



CUE



Knowledge Hub

## Practice recommendations

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This brief includes recommendations for public authorities and developers. The recommendations were developed with input from DUT projects CORPUS, GREEN-INC, TransScale, ECLECTIC, MAINCODE, IntegrateNbS, and Circular Grassroots.

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# STRATEGIES FOR INCREASED SOCIAL JUSTICE IN URBAN PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE

## KEY MESSAGES

- **The challenge:** Climate change and social inequalities affect urban life, in particular marginalised groups. Traditional participatory approaches in urban planning and local governance solutions often fail to create just inclusion of people who need it the most.
- **The solution:** Municipal administrations should move from simple participation models, collecting inputs only at selected moments, to collaborative governance models where decision-making power is shared and community insights shape policy design, implementation and budget allocation.
- **Action for public authorities and developers:** Prioritise the local knowledge and lived experience of residents and civil society groups alongside technical data to ensure urban greening and circular initiatives simultaneously address rising issues of socio-ecological inequalities in cities and meet local needs.
- **The impact:** When urban developments and initiatives acknowledge and value local knowledge, they create more resilient, widely supported, and socially just urban environments.



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# INTRODUCTION

Cities are facing rapid climate and socio-economic transitions. When it comes to urban planning and local governance, municipal administrations must do more than simply include more people in dialogues. Rather, urban planning and local governance must be socially just by intention and needs to start from local knowledge and initiatives and empower these. While tools like co-design are popular, they often fail to empower city dwellers, especially marginalised groups, when their input does not lead to real improvement through policy changes or funding decisions.

This publication offers practical recommendations for using collaborative governance approaches to empower marginalised voices in green and circular economy initiatives. All recommendations were drawn from seven Driving Urban Transitions (DUT) projects (CORPUS, GREEN-INC, TransScale, ECLECTIC, MAINCODE, IntegrateNbS, and Circular Grassroots).

# AVOIDING SOCIAL BLINDNESS

Municipalities are under pressure to launch Nature-based Solutions and circular economy projects to solve climate, environmental, and economic problems. However, if these projects are designed using only technical metrics, they risk overlooking social factors. For example, if the urban planner assumes that a park benefits all citizens equally, not taking into account the specific needs, capacities and vulnerabilities of different groups, e.g. inaccessible areas for people with reduced mobility, or women feeling unsafe in parks.

Collaborative governance can bridge this gap. Collaborative governance goes further than including city dwellers in a meeting. Rather, it is a process that redistributes power across institutional and community actors, where actors work together toward shared goals to transform the city more equitably. It ensures that community values and local knowledge are recognised for their worth and shape (municipal) policy and practice from the first idea to the final implementation and evaluation (Chapman et al., 2024).

# PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results from seven DUT projects, we recommend that municipalities make three key shifts to achieve social justice<sup>1</sup> in urban planning and local governance.

## 1. Make participation accessible and re-balance power

Due to efficiency reasons, current urban planning and local governance often prioritise technical knowledge over the local expertise and lived experience of city dwellers. Conventional participation methods can be inaccessible and favour certain demographic groups over others.

### Recommendations

Value local knowledge and lived experience: treat city dwellers and grassroots groups as the true experts of their own neighbourhoods. Incorporate the different community needs, objectives and perspectives when defining priorities and implementing solutions.

**Know your grassroots initiatives:** actively map and make an inventory of grassroots initiatives and their spaces. Provide space and resources for these existing community innovations without taking them over. This can be supported by creating a dedicated municipal role with a specific focus on civic engagement.

**Use intermediaries as facilitators:** work with well-connected and knowledgeable ambassadors from the neighbourhoods, such as neighbourhood associations. A good facilitator creates space for different perspectives, connects local initiatives with local governments, translates technical jargon and regulatory constraints into accessible language, and ensures powerful voices do not drown out the marginalised.

**Remove barriers:** public does not mean accessible. Use fun activities, low-tech digital tools, and varied meeting times to reach people who cannot attend a standard 7:00 PM Tuesday meeting. Different groups take in information in different ways and communicate through a variety of channels. Create participatory spaces and mechanisms that make it easy for citizens to understand local governance and policymaking.

<sup>1</sup> See final page for notes on definitions

## 2. Build diverse networks and embrace conflict

Standard consultation often reaches the usual suspects and avoids the difficult conversations. Therefore, municipalities should proactively work with local networks.

### Recommendations

**Broaden the stakeholder table:** actively recruit social enterprises, grassroots groups, and those organisations focused on social justice. Certain groups might be repeatedly sidelined, despite having a stake in the process. Ask yourself and those already present: who is missing in this room?

**The staircase approach:** for complex initiatives, start with one-on-one interviews, move to group-specific interviews (e.g. just politicians or just NGOs), and finish with joint workshops where multiple groups negotiate on equal footing.

**Welcome a healthy dose of conflict:** tension and friction are to be expected and can actually lead to mutual learning and better, more robust solutions if managed transparently. Engage with diverse opinions and give space for disagreement. Hold dedicated workshops that facilitate convergence towards a shared collective vision.

## 3. Turn input into action

Even highly inclusive participatory processes can fail if the outcomes are not structurally implemented, leading to broken promises and community frustration.

### Recommendations

**Align with policy timelines:** schedule engagement so that the results are ready when a policy is being written or a budget is being set.

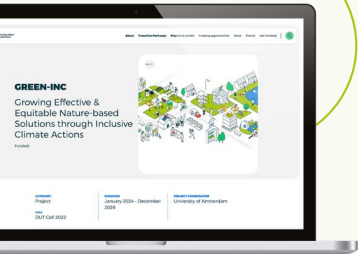
**Set clear boundaries and roles:** be transparent about what is possible with regards to budget, timelines, and regulatory constraints and what is not. This prevents city dwellers and groups from feeling like their time was wasted on things that cannot be changed.

**Build networks:** establish dedicated spaces and moments for continuous communication and learning between grassroots initiatives, community groups, and public authorities, ensuring local expertise is valued and actively used to shape urban solutions.



# DUT PROJECTS TO DRAW ON

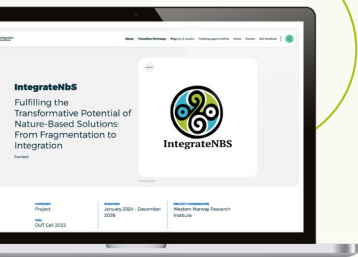
## GREEN-INC



This project investigates how Nature-based Solutions (NbS) could be turned into Inclusive Climate Actions. Results demonstrated that marginalised groups (elderly, migrants, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities and low-income) often feel excluded from NbS projects in Amsterdam, Brussels, and Bucharest. To illustrate, informal community stewards, like migrant women tending local gardens, often lack institutional support or do not feel their perspectives are welcome in greening initiatives. This could lead to missed opportunities for building community ties and building on local knowledge.

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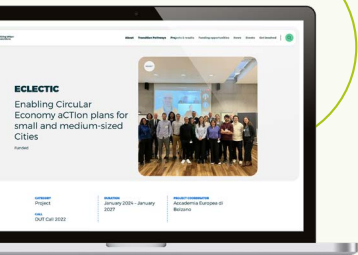
## IntegrateNbs



This project uses Integrative Labs to realise the transformative potential of nature-based solutions through inclusive, co-creative processes. Co-developed with local authorities and civil society, the labs bring together diverse actors and forms of knowledge, integrating values, practice, and governance. Through facilitation that prioritises trust, listening, and reflection over quick consensus, the approach supports more legitimate and context-sensitive responses to climate change risks, water management challenges, urban heat islands, and environmental degradation.

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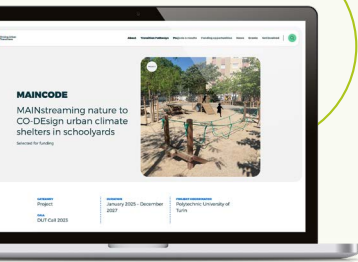
## ECLECTIC



This project identifies grassroots ecosystems that collaborate by sharing resources, exchanging knowledge, and supporting each other's activities. In Bolzano, Italy, social enterprises, cooperatives, associations, and informal groups worked with marginalised communities that focus on circularity, build a network to strengthen their capacity and get recognised by the regional circular economy strategy. Circular Laboratories can help these groups meet with public authorities to align priorities and share resources, taking away power imbalances.

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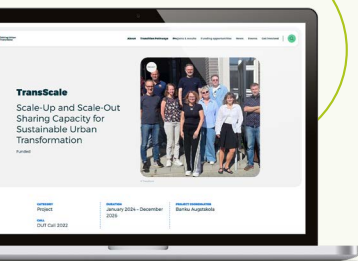
## **MAINCODE**



This project highlights that adapting to climate change is not just a technical engineering challenge, but rather a negotiated, local process. Within MAINCODE, schoolyards become climate shelters, co-designed with residents from vulnerable neighbourhoods. By empowering the residents most exposed to climate risks to help shape solutions, planners achieve both procedural and distributive justice. For co-design to be effective, it must work within real-world regulations and budgets, using analytical tools to keep the process transparent and informed.

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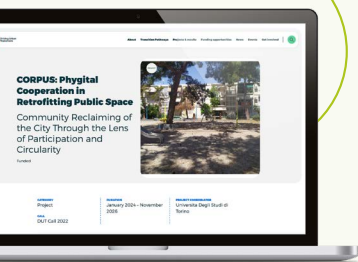
## **TransScale**



In Oslo, a Circular Resource Central for building materials was set-up through a partnership between the public sector, NGOs, and a start-up. It showed that when planners provide the space and institutional backing, practitioners can lead the way in technical material reuse. The centre functions also as a knowledge arena where municipalities, waste companies, and reuse entrepreneurs exchange experiences and develop shared approaches to circular construction practices, through workshops, site visits, and networking activities. Potential conflicts are discussed openly.

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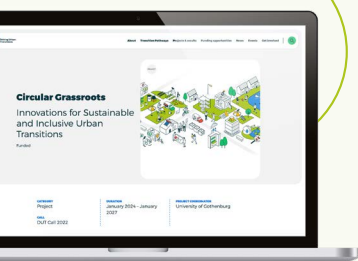
## **CORPUS**



This project researches how retrofitting neighbourhood public spaces can be grounded in digitally-supported circular urban economies. In Aigaleo, Greece, the project engaged the elderly community centre and primary school students in co-designing urban equipment mainly based on upcycling. In Turin, Italy, the project engaged associations and individuals in co-designing local and circular economy projects. The process demonstrated that using 'learning by doing' and situated knowledge is essential for balancing power and translating technical jargon into accessible community action. The project highlights the need to align engagement activities with the existing local rhythms and temporal constraints of the community.

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## **Circular Grassroots**



This project examines collective citizen-driven initiatives like food-sharing, repair hubs, and housing cooperatives that drive just urban transitions. It found that these initiatives often operate in temporary, marginal spaces and remain invisible to municipal authorities despite providing essential services, some even facing regulation or repression. These initiatives generate multiple forms of value that are not captured by monetary value and quantitative metrics. Mapping these initiatives and their values, creating participatory channels to understand their needs, providing spaces, and bringing in intermediaries can help bridge these gaps.

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# UNDERSTANDING THE CORE CONCEPTS

**Social justice:** Social Justice ensures that the benefits of city life are shared by everyone. This is rooted in recognition (acknowledgement that one-size-fits-all plans often fail marginalised groups); procedural justice (going beyond a focus on only a successful outcome, and rather ensuring people have been heard and given equal chances throughout the process); and distributive justice (ensuring that resources are equally distributed to all).

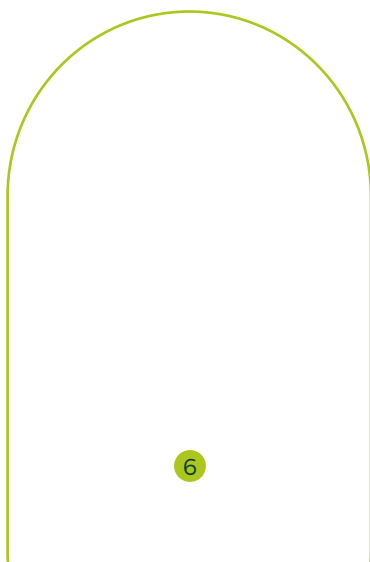
**Inclusion, equity, and empowerment:** Inclusion ensures diverse groups are engaged. Equity ensures all different groups have the same opportunity to be engaged, influence decisions, and access resources. Empowerment ensures that participants have the actual power to influence decisions and developments. This involves giving citizens the practical tools and technical skills to physically change their own neighbourhoods (such as through material reuse), and uses education and collective action to help a community reimagine their shared identity and the future of their local spaces.

**Situated knowledge:** Also called local expertise and lived experience in our recommendations. This is knowledge gained through daily life in a specific neighbourhood.

Mainstream participation processes often miss the voices of marginalised groups such as elderly, women, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities. Seeing and valuing their situated knowledge is crucial to ensure solutions benefit all.

**Collaborative governance, co-design, and co-creation:** co-design and co-creation are collaborative tools used to solve specific problems or design specific spaces. Collaborative governance is a broader framework where the municipality and city dwellers share decision-making power as part of permanent cycles of municipal decision-making and planning.

**Urban planning and urban governance:** A collective term for the variety of DUT's Circular Urban Economies projects that bring work on urban greening and urban circularity together. Both circularity and greening projects need to take social justice into account. The key aspect to this vision is for citizens to take part in processes of urban planning and governance. This requires a constant commitment by the public administration to allocate resources for long-term interaction with local communities through activities on mutual learning, thereby creating trust.



# REFERENCES

Chapman, E., Bukovszki, V., van Lierop, M., Tomasi, S., & Pauleit, S. (2024). Towards more equitable urban greening: A framework for monitoring and evaluating co-governance. *Urban Planning*, 9, Article 8184. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.8184>

## ABOUT THE DUT KNOWLEDGE HUB

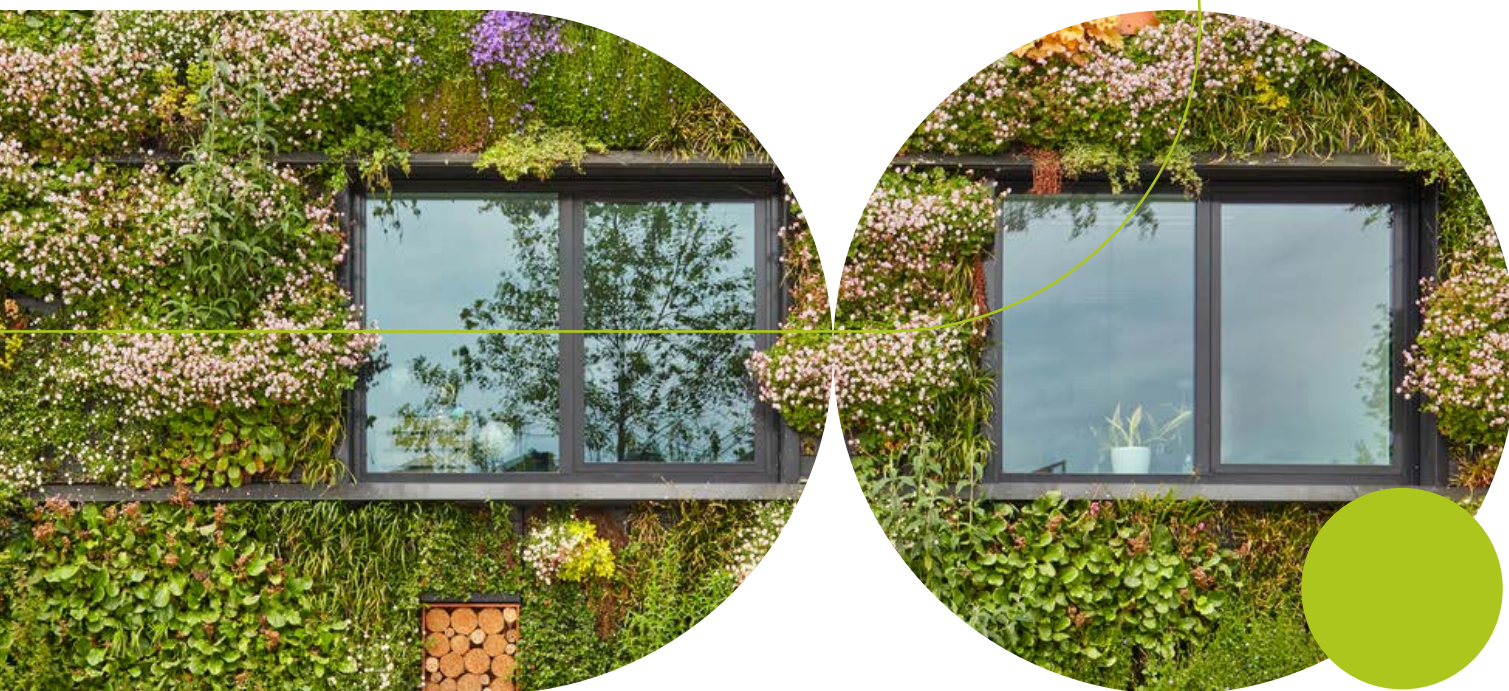
This publication is an output from the Knowledge Hub.

The Knowledge Hub is DUT's instrument to gather a knowledge community, capitalise on project results and facilitate the transfer of the project results to practitioners.

Each DUT project is represented by an expert who spends at least 5 person-months on Knowledge Hub activities. The experts, together with the management team of the Knowledge Hub(s) and the specific Transition Pathway programme management, are set to:

- Contribute to the strategic development of the Transition Pathway
- Synthesise results in collaboration with other projects
- Develop publications and participate in specific events
- Communicate with the scientific community and stakeholders





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