



Policy Brief

Co-creating greener healthier cities: participation from ideation to implementation

Through its activities, VARCITIES has explored a number of key topics linked with the **improvement of health & well-being in urban areas**, identifying existing **shortcomings, knowledge gaps** and the **opportunities** available for **policy stakeholders** to address them. In our series of policy and technical briefs, we present recommendations that we think most critical. This policy brief on Co-creating greener healthier cities: participation from idea to implementation prepared by VARCITIES' project partners, **Prospex Institute (PI)**, **University of Bergen (UiB)** and **Institute for Urban Excellence (iUE)**, gives policy stakeholders interested in the question key recommendations on the topic.

This policy brief explores the principles, design and implementation of co-creation practices based on VARCITIES experience with its Visionary Solutions.

This policy brief highlights existing and potential benefits and provides concrete measures to help cities design and implement co-creation schemes for greener, healthier cities.



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Co-creation and governance

Co-creation refers to the process of participation, interaction, collaboration, or co-production with various actors: citizens (organized or non-organized), political representatives, public officers, private stakeholders, and researchers. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from identifying local needs to co-designing, implementing, and evaluating solutions. In the context of urban development, co-creation enables the integration of diverse knowledge and experiences, fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among participants.

Co-creation is closely linked to city governance, as it contributes to shaping how decisions are made and who is involved in those processes. Governance of urban interventions involves formal and informal rules, mechanisms, and decision-making structures that bring together multiple actors across sectors and levels of authority. This can range from top-down, state-led approaches to collaborative or community-led models. Effective co-creation supports co-governance by encouraging transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, helping cities navigate complex urban challenges while promoting fair and sustainable outcomes.

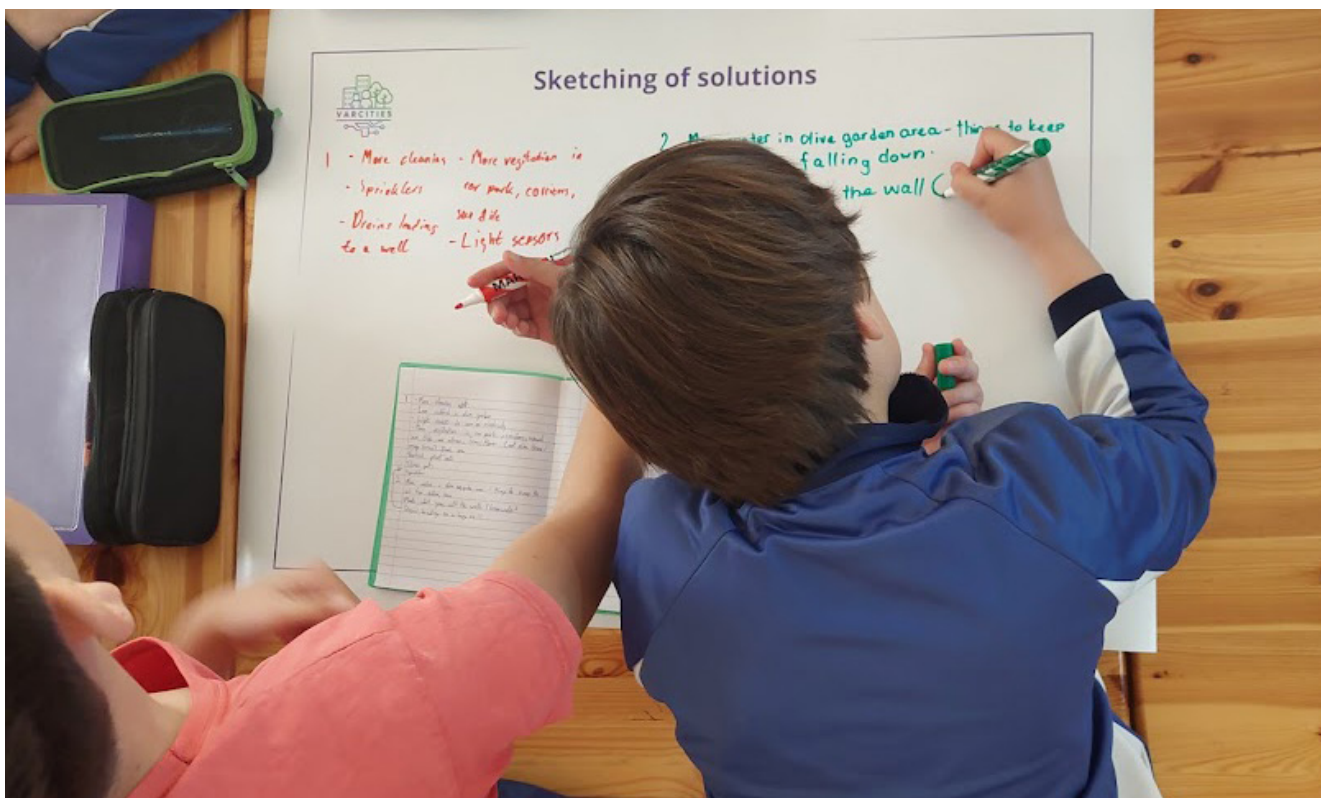


Image: Co-creation workshop in Gzira.



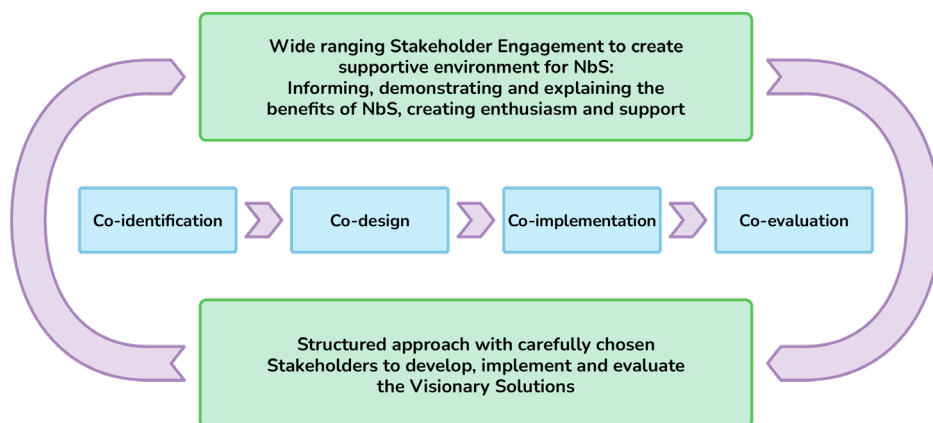
VARCITIES' approach to co-creation

VARCITIES has supported the development of 29 Visionary Solutions across seven European pilot cities. These solutions integrate nature-based, digital, social, and cultural elements to enhance urban health and well-being. Co-creation was embedded throughout the lifecycle of these urban interventions, to foster inclusivity, ownership, and effectiveness.

VARCITIES' co-creation approach for its Visionary Solutions drew inspiration from the EU's NbS framework, while tailoring the process to local needs, capacities, and opportunities.

Co-creation in VARCITIES was shaped as an iterative and dialogic process in which the stakeholders are actively involved through different interactive formats. The Visionary Solutions were systematically developed through four stages:

1. Co-identification: identifying challenges and needs of stakeholders
2. Co-design: designing, tailoring and fine-tuning a set of solutions
3. Co-implementation: executing the designed solutions
4. Co-evaluation: assessing and evaluating the solutions, including their implementation and impact



Each stage tackled challenges and strategies for the Visionary Solutions in various settings, supported by a multi-stakeholder workshop that incorporated participants' experiences and expertise. The process, roles, and expected outcomes (including any limitations) were clearly defined.

How to ensure diversity, inclusivity, and balance representation?

The Prospex-CQI (Criteria, Quota, Individuals) methodology guided stakeholder mapping to ensure diversity, inclusivity, and balance across topical, demographic, and influence-based categories (Gramberger M. et al, 2015). Criteria included topical (e.g., businesses, NGOs, residents), demographic (gender, age, location), and impact/influence factors, the latter ensuring that both stakeholders who are directly or indirectly highly impacted by the NbS with low influence and those with high influence are involved. Critical, neutral, and supportive voices were included for balance and to address conflicts early. Pilot cities set quotas per category to ensure fair representation and address gaps. This approach thoughtfully incorporated Gender, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion into all activities. Based on the quota set for all stakeholder criteria, the pilots reached out to identified individual stakeholders and invited them to participate in co-creation activities at the local pilot level.



Image: Co-creation activity in Gzira.



Image: Co-creation workshop in Castelfranco Veneto.

Practical methods applied

Numerous engagement and participatory methods are available for the co-creation process (e.g. Taking Action for Urban Nature: Citizen Engagement Handbook (Hörschelmann K. et al, 2019)). Pilots employed diverse approaches in engaging communities and stakeholders to assess public views and needs and while building understanding and support for the Visionary Solutions initiatives:

- Traditional formats: surveys, interviews, focus groups
- Digital tools: Health & Well-Being platform, social media
- Creative tools: GoNature VR Game
- Participatory analysis: PESTLE, Social Return on Investment
- Local events: excursions, workshops, cultural gatherings, pop-up interventions



Lessons learnt from VARCITIES co-creation process

The co-creation process was highly valued by pilot cities and stakeholders, generating positive public engagement with the project. A lack of administrative readiness to act on stakeholder feedback was identified as a significant risk, aligning with literature warnings about tokenism. While some pilots acknowledged that implementing all stakeholder input may not always be feasible, they emphasized that transparency about decisions and their underlying rationale remains crucial.

From the beginning of the project, a key limitation of the co-creation process was that the Visionary Solutions had been pre-defined as part of the original project proposal submitted for Horizon 2020 funding. This meant there was limited flexibility to significantly deviate from the initiatives initially outlined.

Sustaining stakeholder engagement throughout the development and implementation of the Visionary Solutions proved challenging. Engagement sometimes declined due to loss of interest, for instance driven by stakeholders feeling they had already contributed sufficiently. Furthermore, changes in the nature of the issues addressed as the project advanced could diminish motivation, while the volume of information and frequent inquiries directed at stakeholders risked causing stakeholder fatigue. The engagement processes were perceived as highly time-intensive, making it difficult to allocate the same level of resources as in VARCITIES to every project. It was acknowledged that different stakeholder groups require tailored approaches and methods, emphasizing the need to customize engagement strategies to maintain their involvement effectively.



Image: Residents at the VARCITIES pilot site in Dundalk.

VARCITIES demonstrates how co-creation can empower communities, reduce resistance, and foster legitimacy.

Benefits of co-creation in VARCITIES

- Facilitated more relevant and accepted solutions
- Built local capacity and ownership
- Encouraged cross-sectoral collaboration
- Promoted transparency and trust
- Supported diverse knowledge integration

Challenges and constraints faced during the project

- Stakeholder fatigue and fluctuating engagement
- Lack of institutional readiness to act on feedback
- Administrative silos and unclear responsibilities
- Time- and resource-intensiveness
- Risk of tokenism if feedback is not meaningfully integrated

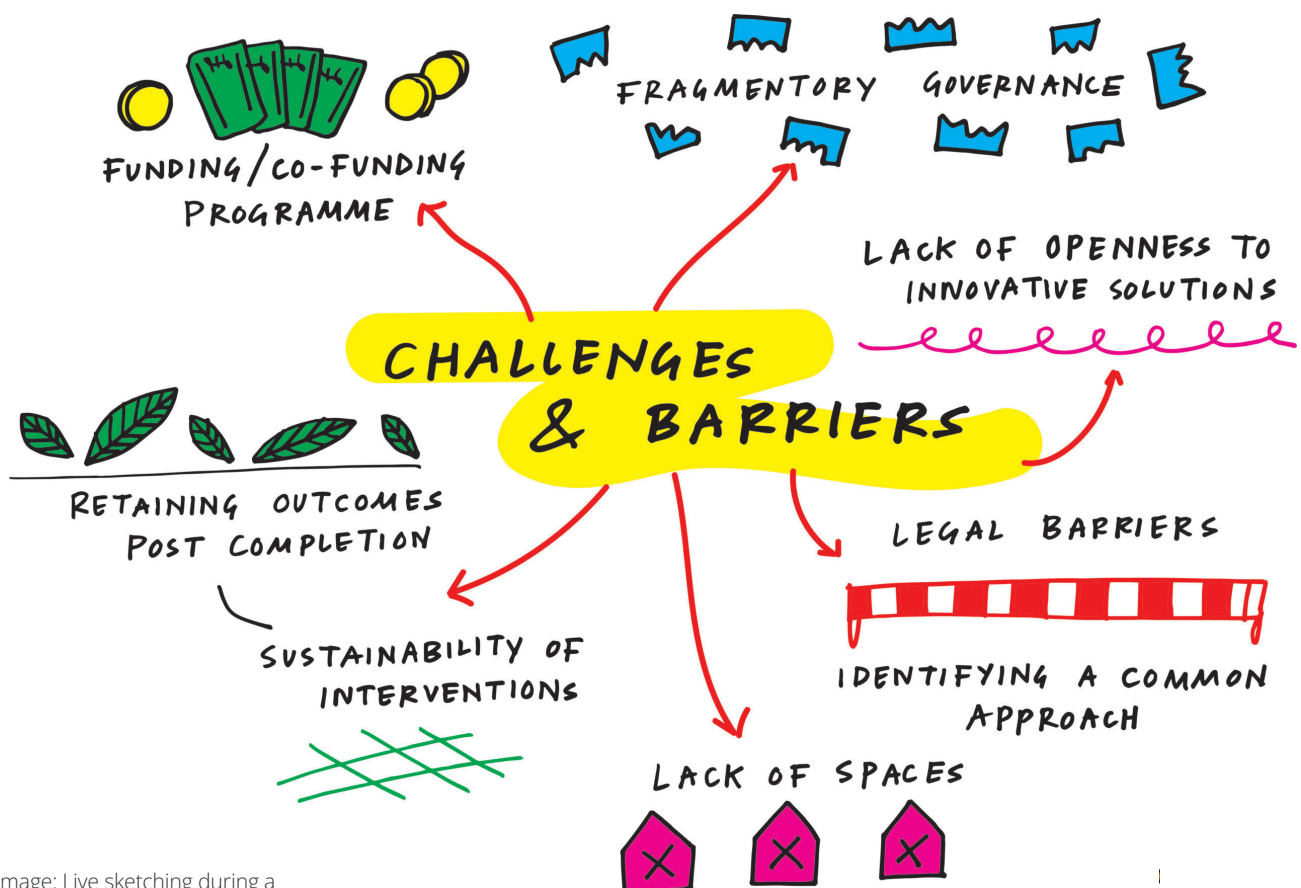


Image: Live sketching during a co-creation workshop in Gzira.



Recommendations

At the EU level

- To enable genuine co-identification and co-design in research and innovation projects involving urban interventions (such as nature-based solutions), a two-step proposal process should be adopted: current (R&I) project calls often require predefined solutions and activities at the proposal stage, limiting genuine co-creation. A two-step approach would allow the first phase to focus on project vision and partnership, with detailed co-designed interventions developed only after project selection, ensuring more meaningful stakeholder engagement and bottom-up input.
- Encourage reporting on stakeholder involvement and inclusive design approaches in Horizon Europe, and project supporting the New European Bauhaus.
- Provide clear guidance on integrating co-creation within policy-oriented urban innovation programmes.

At the national level

- Promote cross-sectoral training and shared governance approaches among city departments and ministries.
- Create financial incentives for projects that demonstrate participatory design and multi-benefit NbS outcomes.
- Invest in monitoring systems to assess participation quality and inclusion over time.

At the local level

- Develop clear mandates and coordinating teams to lead co-creation efforts across departments.
- Institutionalize structured stakeholder mapping and engagement strategies.
- Ensure transparency and feedback loops to communicate decisions back to participants.
- View each Nbs project as part of a continuous learning cycle, enabling cumulative improvements in practice and outcomes.
- Design funding strategies that recognize the co-benefits of NbS and allow for cross-budget financing.

Article 29.5 Disclaimer

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Discover more resources and information about the project in <https://www.varcities.eu/>

References

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