NBS consequences and associated outcomes depends on how each city approaches its specific "theory of change".

For more information on mapping local contexts and policies see Connop et al. (2019) and Hölscher et al. (2019). When planning, it is also important to keep in mind what the objectives for the use of the data are, since planning and evaluation have multiple objectives: to assess performance vs intended benefits, to align NBS outcomes with city strategic priorities, to plan more effective NBS, to develop a data management plan, and to adapt tweak solutions over time. A good robust geographical based evidence base will help to change the policy direction of travel and could have political influence on national and regional policy as well as at local level.

3.1.2. Theory of change: identify your assumptions and map causal pathways

Approaching the city's "theory of change" requires identifying city's assumptions as to how NBS actions and the context within which are taken will relate to expected impacts. It is necessary to build an integrated vision with regard to the NBS implementation impact on different health and wellbeing, social, economic and environmental dimensions (Qui et al., 2018), and the relations among them, while contemplating the temporal, demographic and spatial aspects. The following terms are essential in determining the theory of change for a NBS intervention:

Terms	Description
Assumptions	Initial suppositions of how certain actions will generate the desired impact
Synergies	A positive effect in one category also has a positive effect in another impact category
Trade-offs	Achieving a positive effect in one category brings a negative effect in another or a positive effect on a social group entails a negative effect for another

Table 1. Theory of change essential terms (based on Dumitru et al., 2020).

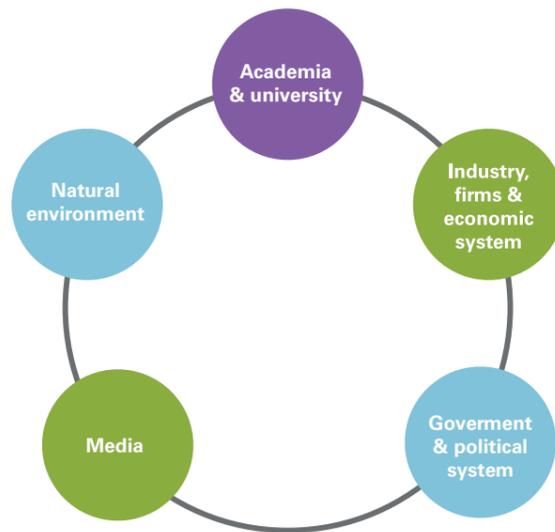


Figure 2. Quintuple Helix Stakeholders (adapted from Carayannis, Barth, & Campbell, 2012).

Understanding the interrelation between health and well-being, social, economic and environmental spheres allows for the identification of actions that will cause synergies with others (i.e., a greater number of green spaces could create improvements in air quality and higher levels of perceived well-being), but also trade-offs (i.e., a greater amount of green spaces can cause gentrification phenomena). Planning to prevent negative and incorporate positive trade-offs and synergies into the NBS intervention will enable cities to avoid unintended consequences.

Collaboration between different stakeholders is essential to carry out this assessment. All components in the Quintuple Helix model should be considered (Figure 2). The objective of reaching a co-production process, understood as a deep participation that considers expert, tacit, and decision-makers knowledge, while seeking sustainable solutions that generate social resilience. Bringing together stakeholders with different knowledge is also a key driver of innovation (Frenken 2017; Handeman et al., 2015).

Each stakeholder has a particular vision of reality and how the actions

carried out are interrelated. For example, the vision environmental organizations may have on how to create more green spaces to improve citizens' quality of life is not the same as the entrepreneurs' vision on how to create green businesses in the area. Therefore, all these points of view should be debated to correctly identify the assumptions and the pathways from interventions to expected outcomes. This joint debate process must include a phase of identifying possible candidate actions. Once direct and indirect effects on expected results have been identified, stakeholders

can detect possible gaps that result from the implementation process (Qiu et al., 2018).

Within Connecting Nature Project, the mapping of the theory of change of each Front-runner city took place from joint workshops (Dumitru et al., 2019). First, a common language was established to identify city's key strategic objectives. Then, with the help of the academic partners, the association was made between these objectives and the specific associations of the NBS. The next phase was to associate the cities' objectives with specific indicators.

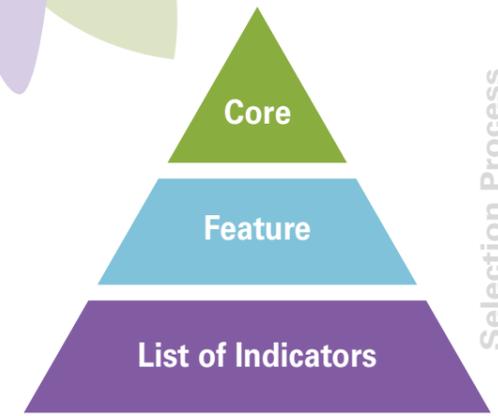


Figure 3. Indicator selection process.

3.2. Step 2. Choosing appropriate indicators

3.2.1. Characteristics of good indicators

Indicators are selected to measure the expected outcomes and outputs related to project strategic objectives. Indicators should be chosen based on the previous mapping process, where the relationship between NBS actions and the expected impact (i.e., health and well-being, social, economic and environmental dimensions) was determined.

Indicators selection process, conducted by local authorities, must be based on the state-of-the-art scientific evidence on NBS impacts while also engaging different stakeholders in a co-production process between cities and different stakeholders (i.e., collaboration between cities with universities can be an effective way of delivering this issue). The list of selected indicators cannot be disjointed. That is, the indicators selection process should not attempt to evaluate complex situations as if different

aspects of reality could be analysed in isolated silos. Notably, synergies and trade-offs previously established must be considered. Therefore, the selected indicators must form a coherent framework where social, economic, and environmental areas of impact are inter-connected. This process allows for a broad vision of how NBS interventions make it possible to advance on the range of objectives desired by cities (i.e., improving the quality of life of citizens, but also their economic possibilities and environments).

At the European level, efforts are underway to create a common framework of indicators, based on the experience of the cities and their collaboration with the different stakeholders. Therefore, a European Handbook for Practitioners is currently being elaborated and will be published soon as a cooperation of European nature-based solution projects.

Sometimes, it is very difficult to apply all indicators initially selected (i.e., for reasons of economic efficiency, time constraints, personnel

resources, etc.). In collaboration with stakeholders, cities must consider what is essential to evaluate in order to understand the NBS process and results. Prioritizing the most relevant indicators as well as gathering expressions of interest for testing different methods facilitates the process of establishing a final list of indicators used to evaluate NBS interventions (Dumitru et al., 2019).

The procedure of choosing indicators by the Connecting Nature Front-runner cities was carried out through a review of literature and a co-production process where cities have made a priority ranking to differentiate between indicators that are critical to evaluating all NBS (i.e., core) and indicators that align closely with city strategic priorities but are not relevant to all NBS (i.e., feature) (Figure 3). Core indicators are recommended for all cities in order to create a holistic evidence-based framework for nature-based solutions, while feature indicators are recommended to all cities but might not be relevant to all NBS projects.

Once the final list of indicators was obtained, cities established the alignment of each indicator with the specific objectives, and its area of influence regarding the population. As a result of this process, the theory of change can be represented for each indicator through causal maps, where the previous actions of each one and their associated consequences can be visualized (Figure 4). These causal maps could be customized to the specific context of each city.

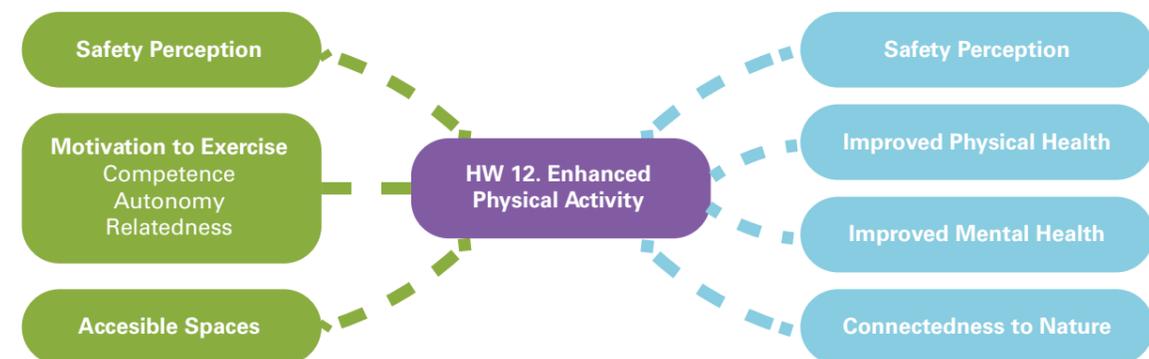


Figure 4. Indicator causal map.

3.2.2. Types of indicators

When selecting indicators, it is not only important to plan the assessment of the NBS impacts on social, environmental and economic dimensions, but it is also important to know the uses that citizens make of exemplars, or how their design and implementation process has been. Table 2 provides descriptions and examples of these three types of indicators.

Having presented the different types of indicators, it is time to focus on outcome indicators that facilitate an evaluation of NBS impact on health and well-being, social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Based on scientific and grey literature review, and through workshops with different experts and cities, Connecting Nature selected four categories of outcome indicators: Health and Well-being,

Social Cohesion and Justice, Environment, and Economic. Each of these four categories presents a comprehensive list of indicators (core and feature) which allow for a thorough assessment of expected outcomes.

All indicators have their own factsheets with detailed descriptions of methodology that will be available on the project website (<https://connectingnature.eu/>). More elaborated list of indicators will be also available on the European Handbook for Practitioners. The core indicators selected for each of the four Connecting Nature categories are presented below:

	Description	Classification and Examples
Outcome Indicators	<p>They are used to measure the expected nature-based solutions results. Based on the scientific and grey literature review, as well as through workshops with cities, the Connecting Nature project has identified four categories of outcome indicators.</p> <p>Each of the four categories presents an exhaustive list of indicators, which would provide sufficient information to assess the broad range of possible outcomes from nature-based solutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and Wellbeing (i.e. General Wellbeing and Happiness) • Social Cohesion and Justice (i.e. Empowerment) • Environmental (i.e. Air Temperature Reduction) • Economic (i.e., New Businesses 'attracted' or started and additional rates received)
Primary Indicators	<p>NBS uses are measured by these indicators, which allow defining their intervention's area of influence, by knowing the communities directly involved in it, and those that may be influenced by indirect effects</p> <p>This analysis can be done through NBS mapping, using GIS or remote devices strategies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type, frequency and duration of interaction with nature-based solutions • Perceived quality of nature-based solutions
Participatory Planning and Governance Indicators	<p>These indicators measure the outputs and outcomes from the nature-based solutions design and implementation process.</p> <p>These indicators are not intended to evaluate the final results of the interventions. However, they are considered fundamental to understand the underlying drivers of success or failure of the nature-based solutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-production (i.e. openness or inclusivity) • Governance capacities (i.e. skills or resources) • Actionable knowledge (i.e. policy learning) • Organisational development (i.e. leadership skills)

Table 2. Types of nature-based solutions indicators.

Health and Well-being

Concerning Health and Wellbeing category, the following six core indicators were selected: General wellbeing and Happiness; Prevalence, Incidence, Morbidity, and Mortality of Cardiovascular Diseases (CVD); Prevalence, Incidence, Morbidity of Chronic Stress; Mental Health Wellbeing; Enhanced Physical Activity; Perceived Restorativeness.



Social Cohesion and Justice

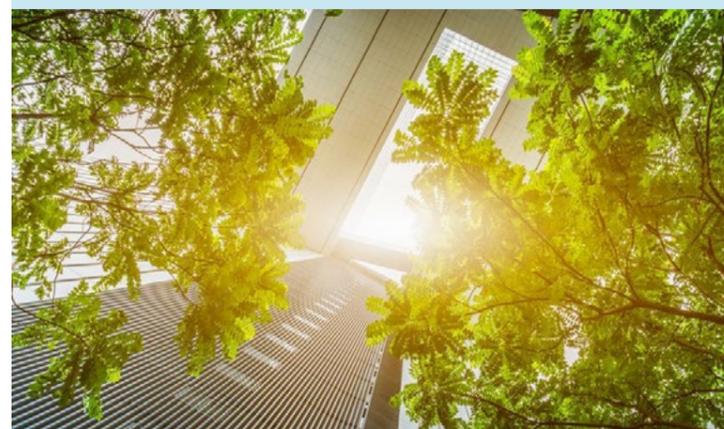
NBS social impact can be evaluated through eleven core indicators: Bonding Social Capital; Bridging Social Capital; Trust in Community; Solidarity between Neighbours; Tolerance and Respect; Perceived Safety; Actual safety; Place Attachment; Empowerment; Positive Environmental Attitudes Motivated by Contact with NBS; Environmental Identity.



Environmental

Within the category of Environment Indicators, 17 indicators were considered priorities with respect to NBS environmental impact evaluation: Air temperature reduction; Rainfall storage (water absorption capacity of NBS); Flood peak reduction/delay; Water quality improvement; Reduction of inundation risk for critical urban infrastructures (probability-economic);

Public green space distribution; Recreational value of blue-green spaces; Cultural value of blue-green spaces; Connectivity of urban green and blue spaces (structural and functional); Supporting/increasing biodiversity conservation; Species diversity; Land use change and greenspace configuration; Access to public amenities; Blue space area; Soil sealing; Change in ecosystem service provision; Community garden area per capita and in a defined distance.



Economic

For the evaluation of NBS impact in the economic dimension, five indicators were deemed to be core: New Businesses 'Attracted' or Started and Additional Rates Received; Net Additional Jobs Created/ Enabled by NBS; Increase in Tourism; Net Impact on Public Expenditure from NBS Implementation; Private Finance Attracted to NBS/Bioeconomy.

3.3. Step 3: Developing a data plan for impact evaluation

3.3.1. Baseline vs outcome data

Once the indicators are selected, the next step consists in developing a plan for impact evaluation. Implementing a good data plan is essential to correctly analyse the intervention results and establish their effectiveness. This data plan must be adjusted both to city's theory of change and to previously selected indicators.

In order to develop a data plan, data availability must be established and clarified. Differences between two moments in time can only be gauged if data prior to implementing NBS interventions is compared with data subsequent to NBS implementation. Baseline data is information that indicates the initial (i.e., prior to NBS implementation) status of a particular indicator. Baseline information can be obtained in two ways: 1. Accessing data available in official reports (i.e., obesity rates or nitrogen dioxide levels), or 2. Collecting data before NBS implementation. On the other hand, outcome data is represented by information obtained once NBS interventions were implemented. Unlike baseline data, it is necessary to collect outcome data during or after NBS execution. Based on outcome data, a new situation generated by NBS implementation can be compared with baseline data (Figure 5).

Available data can come from different sources: city and external sources documents, official statistics, national or international organizations reports, peer-reviewed articles, books, and

research reports. In this phase, the co-production process is again of relevance, since collaboration between stakeholders belonging to the Quintuple Helix model fosters efficient access to available data in order to evaluate the NBS.

City of Genk's co-production workshops offers a fine example of this stage in the process. City team members held several workshops aimed at "bringing together stakeholders to identify existing data" (Dumitru et al., 2019). In this case, available data relevant to assessing NBS effectiveness was varied: prevalence or incidence of diseases statistics, physical activity reports, crimes reporting, economic indicators of local business associations, or indexes of meteorological stations in the city.

The NBS monitoring and evaluation process is ongoing and continuous over time. Once this stage of the framework process is complete, outcome data can become baseline information for future NBS interventions. If we do not have baseline data or a control situation (a similar context but without the NBS), there is no possibility to explore the causal relationships between the NBS actions and the NBS impact (s) assessed. In the absence of baseline data, one can only provide descriptive accounts (i.e., the environmental pollutants levels in an area) or draw momentary comparisons between sub-groups (i.e., differences in physical activity levels across different population groups). If baseline data is located or collected, NBS implementation effects can be effectively explored and reach valid conclusions.

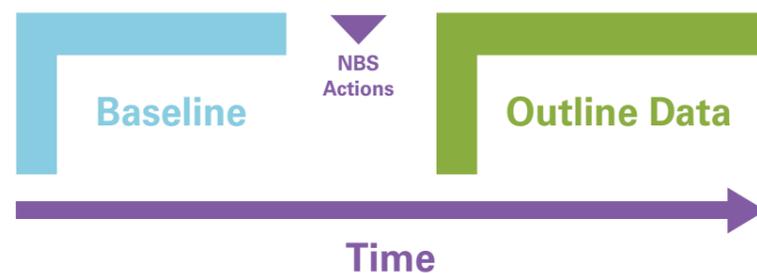


Figure 5. Baseline vs Outcome data.



3.3.2 Things to consider in drawing valid conclusions on NBS impacts

Valid conclusions assumption is the most important criterion in establishing the presence of expected impact upon NBS implementation. That is, check that what was intended with the NBS interventions has been achieved, as impacts are determined by multiple factors. When planners and decision-makers implement a policy through an NBS, at the same time there could be multiple other phenomena that act on the expected result (i.e., creating a park in a neighbourhood to encourage physical activity vs other community sports club programs, which are conducted at the same time, and which also seek to increase physical activity levels).

Therefore, not only it is necessary to consider direct and indirect effects between the actions, and the pathways of synergies and trade-offs previously discussed, but also to identify causality between the actions carried out in NBS implementation and different dimensions of health and well-being, social, environmental, and economic impact (i.e., the creation of a new green area has really been the cause of increased physical activity in neighbours and not another one). To document these impacts, it is important to compare the situations before and after the intervention or between similar contexts and user groups (i.e., compare the levels of

physical activity in a neighbourhood where the new park was created vs. other neighbourhoods where there are no parks or gyms to exercise in).

The in-depth analysis required by this step is fundamental to data interpretation and NBS impact assessment. This step takes considerable amounts of time and commitment. Therefore, we recommend allotting proper time to navigate this phase in a way that ensures robust impact assessment. Once causal chains were considered, causality analysis facilitates valid conclusions on NBS interventions. On the whole, we recommend close contact with academic partners for indicators selection and accessing their expertise in causality analysis to monitor and evaluate NBS impact.

3.4. Step 4: Implementing the data plan

3.4.1. Characteristics of appropriate method(s)

The next phase in assessing NBS effectiveness rests in choosing the necessary methods and instruments to measure selected indicators. Here too, collaboration with academic partners and universities (or data analysts in relevant consulting/public bodies) in setting up appropriate methodologies is highly recommended. Each indicator is to be assigned suitable data collection method(s). As shown in Table 3, relationship between

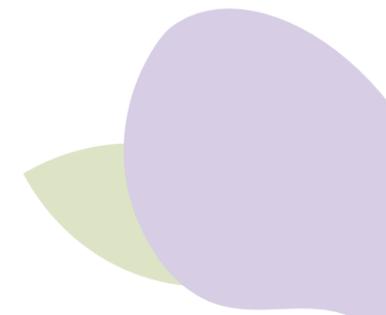
indicator and its measurement method is determined by data quality, temporal adequacy, and cost-benefit ratio assessment. Connecting Nature indicator factsheets include methodologies that follows these criteria.

Optimally, data collection requires attending to numerous indicators with multiple methods, instruments, and data sources. Hence, collaboration among different stakeholders is essential to developing and implementing the data plan. First, citizen collaboration is needed not only to apply the instruments, but also to obtain knowledge about NBS evolution throughout implementation phases. Citizens can become empowered in relation to their local spaces. Secondly, collaboration with partners in the industry can provide valuable information for measuring economic indicators, while media can help in data collection and disseminating the importance of

evaluation. Industry can also generate data to support product development, marketing and decision-making. Finally, the universities are an indispensable partner in executing all steps along the process. If managed well, the process evolves along symbiotic dynamics where all entities benefit. On one hand, local governments obtain the necessary information to evaluate their interventions. On the other hand, the academic sector capitalizes on useful data and knowledge which can be further disseminated to advance the state of the art in social, environmental and economic research worldwide.

	Description
Data Quality	The data quality has to be scientifically valid; it determines the possibility of performing causality analyses. To obtain quality data, it is highly recommended to select standardised instruments (scientifically tested).
Temporal Adequacy	Really exhaustive standardised instruments allow having very precise information on certain indicators (e.g. a 240-item questionnaire on levels of well-being and mental health). However, this comprehensiveness can be time consuming, which may be excessive if other instruments have to be applied to evaluate different indicators.
Cost Benefit Ratio	The ideal situation is to use the best scientific methodologies, but sometimes cities have to choose based on their economic capacity and resources. However, the choice of methodology should never be unscientific.

Table 3. Factors to consider when choosing a method.



4 | Transferring NBS evaluation process and results to other cities

The last phase of the monitoring and evaluation process consists in sharing the results with all those stakeholders belonging to the Quintuple Helix model (i.e., academia, industry, government, media, and natural environment), and also with the wider European and global communities. Several joint collaborative actions can help to disseminate results: scientific articles, official reports from administrations, congresses, open conferences, webinars, talks, citizen meetings, or interviews.

This phase should be covered even if results do not reflect desired impact NBS objectives. It is as important to indicate that NBS contributed to desired impact(s) as it is to report when NBS interventions did not contribute to expected outcomes or even contributed to adverse consequences. By employing ethical research and data dissemination practices, NBS actions can be objectively analysed to see how NBS worked. This way, NBS implementation can be replicated and adapted by other cities within a continuous improvement framework.

In essence, the final objective of NBS evaluation should be to create and share greater accumulated NBS knowledge. This approach is necessary to facilitate the silo-busting of departments and the unlocking of diverse funding sources that is essential to scaling up nature-based solution delivery. Therefore, creation of learning and mentoring links between cities is a guarantee for effective NBS replication within a framework of ongoing improvement and adaptation.

The Oppla platform, an NBS repository of the European Union, is an indispensable resource in sharing information on NBS implementation between cities. Oppla (2019) aims to simplify the creation, acquisition, and transfer of knowledge for a better management of the environment. This free access platform is designed for the benefit of different sectors (i.e., science, policy and practice; public, private and voluntary sectors; organizations large and small; private individuals).

The process of knowledge transfer is the essence of the Connecting Nature Project which seeks to forge the relationship between cities with great experience in NBS establishment, evaluation and monitoring (i.e., Front-runner Cities) and cities that pursue such knowledge (i.e., Fast-follower and Multiplier Cities). In order to support the scaling up of NBS across Europe, the sharing of learning and experiences is critical. European cities could become examples of well evaluated and monitored NBS interventions, and informational hubs for acquired knowledge dissemination and transfer.

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