



Understanding Values and Meanings of Urban Nature through Participatory Engagement: Urbem Fast Forest (Lisbon, Portugal)

As part of the NATURESCAPES project, we are investigating how Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) are experienced and perceived by people in urban contexts, seeking to understand what values and meanings these spaces represent for different actors.

This policy brief presents community perceptions collected during a participatory workshop in the URBEM mini-forest (Lisbon, Portugal) and proposes recommendations for strengthening social, environmental and collective values in urban greening strategies.

Key Findings

- Contact with urban nature is perceived as a source of well-being and mental health.
- NBS create opportunities for connection, belonging and collective learning.
- Participants value the positive ecological impacts and educational potential of the project.
- The URBEM mini-forest is experienced as a territory of care, legacy and collective action which contributes to addressing climate change and biodiversity loss at the local level.
- Findings reveal concerns about how small-scale actions can generate impact and engagement in the context of an understanding of the need for deeper, structural changes.





Workshop: Urbem Fast Forest (Lisbon, Portugal)

On 18 January 2025, a participatory process was conducted in partnership with the NGO Urbem Fast Forest in one of its mini-forests, this one located in Casal Vistoso Park (Lisbon, Portugal). The aim of this participatory process was to engage the volunteers present in a planting day to understand the values and meanings they attach to that space. To this end, four guiding questions were displayed on a board asking participants to share their reflections on:

1. What does nature in this place mean to you on a daily basis?
2. Why are you volunteering in a mini-forest?
3. What benefits do you feel from planting here, for yourself and for the community?
4. What do you value about this space (e.g. well-being, learning, community)?

Due to the cultural diversity of the group, the questions and explanations were given in English and Portuguese. More than 40 entries were written by volunteers on post-its during breaks. The material was transcribed, translated (when needed), anonymized, and thematically analyzed, connecting the participants' insights with the values and meanings attributed to natural space.





Well-Being

Many participants expressed that contact with nature and volunteering in the URBEM mini-forest made them feel calmer and more relaxed, in contrast to the fast-paced daily life of a big city like Lisbon, emphasizing the role of nature in well-being, which was reflected in quotes such as: "Well-being, nature and community" and "For me, nature and parks are super important for our health and mental sanity." The green space was also described as a "place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of the city" and as "heaven."

Beyond personal well-being, many valued collective actions connected to well-being and the sense of community built through shared efforts. "For myself, I feel calmer and more connected. For the community, I feel we are building for the future." Others emphasized the joy of volunteering: "Because it's fun," "Healthy, feeling good, and wonderful to do together." The act of caring for trees over time was also deeply meaningful: "It's rewarding to come back and check on the plants I've planted—it makes me feel happy."

For some, this was about legacy and impact: "[...] leaving a legacy for my children and meeting people with the same goals. That's wonderful." Others saw it as an opportunity to contribute to a greener Lisbon and promote "education, family, health and well-being."

Escape from routine.	I value collective consciousness, sustainability, and social well-being.	Well-being, nature and community.	A place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of the city.	Education, family, health and well-being.	Because it's fun	Peace, Tranquility and Contribution
<p>My name is [blinded] and I'm part of Urben. I've always loved the outdoors and being a volunteer and responsible for this project is a dream. Urbanizing cities, leaving a legacy for my children and meeting people with the same goals. That's wonderful. What I value about the space is the chance to be in the countryside but in the city, to meet incredible people, to contribute to making Lisbon greener. The benefits are the same: health, friendship and reforestation in the city.</p>	<p>Peace.</p>	<p>For me, nature and parks are super important for our health and mental sanity.</p>	<p>Rise and shine!</p>	<p>I feel it helps to bring connection and hope.</p>	<p>Peace.</p>	<p>For myself, I feel calmer and more connected. For the community, I feel we are building for the future.</p>
<p>It is heaven.</p>	<p>I feel calmer and enjoy the social aspect.</p>	<p>It is a good exercise and a contribution to the place.</p>	<p>I like to volunteer here because the organizing team is very welcoming and committed to the cause. It's rewarding to come back and check on the plants I've planted—it makes me feel happy.</p>	<p>Healthy, feeling good, and wonderful to do together.</p>		



Community, Connection and Learning

A common theme among the volunteers was the sense of community and connection associated with nature and the act of volunteering. The collective experience encouraged bonds, and created a space where people could share experiences, cultures (given the cultural diversity of the participants) and values while working towards a common goal, reinforcing the opportunity to meet new people, learn and contribute as a positive point: "Bringing communities together, sharing passions," "To have the opportunity to give back to nature, contribute, learn, connect with people working together for the same goal."

For some, this space was about creating a greener city and taking positive action: "To contribute for a greener planet and to connect with nature. Also, it is therapeutic," "Contribute to the development of nature in the city. Feeling of connection to nature and a project of positive social impact." Others emphasized the need for more spaces like this: "First: because I think it's important to have many places like this everywhere in the city. Second: to meet and talk with people."

To have the opportunity to give back to nature, contribute, learn, connect with people working together for the same goal. Connecting to nature & observing the community that emerges.	First: because I think it's important to have many places like this everywhere in the city. Second: to meet and talk with people.	To contribute for a greener planet and to connect with nature. Also, it is therapeutic.	To make new friends, breathe fresh air, be in the sun among the greenery, joining this new community.	Contribute to the development of nature in the city. Feeling of connection to nature and a project of positive social impact. Positive action in the world.
The commitment the people involved show.	Connecting to nature, people, and God.	Bringing communities together, sharing passions.	I would like to connect more with nature and give something back to the community.	I am volunteering here because I care a lot about earth and I think that connecting ppl will help.
I feel the benefit is in community; we are doing something wholesome with people with similar motivations and interests. And being in the sun!	Well-being, education, and a sense of community.	Developing community spirit.		



Biodiversity, Climate Action and Concerns

A strong personal and collective commitment to environmental preservation was expressed among the participants. Many described their motivation for volunteering as a desire to give something back to nature and to contribute to tackling the climate crisis as a kind of step towards a greener future: "To give back to Mother Earth in any way I can. To make Lisbon greener.", and "To give back to the community - to enhance the biodiversity of Lisbon." Others mentioned a broader sense of responsibility: "Contribute to make the world a greener place."

Participants also emphasized the ecological functions of urban green spaces and their role in building resilience. The mini-forest was valued for its contribution to air quality, rainwater absorption and biodiversity, which also reflects a certain degree of environmental awareness: 'Improvement of air and absorption of rainwater' and 'Creating green spaces, providing us with cleaner air and a rich biodiversity.' One participant reflected on the personal importance of these spaces in a dense urban environment: 'Lisbon has so much impermeable soil & concrete. It has great value to me to come here once a week to recharge my battery in nature.'

Although most of the contributions were positive, there was also an important question mark over the real impact of the project on combating climate change. One of the volunteers expressed concern that occasional participation could generate a false sense of sufficient contribution, without necessarily resulting in structural change:

'I feel benefits for myself (through nature and community). But I study & work in environmental field & climate science. I do think the positive impact of the project is more personal & community-related. The actual impact is not big enough to make a difference in scale to avoid climate change-related risks. Actually, I am worried to hear people talk about it in a way as if they come here once a week and think it is enough. That they leave & think they contributed enough. But I think it has great potential to build motivation!'

Creating green spaces, providing us with cleaner air and a rich biodiversity.	Improvement of air and absorption of rainwater.	It means a lot to me. Lisbon has so much impermeable soil & concrete. It has great value to me to come here once a week to recharge my battery in nature.	To give back to Mother Earth in any way I can. To make Lisbon greener.	- To give back to the community - to enhance the biodiversity of Lisbon
Giving back to the community, making connections, and learning.	To learn the fast-forest method in order to spread this information.	Worms deserve love too.	- Space is of value to the local community - A learning opportunity	I feel like I am actively involved and fulfilled. Building for the future.
Contribute to make the world a greener place.	Trying to make my contribution to the reintroduction and recovery of nature in cities.	Cool cause, happy to contribute, community build, give back, learn about trees, concept be in nature	- Make the world greener in a socially sustainable way. - Connect with nature - Dig some holes	I love having the opportunity to contribute to a more sustainable planet and meeting other people along the way.



Summary

The participatory workshop at Urbem Fast Forest demonstrates the importance of nature in urban environments, especially in a case where there is strong community engagement in which nature was associated with a space of well-being and also as a territory of connection, agency and collective action. The participants are a highly committed and diverse group, which is reflected in the varied manifestations and meanings associated with nature and volunteering, demonstrating that the connection with nature goes far beyond the individual experience and is rooted in a sense of belonging, care and shared responsibility.

Different narratives emerged throughout the activity, reinforcing nature in the city not as a passive setting, but as an active space for agency, intervention and transformation. Despite this, the concern raised by one participant resonated with a complex discussion about small-scale actions in the face of the complex polycrisis scenario we face, and raises the following question: (how) can the act of planting trees in an urban mini-forest be linked to structural change? This question reinforces a bigger challenge: how can one-off initiatives be transformed into ongoing processes of urban and environmental transformation?

Recommendations

- Urban policies for nature-based solutions must go beyond ecological metrics and integrate the way people perceive, feel and attribute meaning to nature. Planning processes should include participatory tools to capture these values and inform greening policies at their different stages (proposal, design, implementation and governance).
- Promote continuity, ensuring that communities feel like they are part of the intervention, return to, care for and co-manage green spaces over time. Establish programmes to monitor engagement (e.g. collective platooning and monitoring of the green area with citizen participation).
- Scale-up community initiatives within the framework of city-wide municipal policies regarding climate adaptation, biodiversity, social inclusion and education, ensuring that local involvement contributes to structural transformation.



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Funded by
the European Union

The NATURESCAPES project is funded by the European Union under Grant Agreement No 101084341. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.