Nature Within Cities and Cities within Nature

(30 June 2021, 16h00 CEST)

LONG SUMMARY OF THE EVENT

On the 30th June 2021, the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), with the support of the Geneva Environment Network, co-hosted the high-level online conference "*Nature Within Cities and Cities within Nature*". The event builds on and follows up to the German Presidency event held on 14 December 2020, which focused on how ecosystem conservation, management and restoration can address the three planetary crises: climate, biodiversity, and pollution.

The event focused on exploring the multiple benefits of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for cities, highlighting opportunities and challenges to advance and scale up NbS, from local action to global solutions, accelerating impact in 2021 and beyond. Catarina Roseta-Palma introduced the topic for this event, and highlighted the current context and relevance of NbS as a driver that harness the power of nature for sustainable development, thus delivering benefits for climate resilience, healthy populations, sustainable economies, green jobs and biodiversity regeneration.

Inger Andersen, UNEP's Executive Director, opened the event on behalf of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres by restating the unique position, scale and complexity of cities. They show how ingenious humans can be. However, cities are responsible for 80% of greenhouse gas emissions and 75% of resource use. The density that comes with cities concentrates problems, yet also allows for resource efficiency and cost effectiveness. NbS will be an essential response to the triple planetary crisis – climate, nature, and pollution – delivering benefits for climate resilience, healthy population, sustainable economies and biodiversity restoration. Indeed, NbS represent numerous opportunities for cities, from reducing urban heat islands by greening neighbourhoods to offering equitable access to safe and green spaces for all. To leverage those opportunities, it is essential to implement the right policies and ensure that no one is left behind – especially with growing urban populations. A life in harmony with nature in our cities should be promoted, and only then the worse impacts of climate change may be avoided.

Minister João Pedro Matos Fernandes, Minister for the Environment of Portugal, then expressed the 2021 Portuguese EU Presidency's intention to further strengthen the EU's climate and biodiversity leadership. NbS must be prioritized if our climate goals are to be delivered, in the light of population growth. NbS bring benefits for the environment, the economy, and society overall by simultaneously improving public health, saving energy and water, while contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030. The Covid-19 pandemic made even more evident our relationship with nature, and now going back to a business-as-usual scenario is not conceivable. Cities have the responsibility to build back better. Since more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, it is essential to act at the city level. NbS are win-win solutions, bringing multiple benefits such as empowering communities, increase resilience, or provide jobs and opportunities.

The first session of the event expanded on the multiple benefits of NbS. Inger Andersen started by asking important questions: how can nature be brought back to cities? How might we rethink the ways cities can really work for people? She listed three things society can do, should do, and must do:

1. Letting nature back in, with parks, green roofs, green streets, among others. Nature can do its job. As examples, urban and peri-urban agriculture can increase food security, or green spaces can provide shading and natural cooling – as Lisbon's green corridors do.
2. Rebalancing cities' relationship with suburban areas. Cities simply cannot spread and swallow their surroundings. Sustainable density, walkability, and greening are linked to make cities and neighbourhoods liveable and attractive.
3. Reduce the pressure on nature. Cities are major energy and resource consumers. From waste management to public procurement as a lever for change, cities can address their own demand and disrupt the value chain. 75% of the infrastructure that will be present in 2050 is yet to be built, and Covid-relief packages are a chance to make the shift and make it happen.

Multi-level governance has a key role to play in enabling this transition. Building strong business models for NbS is also important. Cities can innovate and reinvent themselves now; by investing in NbS, they can slow down climate change and provide more sustainable lives for everyone.

The Portuguese Minister of Territorial Cohesion, Ana Abrunhosa, then reminded us that we have been doing it the easy way, replicating good practices such as investing in sustainable mobility models. Those measures are still not enough, therefore it is now time to act, to do what has not yet been done. Europeans must work together to come up with new ideas, test results and disseminate new research. As there is no magical wand to erase the mistakes of the past, we need to work on top of what we have. The pandemic showed cities that they can respond actively to the challenges and bringing more nature into the cities can be an objective. NbS can, for instance, help address heat waves in the urban context. Now the way forward is to keep counting on science and innovation to address the challenges of a pandemic world while focusing on nature, strengthening the bridge with academia, investing in universities and believing in them. With an open mind, governments can work together to improve the collective response to the challenges of the future.

The German Minister of the Environment, Svenja Schluze, introduced the Climate Change Act in her video intervention. The revised Climate Change Act sets out binding trajectory towards climate neutrality by 2045. The Act is also creating the political framework in Germany for bringing forward NbS in cities. NbS make cities more resilient and create a valuable habitat for animals and plants if done properly, while improving lives in neighbourhoods. The government is supporting municipalities in developing green infrastructures, helping with master plans that include NbS. NbS need to become widespread as quickly as possible in Germany, in the EU and worldwide. She then invited all panellists and attendees to join Germany on this path: it is only through working together that the value of nature will be better understood.

Finally, the Minister of the Environment and Spatial Planning of Slovenia, Andrej Vizjak, restated the *evident* multiple benefits of NbS in cities. They improve air quality, support better water management, and provide recreational spaces. NbS shape the identity of the city, and cities and towns should be recognized as relevant areas of biodiversity protection. NbS make our cities greener and more pleasant for living and working; European cities offer great examples of what Nature can bring to an urban environment. Urban

planning is crucial for supporting NbS, and in Slovenia a partnership on NbS was established in the light of the new urban agenda to promote the multiple benefits of NbS for cities.

The second session focused on the opportunities and challenges cities are facing to advance NbS. It started with the intervention of Philippe Ulkens, Deputy Head of Unit « Climate and planetary boundaries », EU's DG Research and Innovation. NbS will be key in the coming years for implementing the European green deal. NbS are amongst the best solutions, but their value is not always recognized. Philippe Ulkens mentioned the EU Climate Pact to illustrate the EU increased climate ambition for 2030, with an objective to achieve climate-neutrality by 2040. NbS will contribute to this objective. The EU also has a new Adaptation to Climate Change Strategy since February, and again NbS are a key element. Moreover, recovery plans are an additional way to further the investments in NbS. Member States must take up those solutions, implement them, and transform their local environments. Regarding the science around NbS, some knowledge gaps remain, but the research will continue. Philippe Ulkens reminded the audience that the EU is increasing its investments through the program Horizon Europe. There are also other opportunities to promote and develop NbS through the Partnership on Biodiversity and the Europe Horizon Mission (to be launched soon, this will be a programme rooted in research but going beyond, calling for action and demonstrating the viability of solutions). He concluded by stating that considering the socioeconomic aspects is fundamental to accelerate the development of NbS. As we live in a period of unprecedented challenges, opportunities emerge as well, and we should not forget them. Good science is there to help rediscovering those solutions and opportunities rooted in nature, as the understanding of what NbS are and what is their value is still unevenly distributed around the world.

Following this intervention, Ana Daam from the Portuguese Environment Agency (PEA) put climate change adaptation at the center of her presentation. Climate change adaptation is a priority issue around the world and governments need to pay attention to it. Adaptation strategies will help to achieve climate resilience, hopefully, by 2050. However, in order to do so and to promote NbS, better data is needed, as well as better use of data. By integrating financial considerations, the importance of NbS to restore ecosystems, protect the planet's biodiversity, and achieve climate resilience becomes clear. Alone we are strong, yet together we are stronger and better able to deliver the multiple benefits of NbS. One NbS can benefit several policy goals. Blue and green infrastructures increase biodiversity and reduce the risk of flooding – relating to the climate change policy, while bringing multiple benefits such as improving health and creating jobs and opportunities – relating to socio-economic policies. She then proceeded to warn the audience: in spite of the many advantages of NbS, without money nothing is possible. That is why the PEA created an Environment Fund, the perfect call for citizens and cities to promote sustainability for buildings and cities.

Rosário Oliveira, researcher at the University of Lisbon (ICS), Portugal, concluded the session. She highlighted that building a just city, where social conditions, environmental quality and health are positively correlated, is complex. Distributive justice, equitable access to environmental resources, and procedural justice are three aspects of environmental justice. By illustrating her point with the Doughnut Economics visual framework (Kate Raworth, 2012), she explained that environmental and social goals are linked, and that authorities should make and enforce the right regulations accordingly. More than implementing NbS in cities, cities should move into nature-based economic scenarios, and connect multi-systems at multi-levels. An example of a project helping to deliver NbS in Europe and Latin America is the CONEXUS

project. It is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Action project, supporting cities and communities in creating NbS and restoring urban ecosystems, by improving knowledge sharing. She concluded by presenting another project promoting nature-based thinking: the Lisgreen life-lab in Lisbon.

Finally, the last session of the event focused on the models for scaling up NbS from local action to global solutions. Duarte d´Araújo Mata, landscape architect and Climate & Green Infrastructure Advisor for the Municipality of Lisbon Deputy Mayor´s Office, presented the magnified advantages of NbS in an ecological landscape approach. He introduced Lisbon's work on the green corridors programme, and their ecosystem and natural landscape design services more broadly. The municipality recently renamed those services, from green spaces to ecological structures, shifting the focus to recognize the importance of such services in the natural, social, and economic environments. The multiple benefits of NbS include active mobility promotion, health benefits, low-cost implementation and maintenance, local food production, social inclusion, or energy savings. Lisbon has been implementing 9 green corridors, +300 hectares of new green areas and +15% of new green in the city since 2009.

Finally, Ângela Cruz Guirão, Director of Green and Sustainable Development for Campinas City Hall (São Paulo, Brazil) reminded the audience of the importance of integrated planning. She mentioned a few examples in that sense: ecological corridors and passages of arboreal fauna, linear parks, and the RECONECTA RMC program encouraging sustainable use and occupation of the urban territory through NbS. She acknowledged the technical and political support received from their partners and indicated that this support is essential to boost the actions of Campinas and the municipal region. She concluded by reiterating the importance of integrated planning and collaboration for sustainable programmes.

Susana NETO, from the University of Lisbon, wrapped up the event by highlighting the importance of mindset changes. Mindsets should be changed so urban dwellers understand the importance of letting nature take some space in cities. There should be a switch in the way people live in cities, as a better balance within the region we impact and absorb should be attained. By doing so, the pressure on nature could be reduced, and governments will achieve their objectives by understanding how nature can achieve them. The event highlighted the many experiences worldwide dedicated to NbS to learn from and exchange on. Thus it is helping to link experiences and actors, and some seeds were planted that day.

Link to the recording:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdtwHQUeFME&ab_channel=GenevaEnvironmentNetwork