



Enhancing environmental sustainability of cities and communities through a neighbourhood-centred approach

N-GREEN Toolkit



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N-GREEN – Enhancing environmental sustainability of cities and communities through a neighbourhood-centred approach is an Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships in Vocational Education and Training (KA210-ADU) that aims to support Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), community workers and local stakeholders in promoting sustainability through neighbourhood-based participation, community engagement and local action.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Key Concepts

This chapter introduces the N-GREEN Toolkit, its purpose and key concepts. It provides a shared understanding of sustainability and explains how local, neighbourhood-based actions can support environmental and social change.

1.1 What is N-GREEN and why this Toolkit

The N-GREEN project aims to support Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in promoting environmental sustainability at neighbourhood level through participatory approaches. It recognises that local communities play a key role in addressing environmental challenges, as many sustainability-related behaviours and decisions take place in everyday life and within local contexts.

The N-GREEN Toolkit serves as the primary product of the N-GREEN project. It is designed as a practical guide to support organisations, facilitators and community actors in designing and implementing sustainability actions together with local communities. Rather than providing theoretical knowledge only, it focuses on actionable steps, tools and examples that can be directly applied in real contexts.

The methodology employed in producing this document is as follows:

- Focus groups, referred to as N-GREEN Talks, were conducted in each participating country (Italy, Spain and Denmark) to identify the most relevant needs, challenges and opportunities related to environmental sustainability at neighbourhood level. These activities involved experts, practitioners, and representatives of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working in the fields of climate change, community development and sustainability. A total of 15 participants took part in these activities across the three countries.

- Each partner collected and analysed the results of the national focus groups. The lead partner, Mindleap, compiled all findings into a comprehensive report summarising the key insights and identifying common themes across countries.
- Based on these findings, the overall structure of the N-GREEN Toolkit was defined and shared among project partners. The development of the Toolkit content was carried out through a collaborative process, with each partner contributing specific sections according to their expertise and role within the project.

The Toolkit is structured into distinct chapters, covering the following themes:

1. Understanding and engaging the neighbourhood: supports organisations in analysing local contexts and activating community participation.
2. Designing and implementing sustainability actions: guides users through a step-by-step process to co-design and implement local initiatives.
3. Communication, behaviour change and impact: focuses on how to engage communities, promote sustainable behaviours and measure results.
4. Case Studies and Good Practices: presents real examples of community-driven initiatives, highlighting practical approaches, tools and lessons learned that can be adapted to other contexts.

1.2 Understanding Environmental and Social Sustainability

The N-GREEN project focuses on environmental sustainability, supporting actions that reduce environmental impact and promote more sustainable ways of living at neighbourhood level.

Environmental sustainability refers to the responsible use of natural resources and the protection of ecosystems, ensuring that environmental systems can support both present and future generations. In practice, this includes actions such as:

- reducing energy consumption
- promoting sustainable mobility
- protecting biodiversity
- using resources efficiently

However, environmental sustainability cannot be achieved through technical solutions alone. As highlighted by international organisations such as the European Environment Agency and OECD, it also depends on people's behaviours, everyday choices and the active participation of communities.

For this reason, the N-GREEN approach also integrates social sustainability as a key enabling factor.

Social sustainability refers to the capacity of communities to ensure well-being, inclusion, equity and quality of life, allowing all people to participate in and benefit from sustainability processes.

These two dimensions are closely interconnected. Environmental actions (the objective) are more effective when they are inclusive, accessible and supported by the community, which provides the conditions to achieve them.

Example Box

A cycling initiative will only be successful if it is safe and accessible for different groups, including children and older people.

Energy-saving actions are more effective when residents understand their benefits and are actively involved in implementing them.

1.3 The Neighbourhood-Centred Approach

The N-GREEN Toolkit adopts a **neighbourhood-centred approach**, focusing on the local scale as the most effective level to design and implement sustainability actions.

This approach is based on a key principle:

sustainability becomes effective when it is rooted in everyday life and shaped together with the community.

Research and policy frameworks highlight the importance of working at neighbourhood level. For example, the OECD emphasises that neighbourhood-based approaches can respond more flexibly to local conditions and better address complex social and environmental challenges. Similarly, studies on urban sustainability identify the neighbourhood as a key scale where environmental and social dynamics interact and can be effectively influenced.

Working at neighbourhood level also helps reduce complexity. By focusing on a smaller geographical scale, organisations can more easily identify key challenges, prioritise needs and develop targeted actions. This makes sustainability initiatives more manageable, relevant and adaptable over time.

Within this approach, organisations do not apply predefined solutions. Instead, they work within a specific local context to:

- understand local needs, challenges and resources
- engage residents and stakeholders
- co-design actions adapted to the local context

- test and adapt solutions through direct implementation

Neighbourhoods are particularly effective spaces for action because they are:

- places where daily behaviours take place (mobility, energy use, consumption)
- environments where relationships and trust can be built
- contexts where actions can generate visible and immediate results

For this reason, the N-GREEN approach combines three key elements:

- **Place-based action**

Working in a specific neighbourhood to ensure that actions respond to real needs and conditions.

- **Participatory processes**

Involving residents and stakeholders in decision-making and implementation to increase relevance and ownership.

- **Practical experimentation**

Testing small-scale actions that can be adapted over time based on feedback and results.

This method allows organisations to move from abstract sustainability goals to concrete, locally relevant actions, increasing both effectiveness and community engagement. Evidence also shows that strengthening community engagement at neighbourhood level is essential to build resilience and support long-term sustainability transitions.

Example Box

A local organisation aims to reduce energy consumption in a neighbourhood.

Instead of launching a general awareness campaign, it:

- engages residents to identify main issues (e.g. high energy costs)
- co-designs simple solutions (e.g. energy-saving practices, shared sessions)
- tests actions with a small group
- adapts them based on feedback

This approach makes the action more relevant, understandable and effective, while also increasing participation and long-term engagement.

1.4 The Role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are non-governmental, non-profit organisations that represent the interests, needs and values of communities. According to European and international frameworks, CSOs play a key role in supporting participation, inclusion and local development processes.

Within the N-GREEN approach, CSOs are essential actors in enabling sustainability at neighbourhood level.

Why CSOs are effective

CSOs are particularly effective in promoting sustainability because they operate close to local communities and can act directly within everyday contexts.

They:

- have a strong understanding of local needs and dynamics
- are able to build trust over time
- can engage diverse and often underrepresented groups
- are flexible and able to adapt actions to specific contexts

Because of these characteristics, CSOs are well positioned to support behaviour change and community participation, which are essential conditions for achieving environmental sustainability.

Roles of CSOs in the N-GREEN approach

In practice, CSOs take on multiple roles within neighbourhood-based sustainability processes:

- **Facilitators**
They design and manage participatory processes, creating spaces where people can express needs, share ideas and co-design solutions (*e.g. organising community workshops to identify local sustainability priorities*).
- **Connectors**
They link different actors, including residents, public institutions, local organisations and experts, helping to build collaborative networks (*e.g. bringing together citizens, local authorities and schools to develop a neighbourhood initiative*).
- **Enablers**
They support communities in turning ideas into action, providing tools, guidance and

opportunities for engagement (*e.g. supporting residents in setting up a community garden or energy-saving initiative*).

- **Mediators**

They help balance different perspectives and interests, ensuring that sustainability actions are inclusive and accessible (*e.g. facilitating dialogue between residents and local authorities to address concerns about a new mobility plan*).

CSOs are also particularly effective because they:

- operate close to local communities
- understand local contexts and dynamics
- can build trust over time
- are flexible and able to adapt actions to specific needs

1.5 Sustainability and Quality of Life

Sustainability is closely linked to **quality of life**, understood as the combination of people's daily living conditions, health and overall well-being.

Environmental conditions directly influence how people live, move and interact within their neighbourhood. As highlighted by the European Environment Agency, reducing pollution is essential to protect human health and improve quality of life. For this reason, sustainability actions are not only about long-term environmental goals, but also about improving everyday life in concrete and visible ways.

Recognising this connection is important for two reasons. First, it helps to better understand the real impact of sustainability. Second, it provides a strategic way to engage communities, as people are more likely to participate when they see clear and immediate benefits.

Why sustainability matters

Sustainability actions generate tangible benefits that contribute to improving quality of life at neighbourhood level:

- **Better health**

Reduced air pollution and access to green spaces improve both physical and mental health.

(e.g. creating a small green area in the neighbourhood can reduce stress and encourage outdoor activities).

- **Improved daily living conditions**

Cleaner, safer and more liveable environments enhance everyday experiences.

(e.g. pedestrian-friendly streets reduce noise and make public spaces more enjoyable).

- **Economic benefits**
Efficient use of resources can reduce costs for households.
(e.g. simple energy-saving practices can lower electricity bills).
- **Stronger social connections**
Shared activities and local initiatives build relationships and trust.
(e.g. organising community events or collective projects increases interaction among residents).
- **Environmental protection**
Sustainable behaviours reduce environmental impact and contribute to climate goals.
(e.g. reducing waste or promoting cycling instead of car use lowers emissions).

Toolkit Note

These benefits can be directly used as key messages in communication strategies (see Chapter 4), helping organisations connect sustainability with people's everyday priorities.

Example:

Instead of communicating:

- Instead of:
"Reduce emissions to fight climate change"
- It is more effective to say:
"Save energy to reduce your bills and improve comfort at home"

Similarly:

- Instead of:
"Promote sustainable mobility"
- It can be communicated as:
"Make your neighbourhood safer and more pleasant to walk and cycle"

Further resources

1. The European Green Deal

Type: Policy Framework

Source: European Commission

Language(s): All EU languages

Short Description: EU strategy for climate neutrality, highlighting the importance of inclusive and participatory transitions.

License/Attribution: © European Union (reuse allowed with attribution)

Link/Attachment: <https://commission.europa.eu>

2. European Climate Law

Type: Policy Framework

Source: European Commission

Language(s): All EU languages

Short Description: Establishes the legal framework for achieving climate neutrality in the EU by 2050 and sets intermediate targets for emission reduction.

License/Attribution: © European Union (reuse allowed with attribution)

Link/Attachment: https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/european-climate-law_en

3. EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change

Type: Policy Strategy

Source: European Commission

Language(s): All EU languages

Short Description: Supports actions to strengthen resilience and adapt to the impacts of climate change at all levels, including local communities.

License/Attribution: © European Union (reuse allowed with attribution)

Link/Attachment: https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-and-resilience-climate-change/eu-adaptation-strategy_en

4. Urban Mobility Framework

Type: Policy Framework

Source: European Commission

Language(s): EN (available in multiple EU languages)

Short Description: Provides a framework for sustainable urban mobility, promoting active mobility (walking and cycling), accessibility and improved quality of life in cities.

License/Attribution: © European Union (reuse allowed with attribution)

Link/Attachment: <https://transport.ec.europa.eu>

5. Europe's State of the Environment 2025

Type: Report

Source: European Environment Agency

Language(s): EN

Short Description: Provides an up-to-date assessment of Europe's environmental challenges, highlighting the role of local action, behavioural change and community engagement in sustainability transitions.

License/Attribution: © EEA (reuse with attribution)

Link/Attachment: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/europe-environment-2025>

6. From Community Vulnerability to Resilience

Type: Technical Brief

Source: Council of Europe Development Bank

Language(s): EN

Short Description: Shows how community engagement strengthens resilience and supports sustainability at local level.

License/Attribution: © CEB

Link/Attachment: <https://coebank.org>

7. How's Life? Measuring Well-being

Type: Report

Source: OECD

Language(s): EN (summary in multiple languages)

Short Description: Defines quality of life through dimensions such as health, environment, living conditions and well-being.

License/Attribution: © OECD (reuse with attribution)

Link/Attachment: <https://www.oecd.org/how-s-life>

8. Urban Green Spaces and Health

Type: Scientific Report

Source: World Health Organization

Language(s): EN

Short Description: Shows how access to green spaces improves physical and mental health and overall well-being.

License/Attribution: © WHO

Link/Attachment: <https://www.who.int>

9. Zero Pollution Monitoring and Outlook 2025

Type: Report

Source: European Environment Agency

Language(s): EN

Short Description: Assesses progress towards EU zero pollution targets, highlighting links between environmental conditions, human health and quality of life.

License/Attribution: © EEA

Link/Attachment: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/zero-pollution-monitoring-and-outlook-report>



Chapter 2

Understanding and Engaging the Neighbourhood

This chapter guides organisations in analysing their neighbourhood and engaging stakeholders. It introduces a practical, step-by-step approach to identify local priorities, map actors and design effective community engagement strategies.

2.1 Understanding the Local Context

Understanding the local context is the first step in designing effective sustainability actions.

A neighbourhood should be understood as both a physical environment and a social system. It includes streets, buildings and public spaces, but also relationships, daily practices and local dynamics. Considering both dimensions is essential to identify relevant challenges and design actions that are realistic and meaningful for the community.

The neighbourhood scale is particularly suitable for sustainability action. It is large enough to include key issues such as mobility, environmental conditions and public space, but small enough to allow concrete, visible and community-based interventions.

Step 1- Understanding the local context

To make the analysis manageable and useful, it is important to focus on a limited number of key aspects that are directly linked to possible actions.

Rather than trying to analyse everything, organisations should concentrate on four main dimensions:

1. Physical and spatial conditions

This includes how the neighbourhood is organised and how spaces are used.

Key aspects to observe:

- public spaces (e.g. squares, parks, shared areas)
- street layout and accessibility
- presence of green areas
- barriers or underused spaces

(e.g. a park that is not used, a street that is difficult to cross, a lack of shaded areas)

What to look for:

Observe the neighbourhood directly and use simple mapping tools to understand how spaces are organised and used in everyday life.

Based on observation and mapping, identify:

- **Spaces that are:**
 - underused
 - inaccessible
 - poorly designed
- **Opportunities for improvement:**
 - unused or poorly maintained green areas
 - spaces that could be activated or repurposed
 - areas where small changes could have visible impact

Tools and templates

- [OpenStreetMap](#): provides a free and open map of streets, public spaces and services, useful to identify spatial features and understand how the neighbourhood is organised.
- [Copernicus Urban Atlas](#): provides detailed information on land use and green areas across European cities, helping to identify urban structure and availability of open spaces.

2. Environmental conditions

This refers to the environmental quality of the neighbourhood and its impact on daily life.

Key aspects to observe:

- air quality and pollution sources
- noise and traffic
- heat and lack of shade
- waste management
- presence of vegetation and biodiversity

(e.g. areas exposed to high traffic pollution, lack of trees, poor waste management)

What to look for:

Observe the neighbourhood directly and use available environmental data to understand local conditions.

Based on observation and data, identify:

Environmental risks:

- areas exposed to high levels of air or noise pollution
- streets with heavy traffic
- overheated areas with little shade
- poorly managed waste or lack of recycling facilities

Opportunities for improvement:

- spaces where trees or vegetation could be added
- areas where traffic reduction could improve air quality
- locations suitable for small-scale environmental interventions

Tools and templates

- [Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service \(CAMS\)](#): provides four-day forecasts of air quality across Europe, showing levels of key pollutants, pollen, and airborne particles.
- [EEA Noise Observation & Information Service](#) provides strategic maps about environmental noise levels across Europe, highlighting exposure from sources like road traffic, railways, airports, and industry.
- [Hush City](#) use crowdsourced data to map quiet areas.
- [WeCount](#) use crowdsourced data to map traffic flow.

3. Daily life and mobility

This dimension focuses on how people move and access services in their everyday life.

Key aspects to observe:

- walkability and safety for pedestrians
- access to services (shops, schools, healthcare)
- use of bicycles or public transport
- distances and travel habits

What to look for:

Observe mobility patterns and combine spatial analysis with user experience.

Based on observation and mapping, identify:

Mobility challenges:

- unsafe or difficult walking routes
- barriers for pedestrians (e.g. traffic, poor lighting, narrow sidewalks)
- limited access to services within walking distance
- low use of public transport or cycling

Opportunities for improvement:

- routes that could be made safer for walking or cycling
- areas where access to services could be improved
- spaces where mobility interventions could reduce car dependency

 *Example:*

A street near a school has no safe crossing → parents use cars instead of walking.

Residents need a car to reach basic services → low walkability.

Tools and templates

- [OpenRouteService](#): calculates walking, cycling and driving routes, helping assess distances and accessibility to services.
- Local public transport open data (GTFS): provides information on routes, frequency and coverage of public transport systems.

4. Community and local actors

This includes the social dimension of the neighbourhood and the people involved.

Key aspects to identify:

- local organisations and associations
- active citizens and informal groups
- levels of participation and interaction
- presence of vulnerable or underrepresented groups

(e.g. strong local associations, but limited involvement of young people or elderly residents)

What to look for:

Engage with the community and gather information through direct interaction.

Based on observation and interaction, identify:

Existing actors:

- active organisations and community groups
- informal networks and local leaders
- institutions involved in the area

Gaps and opportunities:

- groups that are not actively involved
- communities that are harder to reach
- opportunities to strengthen participation and collaboration

Tools and templates

- Local municipal websites and open data portals: provide information on registered organisations, services and community initiatives.
- [URBACT](#): provides examples and case studies of stakeholder engagement and local governance in European cities.
- [Stakeholder Mapping Tool](#): supports the identification and organisation of stakeholders based on their role, interest and level of involvement.

Step 2- Identifying priorities and key issues

The four dimensions explored in Step 1 should not be considered separately. In most neighbourhoods, environmental, spatial, mobility and social issues are interconnected.

For example:

- limited green spaces may contribute to heat and reduce the use of public spaces
- heavy traffic may affect both air quality and pedestrian safety
- underused public spaces may limit opportunities for social interaction

For this reason, the aim of the analysis is not simply to describe the neighbourhood, but to identify the issues that have the greatest influence on everyday life and sustainability.

To support this process, organisations can follow a simple, action-oriented method:

- **Phase 1: Identify recurring issues**
Look for problems that appear across different dimensions (e.g. traffic affecting both mobility and environmental quality).
- **Phase 2: Prioritise based on relevance and feasibility**
Focus on issues that are both important for the community and realistically addressable at neighbourhood level. They should be:
 - are relevant for the community
 - affect everyday life
 - are feasible to address at neighbourhood level

Avoid selecting too many priorities. A small number of well-defined challenges is more effective.

Tools and templates

- [Neighbourhood Analysis Sheet](#) (Phase 1): To collect observations and describe the local context, including key issues, resources and opportunities.
- [Priority Selection Grid](#) (Phase 2): To help organisations prioritise issues based on relevance and feasibility.

Step 3- Mapping stakeholders

Stakeholder mapping should be carried out in parallel with the neighbourhood analysis, once key issues and priorities have been identified.

As organisations explore the local context, key actors will naturally emerge in relation to specific issues, spaces or activities. For example, a problem related to public space may highlight the role of local associations, while mobility issues may involve schools, local authorities or active citizen groups.

This reflects a **multi-stakeholder approach**, where different types of actors contribute to understanding and addressing local challenges.

Once the main issues and priorities have been identified, organisations can structure this information into a stakeholder map, clarifying:

- who is involved
- what role they play
- how they could contribute to future actions

Stakeholders may include:

- **Local organisations and associations**
(e.g. NGOs, community groups, cultural or environmental organisations)
- **Public institutions**
(e.g. municipalities, schools, local services)
- **Informal groups and active citizens**
(e.g. neighbourhood groups, volunteers, community leaders)

Mapping stakeholders helps to:

- understand existing relationships
- identify potential partners
- ensure inclusive participation

It is also important to consider not only visible actors, but also less represented or harder-to-reach groups, who may require specific engagement strategies.

Tools and templates

- [Stakeholder Mapping Tool](#): To identify and categorise stakeholders based on their role, level of involvement and potential contribution.

2.2 Designing Community Engagement at Neighbourhood Level

The participatory phase builds directly on the results of the neighbourhood analysis.

The issues and priorities identified before, together with the stakeholder mapping, provide a clear basis for defining how participation should be structured.

At this stage, the objective is to translate this information into a simple and realistic engagement strategy that answers a few key questions:

- who to involve

- on which issues
- with what level of engagement
- and why participation is relevant for them

This helps ensure that participation is not generic, but focused, meaningful and adapted to the local context.

Step 1- From analysis to engagement

Stakeholder mapping and priority issues should be used together to define how to engage different groups.

They help organisations move from:

- a general idea of “the community”
→ to
- a clear identification of specific stakeholders to involve

Different stakeholders require different types of engagement.

This Toolkit adopts a graduated approach to participation, where the level of engagement can vary depending on the stakeholder and the objective:

- **Inform** → provide clear and accessible information
- **Consult** → collect feedback and perspectives
- **Involve** → engage stakeholders in discussions
- **Collaborate** → work together to shape solutions

This allows organisations to design participation processes that are targeted, realistic and adapted to the local context.

Step 2 - Focusing participation on concrete issues

Participation should be directly linked to the priorities identified in the analysis phase.

This means:

- engaging stakeholders around **specific local issues**
- using real examples and situations
- avoiding abstract or overly general discussions

For example:

- discussing mobility issues in relation to a specific street or area

- exploring the use of a particular public space
- identifying environmental concerns in a defined location

This approach makes participation more meaningful and easier for people to engage with.

Step 3 - Choosing appropriate engagement formats

Different stakeholders and issues may require different forms of engagement.

The choice of engagement format should be based on:

- the level of participation required (inform, consult, involve, collaborate)
- the type of stakeholders involved
- the available time and resources

Examples include:

- Inform → fact sheets, online content
- Consult → surveys, interviews, feedback sessions
- Involve → workshops, group discussions
- Collaborate → co-design sessions, working groups

The goal is to create accessible and context-appropriate opportunities for participation.

Step 4- Ensuring effective participation

To be effective, participation should:

- be clearly connected to identified issues
- involve the right stakeholders
- allow participants to contribute meaningfully
- provide a clear and perceived benefit for participants

Participation is more effective when people understand what they gain from being involved.

As highlighted in Chapter 1, sustainability actions can generate tangible benefits for everyday life, including improved health, better living conditions and economic advantages.

At neighbourhood level, these benefits should be made explicit and connected to concrete situations. For example:

- improving air quality or access to green spaces can support **physical and mental health**
- reducing traffic or improving public spaces can enhance **daily living conditions**

- promoting efficient use of resources can lead to **economic savings for households**

Framing participation around these tangible benefits helps increase motivation and engagement, making it easier for people to see the value of being involved.

It is important that participants understand:

- why they are being involved
- what they are contributing to
- how their input will be used

This helps avoid tokenistic participation and increases the quality and sustainability of engagement.

Step 5- Anticipating common challenges

Designing and managing community engagement at neighbourhood level often involves practical challenges. Anticipating them in advance helps organisations design more effective processes.

Common challenges include:

- **Low participation or lack of interest**
→ Start with small, visible actions and clearly communicate the benefits of participation
- **Limited trust in institutions or organisations**
→ Build trust gradually through transparency and consistent engagement
- **Difficulty in reaching certain groups**
→ Use different channels and formats, and collaborate with local intermediaries or community leaders
- **Unrealistic expectations or misunderstandings**
→ Clearly communicate the scope of the process and what can realistically be achieved

Addressing these challenges early helps create more inclusive and sustainable participation processes.

Step 6 -Defining your Engagement Strategy

Based on the neighbourhood analysis and stakeholder mapping, organisations should define a clear and structured engagement strategy.

This strategy brings together all the key elements identified so far and translates them into a practical plan.

A simple engagement strategy should include:

- **Phase 1 – Select the priority issues**

Start from the issues identified in Section 2.1 and select a limited number of priorities, that are relevant for the community and feasible at neighbourhood level

- **Phase 2 – Identify the stakeholders to involve**
For each priority issue, identify the relevant stakeholders.
- **Phase 3 – Define the level of engagement**
Decide how to involve each stakeholder group, using the appropriate level of engagement (inform, consult, involve, collaborate)
- **Phase 4 – Clarify the benefits for participation**
Define why participation is relevant for each stakeholder.
- **Phase 5 – Choose appropriate engagement formats**
Select simple and suitable ways to engage stakeholders, based on the level of engagement, the type of stakeholders available time and resources (e.g. meetings, workshops, informal interactions).

The goal is to ensure that engagement is:

- coherent with the local context
- focused on concrete issues
- realistic in terms of time and resources

Tools and templates

- [Participation Planning Tool](#): To define how to engage different stakeholders based on the issues they are connected to, as well as their roles, interests, level of engagement, and expected benefits.



Chapter 3

From Ideas to Action: Designing Local Sustainability Initiatives

This chapter supports organisations in turning local insights into action. It provides a structured approach to define challenges, co-design and develop practical sustainability initiatives.

3.1 Defining Local Challenges

Building on the analysis carried out in Chapter 2, organisations should now move from identifying priority issues to defining a clear challenge to address.

At this stage, the goal is not to find solutions yet, but to better understand and frame the problem. A well-defined challenge provides a strong foundation for all subsequent steps.

Step 1 – Define the problem

Start by describing the problem behind the selected issue.

A good problem statement should describe:

- what is happening
- where it happens
- who is affected
- why it matters

🔗 This step is inspired by problem framing approaches used in participatory planning and design thinking, which emphasise clarity before action.

Example Box

✗ General statement:

“There is too much traffic in the neighbourhood.”

✓ Problem statement:

“High traffic levels in X street reduce pedestrian safety and discourage walking, especially for children and elderly residents.”

Tools and templates

- [Problem Definition Template](#): helps structure the description of the issue, context, affected groups and impact.

Step 2 – Understand causes and effects

Before moving to action, briefly reflect on:

- the main causes of the problem (why it happens)
- the main effects (what it leads to)

This helps:

- better understand the issue
- avoid superficial solutions
- identify more effective actions

Tools and templates

- [Cause–Effect Reflection Template](#): supports a simple identification of main causes and consequences of the problem.

Step 3 – Define a simple objective

Translate the problem into a clear and actionable objective.

The objective should describe the desired improvement, not the solution.

To be effective, the objective should be:

- **specific** (clearly focused on a defined issue)
- **measurable** (it should be possible to assess progress)
- **achievable** (realistic at neighbourhood level)
- **relevant** (connected to community needs)

- **time-bound** (linked to a timeframe, when possible)

☞ This reflects the **SMART approach**, widely used in project planning to define clear and realistic objectives.

Example Box

Problem:

“High traffic levels in X street reduce pedestrian safety.”

Objective:

“Improve pedestrian safety and accessibility in X street.”

Tools and templates

- [Objective Definition Template](#): helps transform the problem into a clear and realistic objective following simple SMART criteria.

3.2 Co-designing Solutions

Once the challenge has been clearly defined, the next step is to work with stakeholders to develop practical and shared solutions.

The purpose of co-design is to:

- validate the identified challenge
- integrate different perspectives
- define realistic and shared actions

Not all stakeholders need to be involved in the same way.

As introduced in Chapter 2, different levels of participation may apply depending on:

- the stakeholder’s role
- the type of contribution required
- the phase of the process

For this reason:

- some stakeholders may simply be informed
- others may be consulted to collect perspectives
- while a smaller group may be directly involved in co-design and collaborative decision-making

☞ Co-design activities should focus primarily on stakeholders who are directly connected to the challenge and able to contribute to the development of solutions.

Step 1 – Select stakeholders for co-design

Start by identifying which stakeholders should actively participate in the co-design process.

Focus on stakeholders who:

- are directly affected by the issue
- have relevant local knowledge or experience
- can contribute to implementation or decision-making

Other stakeholders may be informed or consulted without participating directly in co-design activities.

Tools and templates

- [Stakeholder Mapping Tool](#) (from Chapter 2): helps identify which stakeholders should participate directly in co-design activities.

Step 2 – Share and validate the challenge

Present the problem and objective identified before.

Invite participants to:

- confirm whether the challenge reflects their experience
- add missing perspectives
- identify aspects that may need adjustment

☞ The goal is to create a shared understanding of the issue before discussing solutions.

Tools and templates

- [Problem Definition Template](#) (from Section 3.1): supports the presentation and discussion of the identified challenge.
- [Cause–Effect Reflection Template](#) (from Section 3.1): helps participants validate causes and impacts.

Step 3 – Generate and prioritise solutions

Once the challenge has been validated, invite participants to propose possible solutions and actions.

Encourage:

- practical suggestions
- local knowledge and lived experience
- different perspectives

Examples:

- identifying safer walking routes
- proposing temporary uses for underused spaces
- suggesting small environmental improvements

At this stage, participants should first generate ideas without immediately evaluating them.

Once different options have been identified, discuss:

- what is realistic at neighbourhood level
- available resources and constraints
- potential benefits for the community
- possible barriers to implementation

Participants can then:

- combine similar ideas
- adapt proposals
- prioritise the most relevant and feasible solutions

🔗 The objective is to move from a broad range of ideas to a small number of realistic and shared solutions that stakeholders are willing to support.

Tools and templates

- [Co-design Session Template](#): supports collaborative discussions and idea generation activities.
- [Brainstorming Canvas](#): helps participants organise ideas visually.
- [Priority Selection Grid](#) (from Chapter 2): helps assess feasibility, relevance and potential impact of ideas.

Step 4 – Define actions and responsibilities

Once priorities are identified, define:

- what actions will be implemented
- who will contribute
- what the next steps are

Responsibilities do not need to be formalised immediately, but participants should have a clear understanding of their possible role.

When possible:

- organise activities in chronological order
- distinguish short-term and longer-term actions
- identify dependencies between activities

This helps create a clearer and more manageable implementation process.

Example Box

Action: Improve pedestrian safety near the school.

Possible implementation activities:

- meet local authorities
- identify unsafe crossings
- install temporary signage
- organise awareness activities with residents and parents

Tools and templates

- [Action Planning Template](#): helps define actions, responsibilities and next steps.

3.3 Implementation

Once actions and responsibilities have been agreed through the co-design process, organisations can begin implementation.

At this stage, the focus is on:

- starting planned activities

- coordinating the actors involved
- ensuring that implementation progresses according to the agreed timeline

It is useful to start with visible and achievable activities that can help build trust and maintain engagement.

Step 1 – Organise implementation follow-up

Implementation requires regular coordination between the people involved.

To support implementation:

- identify who will follow the progress of activities
- clarify how updates and decisions will be shared
- define simple coordination moments during implementation

Depending on the initiative, coordination may involve:

- local organisations
- volunteers or community groups
- technical actors or institutions
- informal coordination between stakeholders

🔗 Coordination mechanisms do not need to be highly formalised. Simple and regular follow-up is often enough to maintain implementation on track.

When possible:

- keep coordination activities simple and regular
- use existing communication channels
- clarify responsibilities early
- document key decisions and updates

Step 2 – Monitor progress and milestones

During implementation, it is important to regularly check whether activities are progressing as planned.

To do this:

- divide the implementation process into smaller milestones
- define expected short-term results
- review progress regularly with the people involved

Milestones help organisations:

- track implementation
- identify delays or difficulties early

- maintain motivation and engagement

🔗 Milestones do not need to be complex. Simple and measurable checkpoints are often enough to track progress and maintain implementation on schedule.

Examples of milestones:

- first stakeholder meeting completed
- temporary intervention installed
- awareness activity organised
- feedback collected from residents

Regular progress reviews can help identify:

- completed activities
- pending tasks
- unexpected challenges
- possible adjustments needed

Example Box

Implementation goal:

Improve pedestrian safety near the school.

Possible milestones:

- meeting with municipality completed
- temporary crossing identified
- awareness campaign launched
- first community feedback collected

Tools and templates

- [Implementation Follow-up Template](#): supports regular coordination and follow-up during implementation.
- [Progress Tracking Sheet](#): helps monitor completed activities, delays and implementation progress.

Step 3 – Make progress visible

Visible progress helps maintain motivation and strengthen trust among participants and the wider community.

Organisations should regularly show:

- what has been implemented
- what is changing
- how participants are contributing

Visible results do not need to be large-scale. Even small improvements can reinforce engagement and encourage further participation.

Useful approaches include:

- documenting before/after situations
- sharing updates during community activities
- presenting ongoing progress visually
- using digital communication channels such as social media, newsletters or community messaging groups to share updates and results

👉 Showing progress helps people understand that their participation leads to concrete outcomes.

Example Box

After a temporary pedestrian intervention:

- photos are shared with residents
- feedback is collected during a local event
- results are presented to the municipality

Toolkit Note

Communication plays an important role in maintaining visibility and engagement throughout implementation. Chapter 4 will further explore how communication strategies and digital tools can support participation, outreach and community involvement.

Step 4 – Adapt and continue

Implementation processes may need adjustments over time.

Organisations should regularly reflect on:

- what is working well
- what difficulties are emerging
- what could be improved or adapted

Possible adjustments may include:

- modifying activities

- adapting timelines
- redefining responsibilities
- simplifying actions when necessary

👉 Flexibility helps maintain realistic and sustainable implementation processes.

This reflection process should primarily involve the organisations and stakeholders directly engaged in implementation, but it can also benefit from feedback collected from residents, participants and community users affected by the actions.

Useful approaches may include:

- informal conversations with residents
- short feedback activities during community events
- online feedback forms or digital interactions
- observation of how spaces or activities are being used

👉 Continuous feedback helps organisations better understand how actions are perceived and whether adjustments are needed.

Example Box

A neighbourhood initiative promotes walking and cycling routes near a school through temporary signage and awareness activities.

During implementation:

- parents appreciate safer routes, but many still use cars because crossing times remain unsafe during peak hours
- local shop owners express concerns about traffic changes affecting deliveries

Following feedback collected through short surveys and informal discussions:

- crossing supervision is introduced during school hours
- delivery schedules are adjusted in coordination with local businesses

👉 Feedback from different user groups helps balance mobility improvements with everyday local needs.

Tools and templates

- [Progress, Feedback and Adaptation Sheet](#): supports periodic review of implementation progress, challenges and possible adjustments.



Chapter 4

Communication, Behaviour change and Impact

This chapter equips CSOs, adult educators, and neighbourhood volunteers with practical tools to communicate sustainability locally, embed lasting habits, track impact without technical resources, and critically evaluate environmental claims.

4.1 Communicating Sustainability

Effective community communication starts by replacing global abstractions with local stories. This section provides a step-by-step approach for building a neighbourhood communication strategy, segmenting your audience, and running practical offline and online campaigns.

Step 1 – Ground your message in local reality

Tie every environmental issue to something residents can see, smell, or feel on their own street. Avoid global language ("carbon footprints", "ecological collapse"). Instead:

- Name a specific place: "The bins on Calle Murillo overflow every Thursday."
- Name a direct personal benefit: sorting waste → fewer flies; cycling → healthier children; a street hedge → 3°C cooler in August.
- Make the community the hero: use "we did" and "our street achieved", not "our organisation delivered".

Step 2 – Identify and segment your audience

Before choosing any channel, map who you need to reach. Most neighbourhoods contain at least two distinct groups with different habits, motivations, and communication preferences.

Audience	Best Channels	Best Hooks	Meeting Format
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Younger residents (15–35)	WhatsApp, Instagram, short video (Reels), QR-linked posters	Peer challenge, visual before/after, humour, creative co-design	Pop-up events, photo contests, online polls
Seniors (55+)	Notice boards, local press, door-to-door flyers, face-to-face	Community pride, cost savings, legacy for grandchildren, safety	Coffee mornings, walking tours, parish hall sessions

Avoid age stereotypes. Many seniors are active online; many young people distrust social media campaigns. Always confirm your assumptions with a quick informal survey before investing in channels.

Step 3 – Plan your offline campaign

Physical presence builds trust and reaches residents who are not online. Use the following formats:

- Door-to-door flyers: one page, one message, one clear call to action. Include a date and a place.
- Community notice board: post a single A4 update monthly. Include one photo, one number, one thank-you.
- Street event / pop-up: a 90-minute visible action (clean-up, repair café, planting day) is its own best advertisement.
- Trusted local voices: recruit 1–2 respected residents (a shopkeeper, a school parent, a parish volunteer) to spread the word verbally. Word-of-mouth is the most effective offline channel.

Step 4 – Plan your online campaign

Online tools extend reach and sustain engagement between in-person events. Keep it simple:

- WhatsApp broadcast group: weekly one-photo + one-sentence update. Never more than three messages per week.
- Local Facebook page or Instagram account: post before/after photos, short volunteer interviews (30-second videos), and event reminders.
- QR code posters: place a QR code on physical posters that links to your WhatsApp group, a sign-up form, or a short explainer video.
- Neighbourhood-specific hashtag: create one simple tag (e.g. #GreenCalle Murillo) and encourage residents to share photos using it.

Step 5 – Validate informal habits and bridge to formal requirements

- Map what residents already do (clothing swaps, shared gardens, informal clean-ups) and acknowledge them publicly.
- Show where existing habits overlap with official guidelines, so compliance feels like a natural extension.
- Translate any ordinance into one plain sentence: instead of citing regulation numbers, say "The city asks us to use three bins – here is a sticker for your kitchen."

Tools to be used

- [Communication Strategy Checklist](#): provides a simple framework to plan, review and improve local communication activities before launching a sustainability initiative or community campaign.
- [Local Communication Campaign Planner](#): provides a structured framework to plan and coordinate neighbourhood communication activities, combining offline and online channels to promote a specific sustainability initiative and engage local stakeholders.

4.2 Behaviour Change

Knowing about a problem does not change behaviour. People act when the new behaviour is easy, visible, social, and immediately rewarding. This section shows how to design those conditions at neighbourhood level.

Step 1 – Apply the Low-Barrier principle

Every initiative must pass this test: Can someone do this in under 2 minutes, with no special equipment, on their normal daily route? If not, simplify.

Attach new behaviours to things people already do (habit stacking):

- Place a small recycling bracket on the existing kitchen bin – no extra trip needed.
- Install a bicycle tyre pump at the school gate where parents already wait.
- Put a seed-swap shelf inside the local shop where residents go weekly.
- Add walking-route distance signs at existing bus stops – same journey, new framing.

What to look for: Walk the route your residents take every day. Look for idle-waiting moments (bus stops, school gates, market queues). A short action that slots into idle time is almost always adopted faster than one requiring a dedicated trip.

Step 2 – Design a visible Quick Win

A single visible success in week one is worth more than a perfect six-month programme residents cannot yet see. Design your first action to be:

- Visible: the whole street can see it the next morning (a cleaned corner, a new planter box, a painted wall).
- Tangible: it produces a countable result (bags removed, items repaired, m² reclaimed).
- Celebrated: take a before/after photo, post it immediately, and thank every participant by name.

Example Box

- One Block, One Afternoon: a single-street clean-up, 90 minutes, bags provided, refreshments at the end.
- Green Corner: transform one neglected planter with donated plants. Before/after photos do the rest.
- Neighbourhood Repair Café: residents bring broken items; volunteers fix them. Zero budget beyond a table and tools.

Step 3 – Build long-term motivation with an Action Menu

Sustain engagement with variety, recognition, and friendly progress. The table below provides ready-to-use formats requiring no or minimal budget.

Action	What You Need	Expected Result
Street Clean-Up Day	Bags, gloves, 8–15 volunteers, 90 min	Visible clean space + high-impact before/after photo
Repair Café	Table, donated tools, skilled volunteers	Items saved from landfill; new social bonds
Shared Tool Box	Box, donated tools, sign-out sheet	Reduced household spending; deeper community trust
Seed / Food Swap Shelf	A shelf, paper bags, blank labels	Direct food exchange; reduced household waste

Eco-Passport Stamp Card	Printed card, ink stamp	Sustained engagement over 8–12 weeks
Neighbourhood Challenge Board	Whiteboard or paper chart, marker	Friendly rivalry; peer motivation; no prize needed
Cross-Gen Buddy Pair	Paired volunteer list + one monthly task	Knowledge transfer; social cohesion across ages
Kids' Green Guardian Chart	Sticker chart, crayons, parent involvement	Family engagement; habit formation from early age

Tools and templates

- [Action Planning Template \(Chapter 3\)](#): provides a structured framework to organise actions, responsibilities, timelines and expected outputs following the co-design process.

4.3 Measuring Impact

Tracking progress is how volunteers see that their Saturday morning was worth it. This section shows how to measure real change using only a notepad, a phone camera, and a consistent routine – no technical expertise required.

Step 1 – Set up your Community Observation Round

A neighbourhood audit is a structured walk with open eyes and a simple counting sheet.

- Choose a fixed route (one street, one park, one block) and always walk the same route so results are comparable.
- Form a team of 2–4 people. Include at least one person who knows the area well and one newcomer for a fresh perspective.
- Use a simple tally sheet (see Impact Tracking Sheet below). Count only what you can see without instruments.
- Take a dated photo at 3–5 fixed points along the route, at the same angle and time of day each visit.
- Repeat monthly or after each major action. Compare numbers and photos side by side.
- Hold a 20-minute debrief straight after: What improved? What got worse? What should we try next month?

What to look for: Invite a sceptical resident to join the audit team. Someone who doubts the project's value will become its strongest advocate once they personally count the change.

Step 2 – Choose your No-Cost Indicators

Select 3–5 indicators that your team can track consistently for at least six months. Avoid CO₂ equivalents or technical measurements. Use only what anyone can count or observe directly.

Category	Example Indicators	How to Measure
Waste	Bags diverted; items repaired; households in swap scheme	Count at collection; repair log; sign-in sheet
Mobility	Children cycling/walking to school; car trips replaced	Gate count 1st Tuesday/month; show of hands at meeting
Green Space	m ² reclaimed; plants or trees added	Tape measure; count + photo
Engagement	Active households; new volunteers; businesses involved	Participation list; sign-up sheet; cumulative total

⚠ These tracking methods are for community motivation, not scientific research. The goal is honest, consistent counts that show your neighbours their collective work is moving in the right direction.

Step 3 – Create a Transparent Feedback Loop

Data only motivates when people can see it. Share your numbers where residents naturally gather.

- Notice board (monthly): a simple chart for 2–3 indicators, a Thank-You Wall naming every helper, and one before/after photo pair.
- Group chat (weekly): one photo + one sentence 2013 201818 bags removed Saturday, thank you to our 11 volunteers!2019
- Celebrate plateaus openly – progress slows after the first burst, which is normal. Acknowledge it rather than pretending otherwise.
- Rotate roles monthly (photographer, counter, note-taker) to prevent burnout.
- Mark milestones at 3 and 6 months: show cumulative totals, which are always more impressive than monthly figures.

Tools and templates

- [Impact Tracking Sheet](#): provides a simple framework to record, monitor and compare community-led sustainability indicators over time using observable, low-cost and easy-to-collect measurements.
- [Progress Tracking Sheet \(Chapter 3\)](#): provides a structured framework to monitor implementation progress, track outputs and milestones, and identify challenges or delays during the implementation process.

4.4 Critical Awareness & Countering Greenwashing

As environmental projects become more visible, communities are increasingly targeted by misleading claims from companies and local authorities – a practice known as greenwashing. This section gives adult educators practical tools to help residents spot empty promises and negotiate from a position of strength.

Step 1 – Learn to spot greenwashing

You do not need legal expertise. You need three simple patterns to recognise:

- **The Hidden Trade-Off:** a company loudly promotes one green action (switching to LED bulbs) while hiding a large negative impact (demolishing a park for a car park).
- **Vague Words:** promotional material uses terms like "eco-friendly", "natural", or "green" without showing real numbers, open data, or a named certification body.
- **Token Gestures:** a one-day tree-planting event or a sponsored clean-up is used as a reputational shield for an otherwise unsustainable operation.

Step 2 – Apply the 5-Question Detector

When any company, sponsor, or municipality makes an environmental claim, ask:

1. **What exactly changed today?** Not plans or commitments – what is measurably different right now?
2. **Who verified it?** Is there an independent body confirming the claim, or is the organisation evaluating itself?
3. **What is left out?** A product made from recycled materials may still have a supply chain ten times worse elsewhere.
4. **Does the scale match?** Planting 50 trees is not impressive if the same organisation cut down 5,000 last year.

5. **Is the label certified?** "Eco-friendly" and "natural" are unprotected terms. Ask which certification body issued the label.

What to look for: Keep these five questions as a card on your phone. Reading them aloud at a meeting with sponsors or officials is not confrontational – it is professional. Frame it as: "We want to explain this accurately to our neighbours."

Further resources

1. Climate Outreach – Community Climate Communication Guide

Type: Guide

Language: EN

Short Description: Practical guidance on framing climate issues for diverse audiences.

Link/Attachment: <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/metadata/tools/climate-change-outreach-and-communication-guide>

2. Behaviour Change Wheel (Michie et al.)

Type: Framework

Language: EN

Short Description: Evidence-based tool for designing community behaviour change interventions.

Link/Attachment: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21513547/>

3. ECAS – European Citizen Action Service

Type: Online tool

Language: Multiple EU languages

Short Description: Supports CSOs in designing local environmental campaigns

Link/Attachment: <https://ecas.org/>



Chapter 5

Best Practices

This chapter presents real examples of neighbourhood-based sustainability initiatives from different European countries. The selected practices illustrate different approaches to participation, community engagement and local action, providing inspiration and practical ideas that can be adapted to other local contexts.

Country: Italy

Best practice number 1 - WIP – Work in Poliss: Participatory Urban Regeneration through Skills Development and Community Engagement



Context

The practice is implemented in Sassari (Italy), in the Monte Rosello neighbourhood, an urban peripheral area with social vulnerability. It involves public institutions, civil society, and local actors. The target group includes young people (including vulnerable groups). It addresses lack of community spaces, youth opportunities, and social cohesion.

Action implemented

The WIP – Work in Poliss project transforms an underused public space into a community-based social infrastructure, combining urban regeneration with education and participation.

Key actions include:

1. Participatory regeneration workshops (didactic construction sites)

- 5 intensive workshops (10 days each)
- Co-design and co-construction of public spaces (green areas, sports field, common areas)
- Participants guided by artisans, tutors, and facilitators

2. Practical skills and craftsmanship training

- 20+ hands-on workshops (e.g. carpentry, ceramics, sewing, urban gardening)
- Small group learning (1:4 tutor ratio)
- Production of materials used in the regeneration process

3. Community co-design and governance (Ri.SO Table)

- Participatory platform for:
 - idea generation
 - local needs collection
 - project development
- Involvement of 50+ local stakeholders through meetings and networking events

4. Inclusion and empowerment pathways

- Targeted support for vulnerable groups
- Non-formal education methods
- Soft skills development (self-esteem, conflict management, teamwork)
- Individual guidance and job orientation

5. Community activation and cultural events

- 16+ public events
- Networking and community-building activities
- Connection between project and wider city

The regeneration process is implemented progressively through different phases, starting from the activation of entrance and shared spaces, followed by the transformation of green areas, and later expanding to sports, cultural and artistic facilities. This approach allows gradual community engagement, continuous use of the space, and increasing participation over time.

Results achieved

Concrete results

- 300+ young people involved
- 40% participation from vulnerable groups
- 600 hours of technical training
- 200 hours of job orientation
- 20 local artisans and companies involved
- 30 co-design meetings
- 25+ public events

What worked well

- Learning by doing approach (hands-on participation)
- Strong link between regeneration and skills development
- Hybrid governance model involving institutions, NGOs, and private actors
- Focus on inclusion and empowerment of vulnerable groups

Impact on users and community

- Increased employability and skills among participants
- Strengthened sense of belonging and community ownership
- Reactivation of a neglected public space
- Creation of new social networks and local collaborations

The project successfully turned a degraded area into a shared, active and community-driven space.

Transferability

The effectiveness of the practice lies in combining urban regeneration with skills development through hands-on activities that produce visible results. Active involvement of participants in both design and implementation phases is essential, as well as strong collaboration between public authorities, civil society organisations and local professionals. Particular attention should be given to including vulnerable groups through targeted outreach and support.

To replicate the practice, it is important to have access to a physical space that can be activated or regenerated, along with a coordinating organisation capable of managing the process. The availability of local skills, such as artisans or facilitators, and collaboration with public authorities are key, as is the connection with local networks and social services to effectively reach target groups.

Some challenges may arise, including low initial participation, difficulties in engaging vulnerable groups, drop-out during activities, and complex coordination between partners. These can be addressed by starting with small, visible actions to attract interest, working with trusted local organisations, keeping activities practical and engaging, clearly defining roles, and combining short-term results with longer-term opportunities to maintain engagement.

Best practice number 2 - Neighbourhood Houses (Case di Quartiere) as Community-Based Sustainability and Participation Hubs



Context

QUA – *Quartiere Bene Comune* is an initiative developed by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia (Italy) across urban neighbourhoods. It involves public authorities, civil society organisations and local communities, targeting citizens of different ages and backgrounds. The project was created in response to the need to strengthen local participation and reconnect communities with public decision-making after the abolition of district-level bodies (*Circoscrizioni*), which had previously ensured a link between citizens and the municipality. It also addresses the need to improve social

cohesion and to reduce territorial inequalities by involving citizens in the co-management of local services and public spaces.

Action implemented

The initiative is part of the policy framework “QUA – Il Quartiere Bene Comune”, aimed at strengthening neighbourhood-level participation and co-design.

Key actions included:

- Creation and transformation of “Neighbourhood Houses” (Case di Quartiere) as open, accessible community spaces
- Activation of participatory processes, including:
 - neighbourhood labs
 - co-design workshops
 - thematic working groups
- Development of Citizenship Agreements, formalising collaboration between:
 - public authorities
 - citizens
 - civil society organisations
- Implementation of community-led initiatives (163 projects developed by residents)
- Promotion of:
 - social activities
 - cultural initiatives
 - environmental and community care actions

The model combines:

- bottom-up participation
- institutional support
- local resource mobilisation

Neighbourhood Houses function as:

- spaces for aggregation
- hubs for local services
- platforms for co-creation and social innovation

Results achieved

The initiative generated strong results at different levels:

Concrete results

- 1,500 participants involved (citizens and local authorities)
- 784 citizens involved in Citizenship Agreements
- 27 agreements signed, generating 163 local projects
- Around 2,700 volunteers involved
- Over 30,000 hours dedicated to community activities
- Nearly 14,000 users reached across different service areas

What worked well

Structured participatory process in 4 phases:

- citizenship laboratories
- co-design
- commitment agreements
- implementation and monitoring

Strong completion rate:

- 78.5% of projects successfully completed
- 83.5% satisfaction among project leaders

Effective territorial impact:

- higher reach in disadvantaged neighbourhoods
- improved access to services and opportunities

Impact on users and communities

- Increased social capital and community engagement
- Strengthened collaboration between citizens and institutions
- Reduction of territorial inequalities
- Improved access to local services

The project also introduced a **policy evaluation dashboard**, including indicators to measure the social capital generated through participation.

Transferability

The success of the practice relies on a strong connection to the local context and the availability of accessible community spaces where activities can take place. An active role of public institutions is essential, not as sole decision-makers but as enablers that support collaboration with citizens and local organisations. The use of structured but flexible participatory processes, combined with formal collaboration agreements, helps ensure continuity and shared responsibility.

To replicate the practice, it is important to have at least one coordinating organisation, the presence of active local actors, and a minimum level of institutional support. A willingness to share responsibilities between public authorities and communities is key to activating bottom-up initiatives.

Some challenges may arise, particularly in ensuring consistent participation, managing different expectations among stakeholders, and maintaining engagement over time. These can be addressed by focusing on real (non-tokenistic) participation, providing continuous facilitation, and combining short-term visible results with longer-term engagement strategies.

Best practice number 3 - Neighbourhood Participatory Laboratory for the Regeneration of the Marzabotto Area (Bologna)



Context

This practice was implemented in Bologna (Italy), in the Marzabotto–ex Cierrebi–ex Velodrome area, promoted by the Municipality of Bologna and the Porto-Saragozza District in collaboration with Fondazione Innovazione Urbana. The process aimed to address the future use of a large underused urban area, including former sports facilities, while responding to community needs and expectations. The area, with over 18,000 residents and a relatively ageing population, shows both strong community presence and risks of social isolation. The initiative was designed to bridge the gap between institutional planning and local needs through a structured participatory process.

Action implemented

The initiative was developed as a structured “listening and co-design laboratory”, combining qualitative and quantitative tools to engage the local community.

The process included approximately 30 qualitative interviews with local stakeholders (associations, schools, committees, and institutions), aimed at understanding needs, challenges and existing resources . This was complemented by an online questionnaire, open for one month, which collected 152 responses from residents, providing a broader quantitative perspective .

The participatory phase included two public online workshops (16 and 27 participants respectively), structured in plenary sessions and facilitated group work using digital tools (e.g. shared boards for collecting inputs) . Participants were invited to identify critical issues, opportunities and concrete proposals.

The process followed clear phases: context analysis, data collection, public discussion, and co-definition of priorities and actions. Key thematic areas identified included green spaces, mobility, culture, sport, and local economy.

Results achieved

The process generated a structured set of community-driven priorities and proposals, directly informing local policy and planning decisions. It enabled the integration of qualitative insights (interviews), quantitative data (questionnaire), and collective inputs (workshops).

The high level of participation confirmed strong local interest: over 70% of questionnaire respondents declared a direct connection to the area (residents) . The process also highlighted concrete needs, such as the demand for more accessible green areas, sports infrastructure, and spaces for social and cultural activities.

Importantly, the initiative strengthened dialogue between citizens and institutions, creating a shared understanding of local challenges and opportunities. It also contributed to defining clear development directions, such as enhancing green connections, improving mobility, and reactivating key community spaces like the former Cierrebi facility.

Transferability

This practice is highly transferable for contexts involving complex or underused urban areas requiring community input. A structured participatory process combining interviews, surveys and facilitated workshops is essential to capture diverse perspectives.

Replication requires a coordinating organisation capable of managing the process, as well as time and resources to ensure meaningful participation. The use of mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) increases the robustness of results.

Key challenges include engaging a diverse population, avoiding participation fatigue, and ensuring that outcomes influence real decisions. These can be addressed by combining different engagement tools, providing clear feedback to participants, and linking the process to concrete planning actions.

Country: Spain

Best practice number 1 - Can Masdeu: Community-Led Eco-Project for Sustainable Living and Local Engagement (Barcelona)



Context

Can Masdeu is a community-led eco-project located in the Collserola natural park area, on the outskirts of Barcelona (Spain). It is developed by a collective of residents and activists who transformed an abandoned space into a multifunctional community hub. The initiative responds to the need to promote sustainable lifestyles, reconnect people with nature, and create alternative models of living based on ecological and social principles. The project operates at the intersection between urban and natural environments, engaging both local residents and the wider community in environmental and social activities.

Action implemented

The initiative is based on a self-managed eco-community model, combining environmental sustainability, collective governance and community engagement.

Activities focus on:

- agroecology and community gardening
- environmental education and workshops
- sustainable living practices (e.g. resource use, food production)
- organisation of cultural and social events

A key component is the network of community gardens, where local residents participate in cultivating food using ecological methods. These spaces function both as productive areas and as platforms for social interaction and knowledge exchange.

The project is managed through collective decision-making processes, ensuring active participation of members in the organisation and development of activities. At the same time, the initiative remains open to the wider community through regular events, workshops and volunteering opportunities.

The approach connects practical environmental actions with community-building processes, making sustainability visible and accessible in everyday life.

Results achieved

The initiative has created a stable and active eco-community, involving both residents and external participants in a wide range of environmental and social activities. It has contributed to promoting sustainable practices at local level, particularly in relation to food production, resource use and ecological awareness.

The community gardens have strengthened the connection between people and the natural environment, while also fostering social interaction and collective responsibility. The project has become a reference point for alternative sustainability practices, attracting participants from different backgrounds.

Importantly, the initiative demonstrates how small-scale, community-led actions can contribute to broader environmental goals, while also improving social cohesion and local engagement.

Transferability

This practice is transferable to organisations interested in combining environmental sustainability with community engagement.

Replication requires access to a space (urban or peri-urban), a core group of motivated participants, and basic knowledge of ecological practices. Starting from small-scale actions such as community gardens or workshops can help build engagement.

Key success factors include hands-on activities, collective management, and openness to the wider community. Connecting environmental practices with everyday life is essential to ensure participation.

Challenges may include maintaining long-term engagement and managing collective processes. These can be addressed through clear roles, shared rules, and continuous community activation.

Best practice number 2 - Can Batlló: Community-Led Regeneration and Co-Production of Neighbourhood Services (Barcelona)



Can Batlló. Source: [LaCol](#).

Context

Can Batlló is a community-led initiative developed in the La Bordeta neighbourhood of Barcelona, focused on the transformation of a former industrial textile complex into a self-managed community space. Since the 1970s, residents had demanded the area be converted into public facilities, but after decades of inaction, a citizens' platform launched a bottom-up campaign to reclaim the space. The initiative emerged from a coalition of social movements (neighbourhood groups, environmental, feminist and activist networks) aiming to respond directly to unmet local needs. The project represents a shift from passive use of public services to active community management and co-production of services at neighbourhood level.

Action implemented

The initiative began with strong grassroots mobilisation, including a public campaign and the threat of occupation, which led to the progressive opening of the space in 2011. Citizens entered the site collectively and initiated a self-managed process of regeneration and use.

The project is organised through a general assembly (sovereign decision-making body) and multiple thematic committees (e.g. space design, activities, economy), which manage specific areas. All decisions are made collectively, ensuring participatory governance.

Over time, the space has been progressively transformed through community-led refurbishment and project development. Activities include:

- cultural and educational spaces (library, workshops, events)
- sports and recreational facilities

- urban gardens and agroecological initiatives
- social economy projects (cooperatives, incubators)
- housing initiatives (cooperative housing models)

Projects are selected based on clear criteria: social usefulness, connection with neighbourhood needs, and economic viability. A mixed model is applied, where the community manages activities while the municipality supports infrastructure and major investments.

Results achieved

The initiative has generated a large-scale and sustained community impact. By 2017, Can Batlló involved around 370 active members, organised over 2,000 activities, and reached approximately 50,000 users.

The project successfully transformed a 13,000 m² abandoned industrial area into a multifunctional community space. It has created a wide range of services responding to local needs, including cultural, social, economic and environmental initiatives.

A key outcome is the development of a “communitarian-public” model, where citizens actively design and deliver services rather than acting as passive users. The initiative has also influenced local policies, contributing to the development of cooperative housing and social economy programmes.

In 2019, the project obtained a 50-year concession of use, formalising its role and ensuring long-term stability.

Transferability

This practice is transferable to contexts where underused spaces can be activated through strong community engagement and collective organisation.

Key conditions include the presence of an active local community, the ability to organise collective decision-making (e.g. assemblies), and access to a physical space. A gradual approach, starting from small actions and expanding over time, is essential.

The model shows the importance of combining autonomy with strategic interaction with public authorities. While maintaining independence in decision-making, collaboration with institutions can provide access to resources and long-term stability.

Challenges include managing internal complexity, ensuring long-term sustainability, and balancing autonomy with institutional support. These can be addressed through clear governance structures, shared rules, and diversified activities that generate both social and economic value.

Best practice number 3 - Barrios Convivenciales: Co-Creating Sustainable Neighbourhoods through Everyday Practices



Context

Barrios Convivenciales is an initiative implemented in the neighbourhood of *Barrio de la Cooperativa* (San Juan de Aznalfarache, metropolitan area of Seville, Spain), developed by Cotidiana in collaboration with local organisations, public actors and residents. The project responds to environmental and social challenges affecting residential neighbourhoods, particularly related to housing conditions, energy use and quality of life. It aims to promote sustainability at neighbourhood level by focusing on everyday practices and local dynamics. The initiative was conceived as a pilot project, designed to test and develop a replicable model for more sustainable and liveable communities.

Action implemented

The initiative is based on a **participatory and interdisciplinary process**, combining environmental, social and spatial approaches.

The process includes:

- analysis of local conditions (housing, energy performance, public space)
- engagement of residents through participatory workshops and activities
- co-design of solutions addressing concrete sustainability challenges

Activities focus on improving everyday sustainability through:

- bioclimatic and energy-efficient housing strategies
- promotion of sustainable behaviours (energy use, resource management)

- activation of neighbourhood relationships and shared practices

A variety of tools are used, including:

- participatory workshops
- collective mapping
- co-design sessions
- creative methods such as theatre-forum

The project integrates technical knowledge (architecture, environmental design) with local knowledge, ensuring that solutions are practical and adapted to the specific context. The process is structured but flexible, allowing continuous interaction with the community.

Results achieved

The initiative has increased awareness and adoption of sustainable practices among residents, particularly in relation to housing conditions, energy use and everyday behaviours.

It has strengthened collaboration between residents, organisations and local actors, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and community engagement. The participatory approach enabled the development of context-specific solutions that respond directly to local needs.

The project demonstrated that sustainability can be effectively addressed through small-scale, everyday interventions rather than large infrastructural changes. It also contributed to improving neighbourhood liveability and social cohesion.

As a pilot experience, it has provided a tested and structured model that can be adapted and replicated in other neighbourhoods.

Transferability

This practice is highly transferable to organisations working at neighbourhood level that aim to promote sustainability through community engagement.

Replication requires a facilitating organisation with interdisciplinary competences (social, environmental, design), the ability to engage residents, and access to basic local data on housing and local conditions.

Key success factors include focusing on everyday practices, combining technical and local knowledge, and using participatory tools that are accessible and engaging.

Challenges may include maintaining long-term participation and translating awareness into sustained behavioural change. These can be addressed through continuous engagement, visible results and the strengthening of local networks.

Country: Denmark

Best practice number 1 - Tagtomate: Co-Creating Green Communities on Copenhagen's Rooftops and Courtyards



Context

Implemented across various urban neighborhoods in Copenhagen, Denmark (including areas like Valby and Nørrebro). Led by the social enterprise Tagtomate in collaboration with local neighborhood associations, civic community-based organizations, and volunteer citizen groups. The initiative directly targets urban residents, adult learners, and community educators. It addresses the lack of high-quality urban green spaces, structural community trust, and accessible entry points for citizens looking to transition from sustainability awareness to concrete, neighborhood-level action.

Action implemented

The initiative implements bottom-up, user-aided design workshops where residents collaboratively build urban farming infrastructure (such as self-watering raised beds and rooftop gardens). It utilizes open-source design templates and physical facilitation tools to guide community members through co-creation sessions. Local stakeholders—including building owners, civic volunteers, and municipal representatives—are mapped and engaged early to bridge informal community structures with formal municipal guidelines.

Results achieved

Concrete outcomes include the physical transformation of underutilized urban spaces into thriving communal hubs, providing immediate, highly visible "quick wins" that sustain volunteer motivation. It effectively addresses the "participation gap" by inviting residents to be active co-designers rather than passive users. The practice successfully links environmental action with daily health, localized food production, and strengthened social cohesion within the community.

Transferability

Providing immediate, visible results (like a shared garden bed) keeps momentum high. Avoid overly technical jargon; focus on step-by-step pathways and open-source, reproducible materials.

Best practice number 2 – Circular Copenhagen: Fostering Public-Citizen Synergies for Zero-Waste Neighborhoods



Context

Spearheaded by the Technical and Environmental Administration of the City of Copenhagen, Denmark, in close cooperation with localized citizen assemblies, local businesses, and neighborhood environmental networks. The initiative responds to the municipality's ambitious targets to dramatically scale up recycling rates and triple the direct reuse of goods. Recognizing that structural policy alone cannot bridge the "participation gap," the project specifically targets urban citizens, adult educators, and local grassroots change-makers to build decentralized, community-managed resource loops directly inside Copenhagen's residential districts.

Action implemented

The initiative sets up neighborhood-level "Circular Innovation Platforms" and localized resource swap hubs. Rather than treating waste management as a top-down, purely bureaucratic service, the municipality provides the digital tools, logistics, and physical spaces (like community-based repair cafés and sharing depots), while citizen-led groups self-organize the daily operations. This

co-management approach blends data-driven municipal logistics with informal community engagement, mapping local waste streams and turning them into community assets.

Results achieved

The initiative has successfully activated "soft infrastructure"—namely, civic trust and community networks—to meet municipal climate goals. It has drastically normalized circular behaviors at the household level, moving upcycling out of niche eco-groups and into mainstream neighborhood life. It effectively demonstrates how city-wide CO₂ reduction targets can be broken down into accessible, tangible, daily habits for adult learners.

Transferability

Break massive municipal goals (like "59,000 tonnes of CO₂ reduction") into local, hyper-relatable neighborhood challenges. Give citizens true ownership over local hubs rather than treating them merely as service end-users.

Challenges: Institutional inertia and overly rigid waste regulations.

Tip: Use a clear stakeholder mapping framework to identify municipal "allies" who can help simplify compliance for citizen initiatives.



Glossary

CHAPTER 1

Sustainability

The ability to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, by balancing environmental protection, social well-being and economic development.

Based on United Nations; European Commission

Environmental Sustainability

The responsible use of natural resources and protection of ecosystems to ensure long-term environmental balance and support present and future generations.

Adapted from United Nations; European Environment Agency

Social Sustainability

The ability of communities to ensure inclusion, well-being, equity and quality of life, enabling all people to participate in and benefit from sustainability processes.

Adapted from OECD; United Nations

Europe's Consumption Footprint

A measure of the environmental impact of goods and services consumed in Europe, including resource use, emissions and pollution across their entire life cycle, both within and outside Europe.

Based on European Environment Agency and European Commission monitoring frameworks

Climate Change

Long-term changes in temperature, weather patterns and climate systems, mainly caused by human activities such as greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels, deforestation and industrial processes.

Defined by Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and United Nations

Quality of Life

The combination of people's daily living conditions, health, well-being and social environment, influencing how individuals experience and evaluate their lives.

Adapted from OECD; World Health Organization

Neighbourhood-Centred Approach

An approach that focuses on the local scale to design and implement sustainability actions, based on community participation, local needs and context-specific solutions.

Based on place-based approaches promoted by OECD and urban sustainability research frameworks

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

Non-governmental, non-profit organisations that represent community interests and support participation, engagement and local development processes.

Based on definitions from European Commission

Participation

The active involvement of individuals and groups in decision-making and action processes that affect their community.

Adapted from International Association for Public Participation frameworks

Co-design

A collaborative process where different stakeholders, including community members, work together to design solutions and actions.

Based on participatory design approaches used in Design Council frameworks

Community Engagement

The process of involving people in activities and decision-making, building relationships, trust and shared responsibility.

Adapted from World Health Organization community engagement guidelines

Place-Based Approach

An approach that designs actions based on the specific characteristics, needs and resources of a local context.

Promoted by OECD in regional and urban policy

Sustainable Practices

Actions and behaviours that reduce environmental impact and support long-term sustainability (e.g. saving energy, reducing waste, sustainable mobility).

Derived from sustainability frameworks by United Nations and European Commission

Local Stakeholders

Individuals, groups or organisations that have an interest or role in a specific local context (e.g. residents, associations, institutions, businesses).

Common definition used in policy and project management frameworks, including OECD

Proximity (in urban contexts)

The principle of organising services, activities and spaces so that people can easily access what they need within a short distance from where they live, reducing the need for long travel and supporting local quality of life.

Based on urban planning concepts promoted by European Commission and sustainable mobility frameworks

15-Minute City Model

An urban planning model where residents can access essential services—such as work, education, healthcare, shops and leisure—within a 15-minute walk or bike ride from their home, promoting sustainability, well-being and local resilience.

Promoted by C40 Cities and adopted in European urban policy discussions

Urban Inclusion Marker (UIM)

A tool used to assess how urban policies, projects or interventions address social inclusion, accessibility and equity, particularly for vulnerable or underrepresented groups. It helps ensure that urban development contributes to inclusive and fair outcomes.

Based on frameworks developed by European Commission and urban inclusion policy approaches.

City Resilience Profiling

A methodology used to assess a city's capacity to absorb, adapt and respond to environmental, social and economic challenges, helping identify vulnerabilities and guide more resilient urban planning and decision-making.

Developed by UN-Habitat.

The People's Process

An approach to development and decision-making that is led by communities themselves, where local people actively participate in identifying needs, shaping solutions and implementing actions, rather than being passive recipients.

Promoted by UN-Habitat and participatory development frameworks.

Multi-layered Vulnerability Assessment (MVA)

A methodology used to analyse different types of vulnerability (environmental, social, economic and spatial) across multiple layers, helping identify risks, inequalities and priority areas for intervention within a community or urban context.

Based on approaches developed by UN-Habitat and urban resilience frameworks.

CHAPTER 2

Engagement Strategy

A structured approach to defining how and why stakeholders are involved in a process, including who to engage, on which issues, and with what level of participation.
Based on European Commission; IAP2 – International Association for Public Participation.

Level of Engagement

The degree of involvement of stakeholders in a process, typically ranging from informing and consulting to involving and collaborating.

Based on IAP2 – International Association for Public Participation.

Participation Process (Step-by-Step Approach)

A practical sequence of steps used to design and implement stakeholder engagement, from identifying priorities to involving stakeholders and adapting activities over time.
Based on European Commission; EPA Community Engagement Framework.

Stakeholder Engagement

The process of involving individuals, groups or organisations that are affected by or can influence a specific issue or action.

Based on OECD; European Commission.

Interest–Influence Matrix

A tool used to assess stakeholders based on their level of interest in an issue and their ability to influence outcomes, supporting the definition of appropriate engagement strategies.

Based on stakeholder analysis frameworks widely used in project management and public participation, e.g. IAP2; OECD.

CHAPTER 3

Co-design

A collaborative process in which organisations, stakeholders and community members work together to develop solutions, actions and local interventions.

Based on European Commission participatory governance approaches; URBACT participatory and co-creation methodologies.

Implementation

The process of putting planned actions into practice through coordinated activities, stakeholder involvement and continuous follow-up.

Based on Project Cycle Management Guidelines – European Commission.

Output

A concrete and immediate product generated by an activity or action.

Examples of outputs may include:

- a community event organised
- temporary signage installed
- awareness materials distributed

Based on European Commission Project Cycle Management and monitoring frameworks.

Short-term results

The immediate changes or benefits generated by implemented actions within a relatively short period of time.

Examples may include:

- increased participation
- improved accessibility
- greater community awareness

Based on results-based management approaches used by the European Commission and OECD.

Long-term results

The broader and more sustainable changes generated over time through continued implementation and community engagement.

Examples may include:

- long-term behavioural changes
- improved quality of life
- stronger community participation

Based on impact-oriented approaches used in European sustainability and community development programmes.

Milestone

A simple and measurable checkpoint used to monitor progress and verify whether key activities or results have been achieved during implementation.

Based on Project management and monitoring approaches used in European Union funded projects.

Feedback loop

A continuous process of collecting feedback and observations from stakeholders and community users to improve actions and adapt implementation over time.

Based on participatory governance and adaptive management approaches promoted by OECD and UN-Habitat.

Adaptive implementation

An implementation approach that allows actions and activities to be adjusted according to progress, feedback and emerging challenges.

Based on adaptive management approaches used in community development and sustainability initiatives by UN-Habitat and OECD.

Quick wins

Small and visible actions that can be implemented rapidly to demonstrate progress, build trust and maintain community engagement.

Based on URBACT local implementation practices and participatory urban development approaches.

CHAPTER 4

Behaviour Change

The process through which individuals or groups adopt new behaviours, habits or practices over time. In sustainability contexts, behaviour change often involves encouraging more environmentally responsible choices in everyday life.

Based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Communication Strategy

A structured plan that defines objectives, audiences, key messages, channels and activities to support effective communication and engagement.

Based on European Commission; UN-Habitat.

Key Message

A clear and concise statement used in communication activities to convey the main idea, benefit or call to action of an initiative.

Based on European Commission.

Output

The direct and immediate product of an activity, such as events organised, materials produced or participants involved.

Based on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC).



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