URBAN NATURE PLANS +

Short brief on planning and routines for urban nature plans

Planning and routines

*This short brief outlines how to nature-proof **spatial planning**. Spatial Planning Schemes (SPS) are support structures that can help cities and regions develop and implement urban nature plans effectively.*

Key messages:

1. **Urban nature for climate resilience** – Cities are both significant sources of Green House Gasses emissions and prime arenas to drive carbon sequestration, flood- and wildfire-risk reduction, and wider regional ecological health. Integrating nature into everyday spatial and urban planning therefore shifts urban areas from climate liabilities to climate assets, aligning local land-use choices with climate change mitigation and adaptation goals.

2. **The integration gap** – Despite high-level commitments, biodiversity is still only weakly and inconsistently embedded in spatial planning- particularly in statutory plans. The draft Action Plan of the Urban Agenda's Greening Cities partnership flags traditional systems, regulatory fragmentation and rigid, siloed procedures as top barriers that often block ecological restoration from moving beyond pilot projects.

3. **Spatial planning as multi-scalar** – Because planning competencies are split between regional and municipal levels, spatial planning is considered as the necessary glue that coordinates sectoral policies, democratises decision-making, and arbitrates competing land-use claims while ensuring that benefits and accessibility flow equitably.

4. **Long-term ambition** – Ultimately the SPS seeks to normalise biodiversity and nature-based solutions so thoroughly that they outrank competing land uses in every relevant sectoral plan. Doing so, it demands a granular grasp of institutional dynamics, planning procedures, and the concrete spatial tools available in each jurisdiction.

5. **Biodiversity mainstreaming** – This requires understanding of the institutional dynamics of both the challenges and enabling factors and tailoring interventions to existing planning competencies and local capacities, the procedures and practices of spatial planning design and delivery and the available spatial planning instruments that can enable and support implementation of decisions and specific actions

6. **Cascade planning & regional coherence –** The urban- regional approach is key in the SPS to successful climate resilient and nature positive development. Cascade planning approach may support true climate resilience and renaturalisation, with regional plans providing broad land-use strategy, flag high-risk zones, and impose study requirements, while local urban plans can translate these into context-specific actions.

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Why spatial planning matters?

Spatial planning and management instruments and decision-making processes have a great transformative potential to safeguard and enhance biodiversity.

Building on this idea, Spatial Planning Schemes (SPS) provide a model to help cities systematically integrate biodiversity and nature into spatial (and land-use) planning. It stands out as practical bridge between Urban Nature Plan (UNP) goals and the formal, sometimes complex, practices, planning instruments, and land-use regulations each city must follow. Three qualities underpin the SPS:

- **flexibility**, to be adapted to diverse planning processes, practices, and norms, The SPS it is sensible to different planning cultures The SPS is sensible to the diverse ecological, social, and governance characteristics of each city, as well as to the features of their planning systems This sensitivity to Europe's heterogeneous planning systems is flagged as essential for real-world uptake.
- **modularity**, to be adopted in different planning steps, cities can pick the bits relevant to the stage of the UNP process they are in, in an organic rather than in a step- wise way
- **scalability**, as the capacity to consider multilevel governance issues, so it can be applied at the city and at the region-wide strategic level.

In practice, the SPS offers an actionable menu of recommendations, practical guidelines, and best practice examples aligned with the 10-step UNP process and key elements, that cities can follow and adopt to:

- **assure smooth articulation of the UNP process** into the existing policy and planning landscape, governance structures and distribution of responsibilities in cities.
- **capitalize on the use of different planning tools** to produce evidence-led spatial diagnostics, identify priority streets & vacant lots., undertake climate risk assessments to detect demand for urban green, apply urban standards for multifunctional land use or accessibility-.
- **make use of spatial planning instruments** - zoning codes, procurement rules, and more - to support the implementation of UNP, turning high-level biodiversity goals into concrete projects, contract clauses, and ordinances for instance.

Key Principles

Considering the three macro-steps of the UNP process- **Preparation, Action Planning and Implementation & Monitoring** - the SPS clusters the operational guidelines, recommendations and best practices into three planning components (see Figure 1).

Organizational: Institutional arrangements i.e. structures and processes that govern and manage urban development, determine how decisions are made, who has authority, how resources are allocated, and how different entities collaborate to achieve urban planning goals. It includes working around governance, stakeholders (public and private) and citizens/ communities' engagement in the planning process to ensure response to the needs and aspirations of the population, institutional capacity & resources needed to design, support planning decisions, and enable implementation.

Procedural: Design and delivery of spatial planning instruments and related processes (i.e., Master Plans, Urban development Plans). It implies the process and planning tools used by planners to analyse, design, and implement strategies for the development and management of urban areas.

Normative: legal and regulatory framework, and spatial planning instruments that directly affect the delivery of vision and goals. This encompasses the policy and spatial planning instruments (strategic or regulatory) that provide the legal, institutional, and procedural basis for the development and implementation of urban nature.

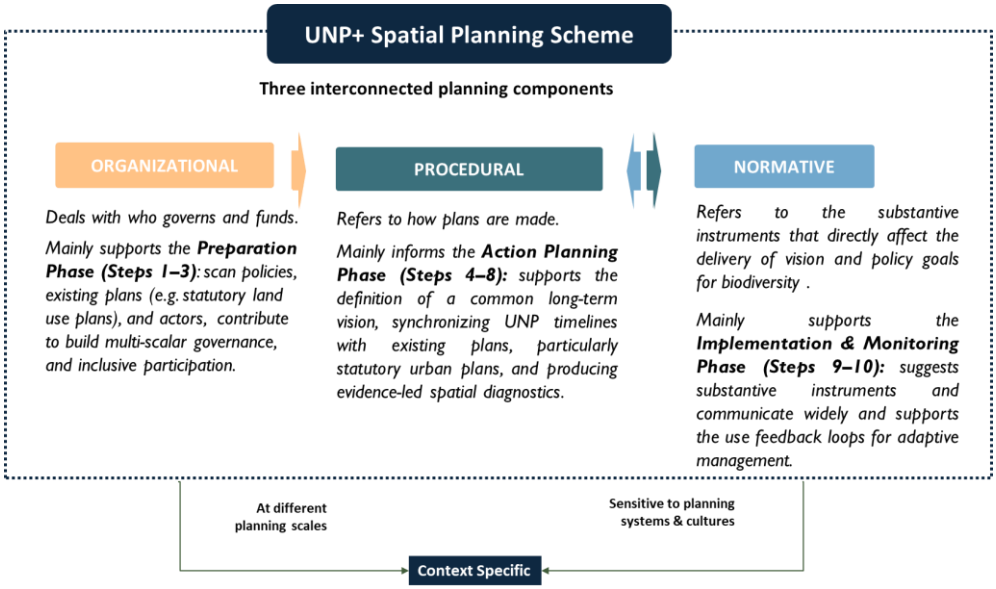

Figure 1 Design principles for SPS

Embedding a justice perspective is critical, and it means recognising historic patterns of exclusion and making multifunctional urban nature a vehicle for redistributive equity. Spatial planning should therefore guarantee just distribution and location of nature spaces, using urban nature to deliver health, safety, and quality-of-life gains first and foremost in underserved areas, and guard against green gentrification, Spatial planning should also enable that vulnerable communities have a voice in participatory planning process, so their needs and preferences are not only heard but taken into consideration in planning decisions.

Key Recommendations

This short brief provides 3 sets of recommendations.

SPS Organizational planning supporting the Preparation Phase (Steps 1–3)

Enhancing of the policy context: The SPS begins by enhancing understanding of the policy context, including ongoing initiatives, relevant strategies, and particularly statutory spatial and land use plan (Step 1).

Decision framing: This foundation on policy context supports the framing of decisions by linking demands for action with responsible actors or partnerships, while promoting good governance through transparency, legitimacy, and openness (Step 1).

Alignment with governance structures: The decision framing then enables stronger alignment with governance structures, contributing to multi-scalar capacity that facilitates the integration of sectoral policies and more effective urban problem-solving (Step 2).

- Working structure inside the administration: An internal working structure to ensure the correct Plan design, implementation and evaluation from a technical and operational point of view, to foster the dialogue with politicians and with other supra-municipal institutions.
- Working structure outside the administration: To co-design with the neighbors and other stakeholders to guarantee their future involvement as co-financiers and promoters of future projects. This working structure could be made up of different civil society groups, the private sector, and neighborhood communities being convened and coordinated by the participants in the strategic working structure. It will meet when necessary, establishing a minimum of xx meetings throughout the plan definition and implementation.
- Working structure inside-out strategic: Aimed to assess the progress of the UNP+ to align it with other municipal strategies and to extract lessons learned and benefits for future iterations of the Plan. This working structure could be made up of 1/the council political representatives of the council, 2/the urban planning team, 3/local strategic stakeholder representatives and 4/representatives of the civil society. It should have periodic depending on the needs or requirements of the different participants.

Setting spatial planning co-creation guidelines and spatial data and knowledge driven decision making: Finally, the approach encourages active and inclusive participatory planning by addressing interconnected needs across various scales and stakeholders. It supports data-informed decision-making and comprehensive strategies that align public and private interests within specific territories (Step 3).

SPS Procedural planning informing Action Planning Phase (Steps 4–8)

Collection, assessment, and comparison of existing visions and goals to support the definition of a common and coherent long-term vision for nature positive planning, (Step 4).

Synchronizing UNP timelines with existing plans: Identifying strategic entry points for integrating UNP+ into ongoing and future plans (anchoring particularly to statutory and binding plans), ensures alignment between the timeframes of the Urban Nature Plan (UNP) and existing urban planning instruments, fostering cohesive and synchronised development strategies (Step 4).

Producing evidence-led spatial diagnostics. It supports spatially explicit diagnosis of needs, demand management, and the planning of adaptation measures under climate change scenarios, thereby strengthening climate adaptation and resilience (Step 5).

Territorialization of policy goals to promote sustainable and equitable development under climate change scenarios. Spatial planning plays a key role in competing land use conflict resolution and promotion of balanced development between rural and urban areas, ensuring fair access to resources. Spatial analyses could inform decision making with regards to the configuration and benchmarking of planning alternatives through spatially explicit targets/actions and indicators, also under climate change scenarios (Step 6).

Flexibility of planning instruments- It is crucial to promote flexibility of process and mindsets to guarantee that the approach also facilitates the translation of strategic targets into planning regulations, operational rules, and implementation mechanisms such as public procurement or ordinances. (Step 7).

Aligning UNP with local urban planning communication frameworks. Finally, it enhances the communication and integration of UNP actions within local urban planning frameworks (Step 8).

SPS Normative planning supporting Implementation and Monitoring Phase (Steps 9–10)

The SPS encourages adaptive planning approach through continuous monitoring and feedback loops, enabling the refinement of policies and land-use regulations over time (Step 9).

It also provides insights on concrete substantive instruments for leveraging multifunctional urban nature (Step 10). Table 1 shows preliminary identification of the variety of spatial planning instruments that can be used in bundles as a policy-mix supporting urban nature deployment and implementation.

Table 1. Spatial planning instruments supporting urban nature deployment and implementation ranked from more restrictive/binding (i.e. enforcement) to more steering/voluntary instruments (i.e., informational)

MAIN CATEGORY	SPATIAL PLANNING INSTRUMENT
ENFORCEMENT INSTRUMENTS	Expropriation of land (including compulsory conservation easements)
	Administrative possession
	Preemption rights
REGULATORY INSTRUMENTS	Quantitative targets or standards
	Qualitative and Technological Requirements
	Compensation measures
	Performance-based approaches with point systems
	Conservation zones, greenbelts or protected areas and sites
	Land parcel ownership rearrangements
	Land use zoning schemes in urban or rural spaces at different scales
	Other instruments related to zoning regulations
PROJECT OR ACTION-BASED INSTRUMENTS	Design-based instruments
	Land acquisition
	Contractualizations, Partnerships and Stewardships, including voluntary conservation easements
INCENTIVE-BASED INSTRUMENTS	Density bonuses
	Transfer of development rights (TDR) mechanisms
	Fast-tracking approval process
	Interim use permits (abandoned/vacant lots)
INFORMATION-BASED INSTRUMENTS	Guidelines and criteria for public space design and management
	Guidelines for promoting good practices in private spaces
	Biodiversity monitoring & Ecosystems Services Assessments

Note: Based on Lia Laporta et al, 2024. BioValue D1.4. Guidelines and Future Pathways for biodiversity inclusion in spatial planning and policy.

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