

Weaving Urban Futures



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Executive Summary

Weaving Urban Futures: Trajectories towards just and climate-resilient cities



Why this guidebook matters

Cities today face various interconnected crises. Climate change brings heatwaves, floods, storms and rising seas. But it does not act alone. It interacts with inequality, housing shortages, environmental degradation, governance challenges, pandemics, resource scarcity and the digital divide. These pressures overlap and reinforce each other, stretching existing infrastructure. They deepen injustice and weaken communities' ability to cope with shocks.

Climate change is one entry point into this broader crisis. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report confirms that human activity has caused global warming. The planet is already 1.1°C warmer than in pre-industrial times. If emissions continue to rise, impacts will intensify. The scenarios are clear: some futures are catastrophic. Others are still possible, but only if we act now.

Most urban planning still follows "business as usual" pathways. These assume incremental change and technological fixes. But what if we aim for deeper shifts? What if cities move towards justice, solidarity and ecological balance? What would that future look like?

Weaving Urban Futures invites citymakers to imagine and build those alternatives together. It asks not only how cities can survive climate change, but what kind of cities we actually want.

This guidebook offers a framework and practical methodology to help communities move towards just and climate-resilient futures. It is not a technical manual. It is a compass.

The guidebook builds on six years of experience from **Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC)**, funded by the German Government's International Climate Initiative (IKI). Since 2021, TUC has supported Urban Labs in five Latin American cities: Buenos Aires (Argentina), León and Naucalpan (Mexico), and Teresina and Recife (Brazil). These Labs brought together governments, civil society, universities, businesses and local communities to co-design solutions grounded in real territories. The lessons from these Urban Labs shape this publication.



Based on TUC experience and systems thinking, the guidebook identifies 12 enabling conditions, grouped into three categories: everyday patterns, relational networks and embedded narratives.



A different approach to transformation

Weaving Urban Futures starts from a simple idea: cities are complex systems. Infrastructure, people, nature, economic activity and policies interact constantly. Many urban problems come from these interactions and their root causes often remain hidden. Climate strategies frequently focus narrowly on carbon reduction or technological innovation. These approaches matter, but they are not enough. They often ignore inequality, power imbalances and historical injustices. They may even reproduce them.

Weaving Urban Futures proposes a systemic approach. It looks at the underlying conditions that produce unjust and carbon-intensive cities. It recognizes that transformation is not linear, depends on context and takes time.

The guidebook introduces the concept of **trajectories**. A trajectory is a coherent direction of change that connects actions across sectors and timescales. From any given moment, multiple trajectories are possible. Some reinforce injustice and risk, while others move towards justice and resilience. Transformation is about choosing and shaping those trajectories.

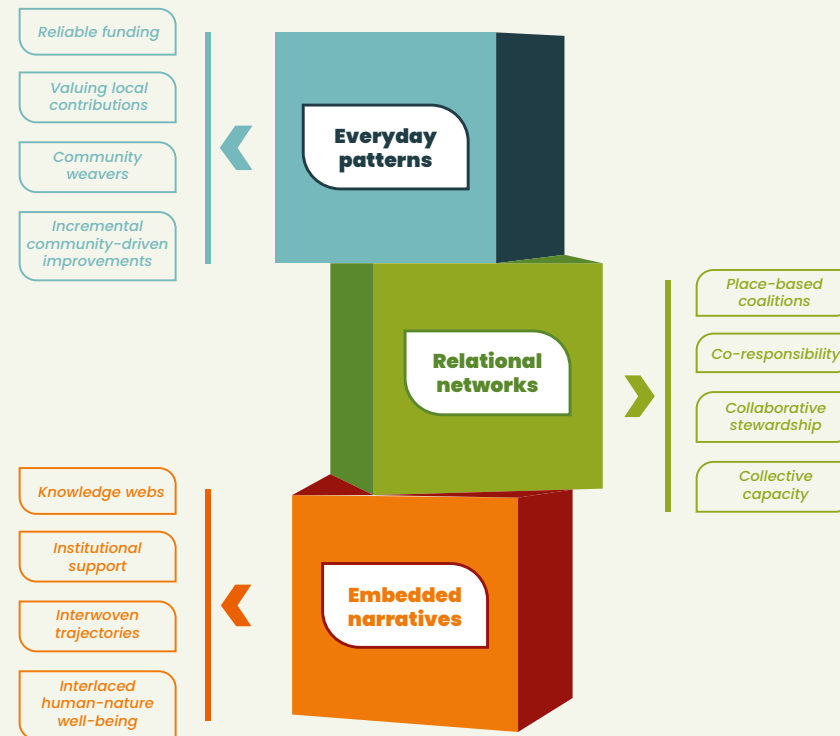
Climate resilience is understood in line with the IPCC's concept of Climate Resilient Development: integrating mitigation and adaptation while advancing sustainable development over time. Justice is understood in multiple dimensions:

- **Redistributive justice:** fair access to resources and opportunities
- **Recognitional justice:** valuing diverse identities and perspectives
- **Procedural justice:** fair and inclusive decision-making processes
- **Restorative justice:** repairing past harms to communities and ecosystems

The Weaving Urban Futures approach challenges traditional roles. Professional planners are not distant experts, but facilitators and co-learners. Communities are not passive beneficiaries, but agents of change.

Enabling conditions for transformation

Structural change requires the right conditions. Based on TUC experience and systems thinking, the guidebook identifies **12 enabling conditions**, grouped into three categories: everyday patterns, relational networks and embedded narratives.



1. Everyday patterns.

These are the daily routines, practices and resource flows that shape citymaking. Key enablers include:

- **Incremental community-driven improvements.** Small, visible actions – restoring public spaces, planting trees, improving sidewalks – can build trust and momentum. They demonstrate that change is possible.
- **Community weavers.** Individuals who connect people, organizations and territory are essential. They build bridges across sectors and scales. Supporting them strengthens collective participation.
- **Reliable funding.** Transformation takes time. Short-term funding undermines trust and continuity. Diversified and accessible funding supports long-term impact.
- **Valuing local contributions.** Community members, especially women and marginalized groups, often contribute unpaid labour. Fair recognition and compensation promote equity and inclusion.

2. Relational networks.

These concern the quality of relationships, trust and power distribution. Key enablers include:

- **Place-based coalitions.** Partnerships rooted in territory connect global goals with local realities. They create learning spaces that can rebalance power.
- **Collective capacity.** Strong organization and shared identity enable communities to act together and engage with institutions.
- **Co-responsibility.** Transformation is shared. Governments, communities, private actors and researchers each play complementary roles.
- **Collaborative stewardship.** Shared decision-making over resources builds legitimacy and ownership.

3. Embedded narratives.

These are the mental models and worldviews that shape what people consider possible. Key enablers include:

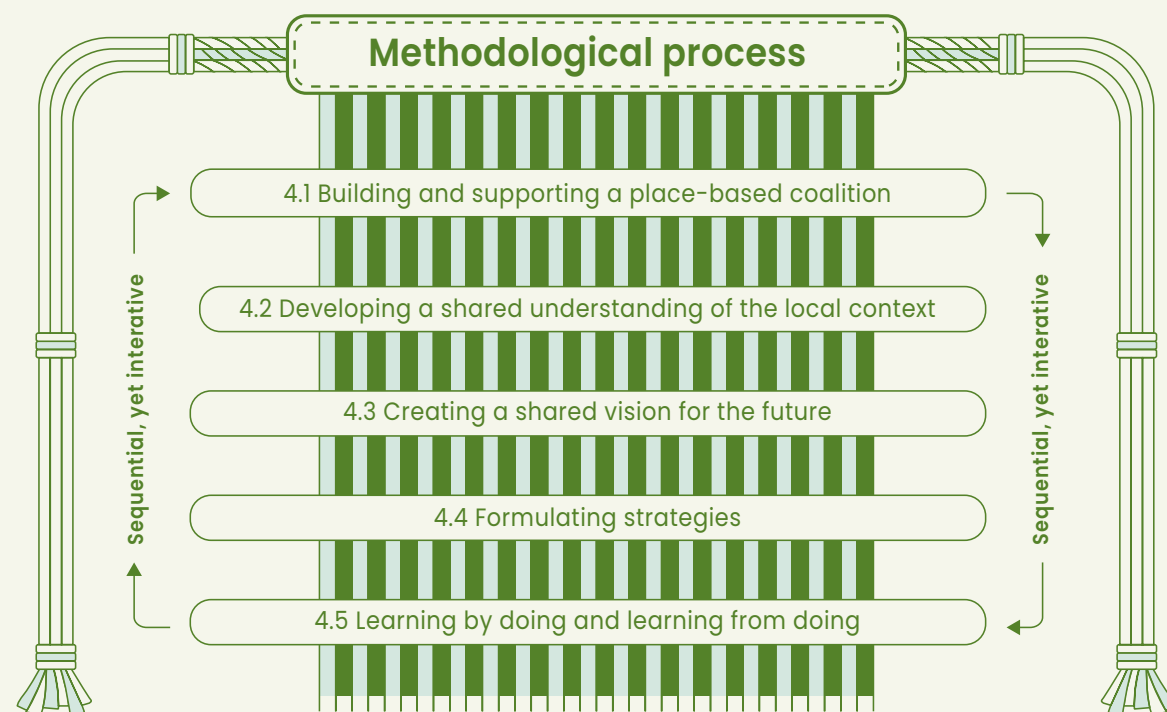
- **Knowledge webs.** Weaving together scientific, technical, traditional and lived knowledge creates deeper understanding and better solutions.
- **Interlaced human-nature well-being.** Urban strategies are most effective when nature is treated as part of the city instead of separate from it. Ecological restoration and social inclusion are interconnected.
- **Interwoven trajectories.** Projects should not stand alone. Instead, they can connect and reinforce each other across time and sectors.
- **Institutional support.** Political will and long-term institutional backing are essential for scaling and sustaining change.

These enablers are interconnected. Progress in one area can strengthen others. For example, strong relational networks can shift embedded narratives. Reliable funding can stabilize everyday practices. Institutional support can legitimize community leadership.



A practical methodology: Five iterative steps

Chapter 4 of the guidebook outlines a five-step process. These steps build on each other, but the process is not strictly linear. You may move back and forth as conditions evolve.



1

1. Build and support a place-based coalition.

Urban challenges are complex and interconnected, so no single actor can address them alone. A place-based coalition brings together diverse citymakers – residents, community leaders, civil society, government officials, researchers, businesses and others – who share a commitment to improving a specific territory.

Coalitions create space for dialogue across sectors and social groups. They help redistribute power, amplify marginalized voices and build shared ownership of solutions. Trust is central. It grows through consistent engagement, transparent communication and visible short-term results. Coalitions also benefit from building on already existing networks to create new spaces for dialogue and shared learning.

2

2. Develop a shared understanding of the local context.

Cities do not become unjust or carbon-intensive in isolation. These conditions are influenced and shaped by historical marginalization, governance structures, economic models and established assumptions. To change them, coalitions need to understand the system they are working within. Urban elements – housing, transport, green spaces, infrastructure, social norms and policies – interact, creating vicious and virtuous cycles. Identifying these patterns helps reveal root causes and entry points for transformation.

Building this understanding requires:

- Framing the problem carefully;
- Identifying knowledge gaps and assumptions;
- Collecting adequate data;
- Combining technical analysis with community knowledge.

Participatory tools such as mapping, surveys, transect walks and community-led data collection strengthen both knowledge and ownership. The outcome is a shared narrative about how the territory functions, what drives current challenges and where leverage points for change exist.

3

3. Create a shared vision for the future.

A shared vision aligns diverse actors around a common future. Visioning is both analytical and creative. It invites coalition members to imagine desirable futures across short-, medium- and long-term horizons, exploring different scenarios, from incremental improvements to deeper structural shifts.

Storytelling, art and participatory exercises help expand imagination. They make futures tangible and emotionally engaging. Indigenous knowledge, grassroots practices and community-led innovations can also serve as inspiration.

Once multiple futures are explored, the coalition defines what is most desirable and realistic for its territory. The vision should be documented clearly and shared widely to strengthen accountability and motivation.

4. Formulate strategies and implementation mechanisms.

Strategies can take many forms. They may include physical interventions, new policies, changes in governance, shifts in collaboration or even new ways of thinking and making decisions. What matters is that they are co-designed by the coalition and grounded in a shared understanding of the territory.

Entry points identified through system mapping help determine where small changes can unlock deeper shifts. A phased approach often works best. Start with what is feasible to build credibility, then move towards more ambitious change. At the same time, remain flexible. Strategies must adapt as conditions shift.

Turning a strategy into action requires clarity. Who is responsible? What resources are needed? What partnerships are required? Addressing these questions early prevents ideas from remaining on paper.

Keep in mind that transformation is not only about infrastructure. It is also about how people collaborate. Changing governance structures – creating participatory spaces, improving coordination, redistributing responsibilities – can be transformative in itself. Shared responsibility strengthens ownership and long-term impact.

Without resources, strategies stall. Funding may come from municipal budgets, national programmes, international donors, philanthropic foundations or climate finance mechanisms. A diversified approach increases stability. Coalitions benefit from maintaining updated information on funding opportunities and aligning proposals with both local priorities and broader agendas.

Capacity development is equally important. Different strategies require different skills, such as technical knowledge, financial management, facilitation, negotiation and leadership. Strengthening both individual and collective capacities ensures that transformation leaves a lasting legacy beyond a single project.

5. Learn by doing and learn from doing.

Urban transformation is often experimental. Therefore, progress depends on continuous cycles of co-creation, reflection and adaptation. Learning by doing encourages coalitions to test ideas through pilots and low-complexity interventions. Small-scale projects, such as a rain garden, a community recycling point or a participatory budget exercise, create visible results and safe spaces for experimentation. They build confidence and trust.

Learning from doing relies on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). Monitoring tracks progress, evaluation assesses outcomes and learning connects insights to future decisions. MEL systems should be built into strategies from the beginning with help of those who are affected by the strategies to define success and contribute to data collection. Documenting and sharing lessons also helps amplify impact.



From imagination to structural change

Weaving Urban Futures emphasizes that transformation is both process and outcome. The approach reshapes physical spaces but also reshapes relationships, institutions and mental models. The process of building trajectories can itself be transformative. It brings together people who may not usually collaborate, builds new capacities and shifts perceptions about what is possible.

The guidebook does not offer one blueprint. It recognizes plural futures, a pluriverse, since there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each city must craft its own trajectory based on its history, culture, institutions and community priorities. But some principles hold across contexts:

- Focus on root causes, not just symptoms;
- Combine short-term improvements with long-term structural shifts;
- Centre justice and the needs of the most vulnerable;
- Integrate ecological regeneration into urban development;
- Build coalitions that redistribute power and responsibility.



An invitation

Weaving Urban Futures is an invitation. It invites citymakers – planners, policymakers, community leaders, researchers, activists and residents – to reflect, imagine and act together.

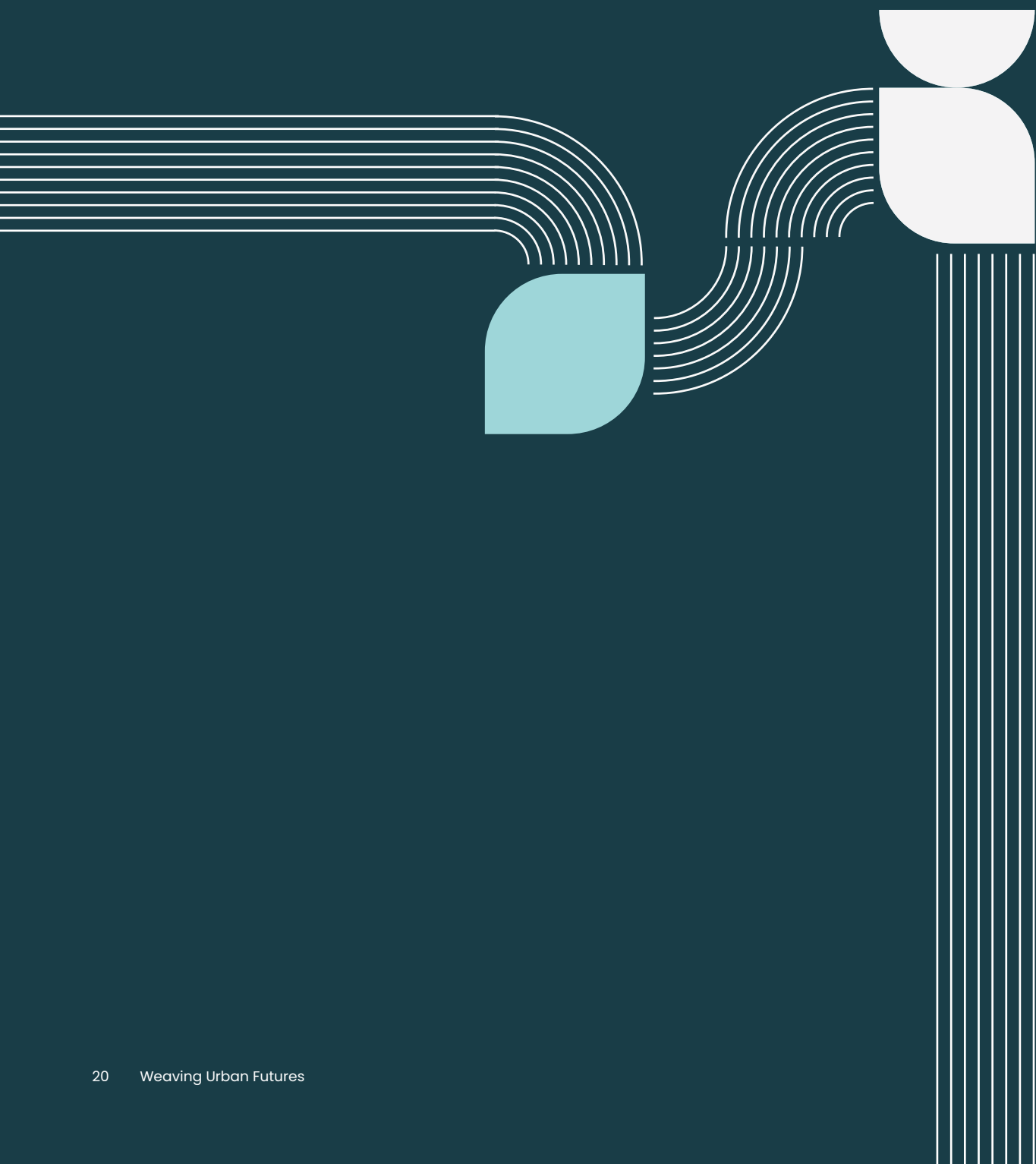
Think of the guidebook as a shared loom. It helps weave diverse ideas, knowledge systems and strategies into coherent trajectories. It encourages to question established narratives and provides practical guidance to move from vision to action.

This guidebook is an invitation to:

- Local governments: to work closely with communities and enable co-creation;
- Communities and marginalized groups: to claim your role as co-designers of change;
- Researchers: to bridge technical and lived knowledge;
- Private sector actors: to engage and invest in equitable innovation;
- NGOs and practitioners: to connect sectors and champion justice.

The future of cities is not predetermined. Multiple paths are open.

The question is which ones we choose and how we weave them together.



1

Introduction

Our cities are increasingly affected by a web of interconnected crises that interact and make each other worse. Climate change, through heatwaves, floods, storms and rising seas, does not act alone but also connects with inequality, unaffordable housing, environmental degradation, weak governance, pandemics, the digital divide, resource shortages, et cetera. These overlapping pressures put immense pressure on urban infrastructure, deepen injustices and undermine the capacity of communities to cope with shocks.



Left: Recife, Brazil: Affective mapping with residents of Comunidade do Pilar, July 2022. © Adriana Preta / WRI Brasil

All of these crises demonstrate that we urgently need to rethink how cities are planned, built and governed. Ultimately, we need to rethink what kind of urban future we want.

Climate change is one of the many entry points that might motivate citymakers to consider different urban futures. Climate-induced disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, resulting in the loss of lives and belongings, destroying homes and infrastructure, displacing communities and causing intense pain and anxiety. News outlets are filled with such stories, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) sends a stark warning in its most recent report the Sixth Assessment Report or AR6 (IPCC, 2023): human activity has undeniably caused global warming, and the Earth's surface temperature is already 1.1°C hotter than in pre-industrial times. And it will continue to rise if greenhouse gas emissions are not reduced.

The IPCC scenarios show what our future could look like if emissions keep growing, and the picture is catastrophic (Figure 1).

Our ideas of the future are often shaped by the so-called “business as usual” pathways, scenarios that we consider as given (represented in Figure 1 as SSP5-85, SSP3-70 and SSP2-45). But what if we defy the notion that we can only make small, incremental changes, if at all? What if we make deep transformative changes now? What if the better scenarios (SSP1-19 and SSP1-26) become reality? What would our cities look like then?

Weaving Urban Futures is an invitation to collectively untangle the many threads of today's interconnected crises and to reweave them into new patterns. It highlights the need to feel hope and dream together of a future that is different from the ones that have long colonized our minds. Imagining this future together is the first step for collective action.

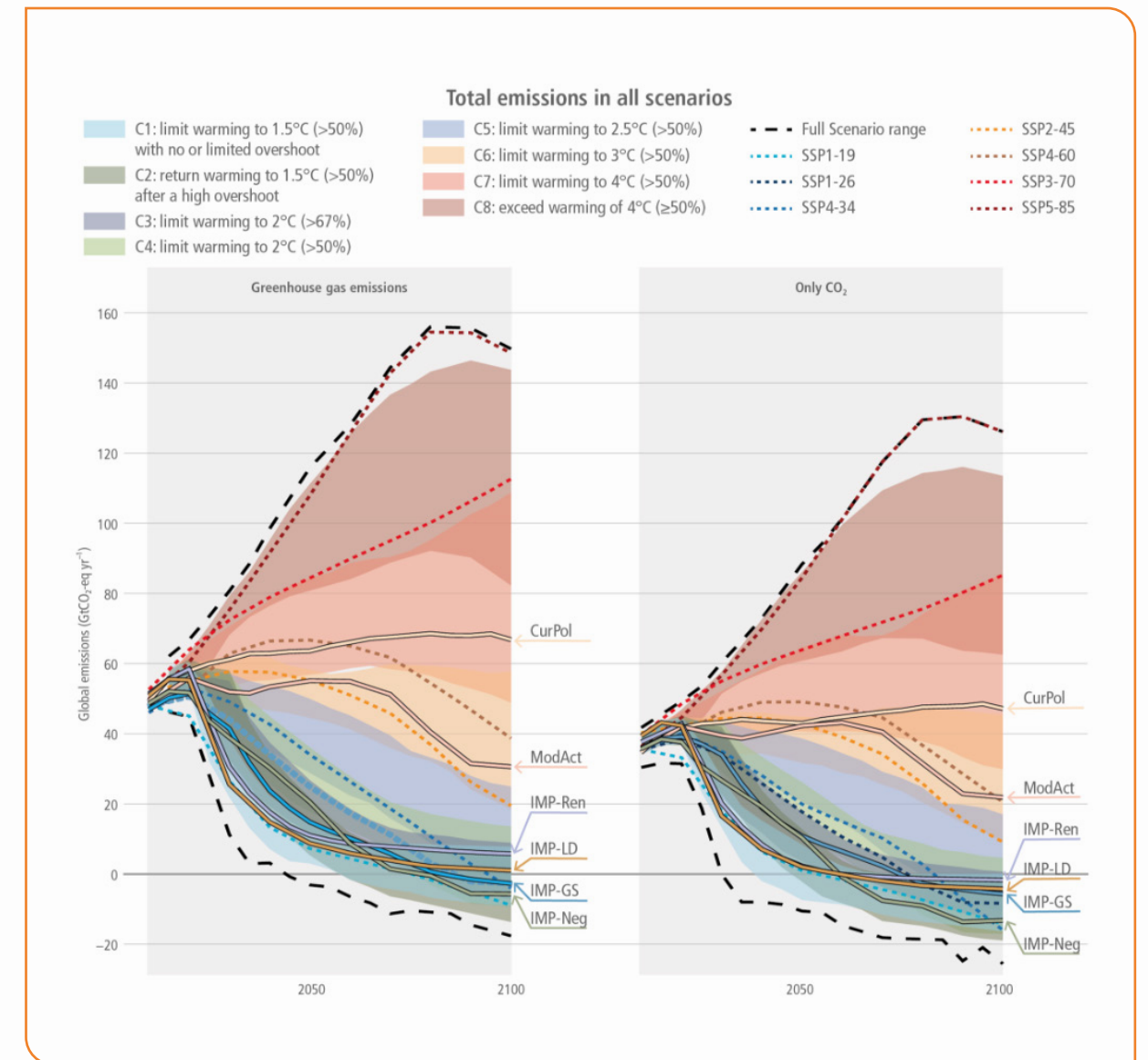


Figure 1: The IPCC established different scenarios of temperature increase according to the level of greenhouse gas emissions, leading to more or less concerning impacts. Source: Cooley, S., D. et al., 2022.



Buenos Aires, Argentina: Exchange between members of the Buenos Aires Urban Lab and residents from an informal settlement in Rosario, 2025. © IIED-AL



Teresina, Brazil: Earth construction workshop at Residencial Edgar Gayoso, October 2023. © Eduardo Sousah / WRI Brasil



Naucalpán, Mexico: Group discussion during Urban Lab meeting, July, 2025. © Alejandra Ramos / UNU-EHS

This guidebook provides recommendations on how you and your community can make deep changes, leading to more desirable futures that are just and climate-resilient. The insights come from **Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC)**, funded by the International Climate Initiative (IKI) of the German Government. TUC is implemented by United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), the World Resources Institute (WRI), the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

Since 2021, TUC facilitated the establishment of Urban Labs in vulnerable territories of five Latin American cities: Buenos Aires (Argentina), León and Naucalpan (Mexico), and Teresina and Recife (Brazil). The experience of each city is explored in a series of Urban Lab Profiles published on the [TUC](#) and [UNU-EHS](#) websites.

The Urban Labs are spaces for exchange that bring together people from government, civil society organizations, universities, businesses and local communities. Until now, through the use of participatory

methods, members discussed their local challenges and co-designed solutions to address both global climate goals and local needs. The guidebook is based on these Urban Lab experiences of people working together to create connections among different individuals and organizations, much like artisans weaving threads together.

These groups inspired the main idea behind the guidebook: that change can be triggered when diverse people come together to understand the specific challenges of their territory, creating local coalitions that are rooted in place awareness and community needs.

Transformation, in this sense, is not a quick or linear process. It is not like a factory process that produces the same result every time, no matter where. Instead, it is more like craftsmanship: slow, careful work that takes patience, trust and practice. It may even be highly specific to one place or region, making it even more special. Just like a handmade piece, real change takes time and steady effort, but it can create something unique, strong and lasting.

[Box 1]

From practice to knowledge:

Lessons from the Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC).

TUC set up five Urban Labs, which were fostered and observed over a six-year period. In these labs, people explored new ways to address local challenges. During this time, evidence was generated through in-depth interviews, surveys, ethnographic observation and regular work and activities within the communities. Researchers then reflected on this information in workshops to bring the findings together. Through dedicated workshops, Urban Lab members also reflected and co-produced lessons that were central to shaping this guidebook, complementing and validating the researchers' findings.

One of the most frequently used tools to guide climate action and transformation towards sustainability are roadmaps. As a citymaker, they are meaningful tools for you, as they outline specific steps that a city can implement over time to achieve its goals in terms of mitigation or adaptation. However, conventional roadmaps for climate action often focus on technological fixes and neglect the need for structural changes, such as reducing inequality or addressing power imbalances. The Weaving Urban Futures guidebook takes a different approach. It looks at the underlying conditions that create unjust and carbon-intensive cities and asks how these can be transformed. Instead of laying out a single thread to follow, it serves as a compass to orient decisions and actions towards ensuring your city will have a more just and climate-resilient future.

Weaving Urban Futures is aimed at you, the **citymakers**, the people who shape cities every day, in many different ways. This includes not only the urban planners, architects, policymakers and engineers among you, but also any other practitioner concerned with our cities, such as community leaders, members of civil society organizations, neighbourhood associations, engaged neighbours, among others. The sequenced process itself is designed to help you enhance your community's capacities to imagine new futures, plan alternative trajectories and create the right conditions for lasting change. Rather than offering predefined solutions, it encourages you to explore alternatives, dialogue and search collectively for new ways to make our cities.

Figure 2: Multiple possible futures are crafted through networks of people, places and infrastructures.



Figure 3: Citymakers are the people that contribute with shaping the city, including specialized professionals, organized groups and local communities.

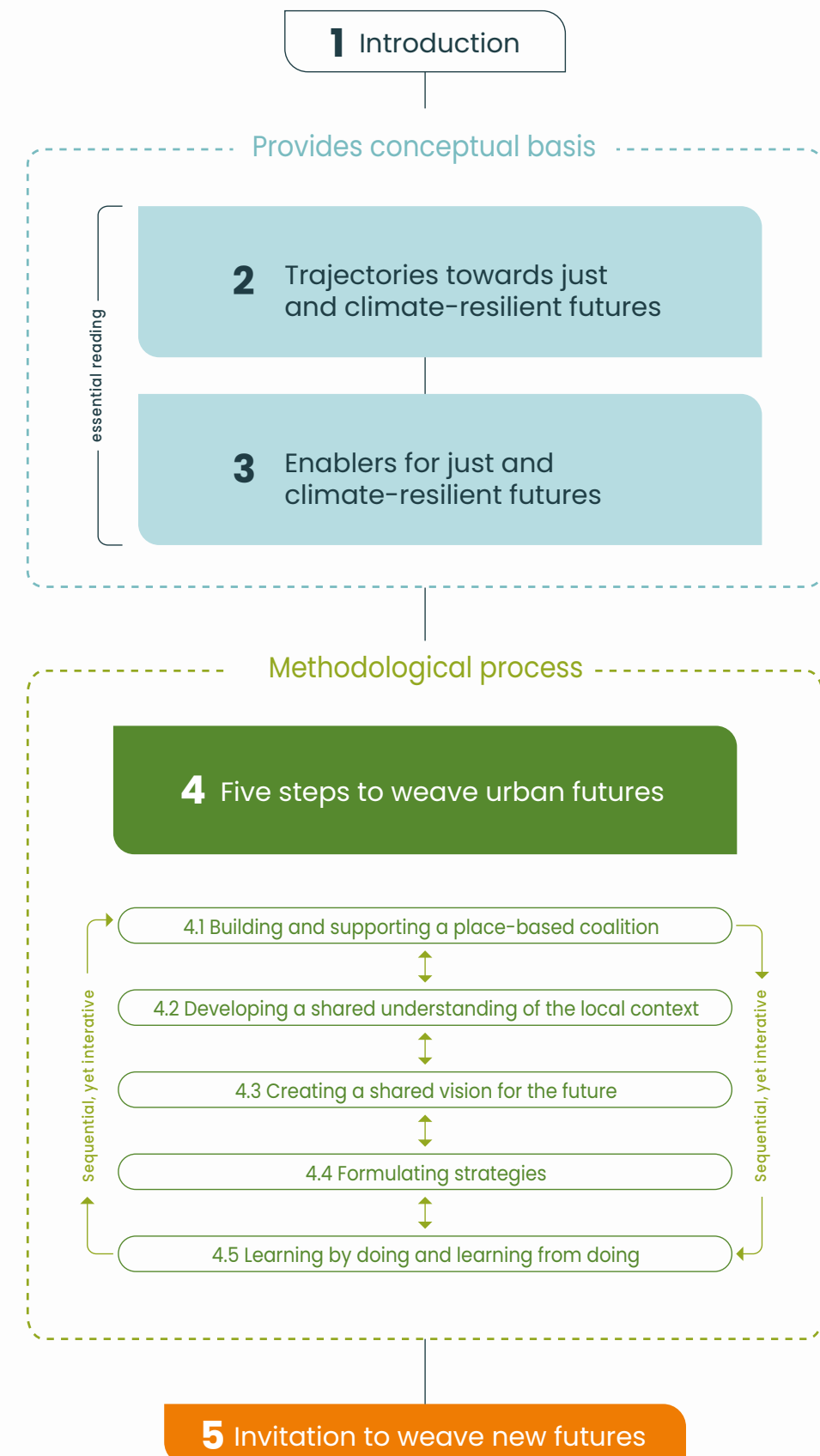


The publication is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** explores the idea of urban transformation and explains how the proposed actions can lead to structural changes in your city.
- **Chapter 3** identifies the enabling conditions needed for transformation to happen, drawing on key lessons from the TUC project.
- **Chapter 4** outlines a step-by-step approach to weaving urban futures, presenting recommended actions based on successes and challenges experienced in TUC Urban Labs. It also references practical tools you can apply.
- **Chapter 5** shares reflections on how to disseminate these lessons more broadly, emphasizing the need for deeper transformations in how our cities work.

The proposed methodology is explained in detail in **Chapter 4**, which outlines five key steps to guide the process: 1) building and supporting a place-based coalition; 2) developing a shared understanding of the local context; 3) creating a shared vision for the future; 4) formulating strategies and implementation mechanisms; and 5) learning by doing and learning from doing. Although the recommended actions are presented in a sequenced way and build upon previous steps, the process itself is iterative. This means you may not follow a strict linear order and might need to loop back and revisit earlier steps sometimes.

Figure 4: Overview of the guidebook structure.



You can also use individual chapters to address specific issues. We recommend to get familiar with the core principles, key terms and overall scope of the guidebook by starting with the introductory chapters ([Chapters 2 and 3](#)). From there, you can focus on the steps most relevant to your context and priorities.

[Box 2] Tools to weave urban futures

To help build new coalitions and imagine new futures, UNU-EHS developed a [toolbox](#) that brings together the principles and methods used and tested in the Transformative Urban Coalitions. The toolbox explains each tool in detail so others can apply them in different settings. These tools can be applied to facilitate participatory processes and they are referenced throughout this guidebook.

When using the guidebook, you may want to adapt the actions to fit your local realities. Consider your resources, existing policies, cultural context and community needs. Critically evaluate the recommended actions to ensure they are realistic and meaningful where you are. Doing this will allow you to create opportunities to bridge gaps by incorporating local knowledge and building upon practices that are already working in your community.

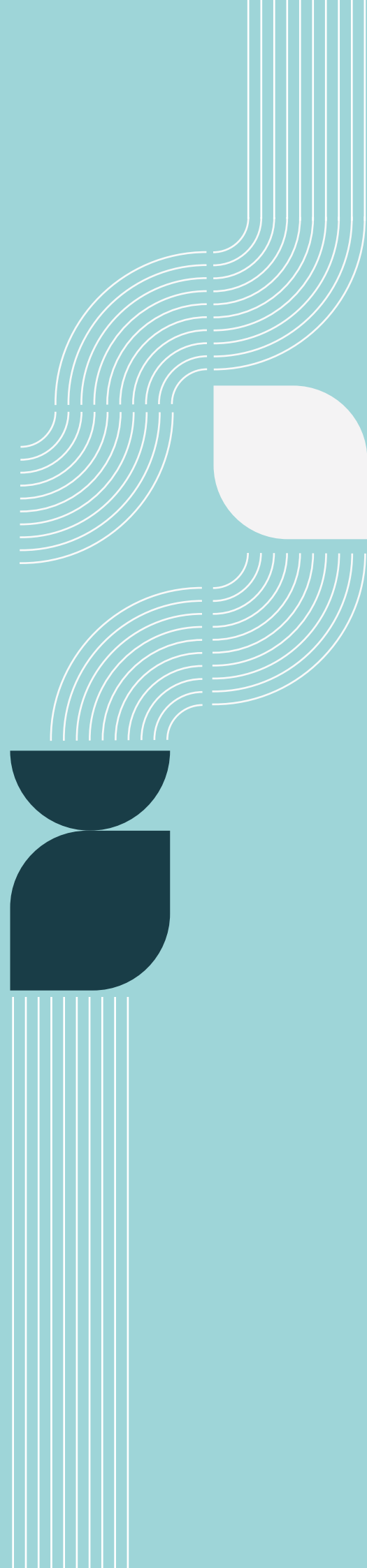
This guidebook is an invitation to reflect, imagine and explore multiple possible futures. Think of it as a shared loom, an instrument for weaving ideas, perspectives and possibilities together.

Use it with colleagues, community groups and partners to build shared understanding and inspire joint action.

By combining the guidebook's structured guidance with local creativity and insights, its recommendations can help make better and more sustainable cities for everyone.



Visioning workshop during an Urban Lab meeting in León, Mexico, August, 2025. © Alejandra Ramos / UNU-EHS



2

Trajectories towards just and climate-resilient futures

Weaving Urban Futures is both a conceptual framework and a practical methodology to help you visualize and craft the future of the city you want.

As a conceptual framework, it helps you understand the systems you are working in and how to identify key challenges within them. Cities are complex systems where many elements constantly interact, such as infrastructure, people, economic activities, nature and policies. To truly understand a city, we need to look at how these elements interact, instead of just looking at each one separately. Many urban problems arise from these interconnected relationships between elements, while their root causes are often hidden beneath the surface (see box 3 “The root causes of unjust and carbon-intensive cities”). Weaving Urban Futures helps investigate these underlying causes and highlights the conditions influencing how cities can become more just and climate-resilient.

[Box 3] The root causes of unjust and carbon-intensive cities

Cities are constantly changing. Their shapes reflect the interaction of deeply rooted social, political and economic structures. The way power is distributed, for example, shapes how land is distributed and can lead to segregation and inequality. Likewise, the way we think about nature influences how our built environments interact with natural systems. These interconnected structures form the roots of unjust and carbon-intensive cities, driving the structural failures we face today.

Contemporary urban systems are largely shaped by economic models that prioritize growth and expansion (Harvey, 2002; Parnell & Oldfield, 2014). In many contexts, a strong focus on economic returns can encourage intensive resource use and place private interests ahead of collective well-being (Hickel, 2020; Robbins, 2019). Alongside this growth-oriented logic, a range of structural factors continue to influence how urban development unfolds. These include economic models that rely on extractive practices affecting both people and ecosystems (Martinez-Alier, 2002), an anthropocentric worldview that treats society and nature as separate (Merchant, 1980; Raworth, 2018), and social structures that contribute to exclusion and inequality (Mbembe, 2001).

These dynamics also influenced how we think about the world, which can narrow the range of perspectives that are considered in policy and practice. As a result, visions of the future often emphasize particular ideas of development, frequently centred on technological solutions, while giving less attention to alternative approaches (Hopkins, 2025). Postcolonial perspectives invite us to imagine and explore different ways of living and building cities, ways that move beyond the established approaches and explore lush and diverse landscapes of alternatives (Wa Thiong'o, 1998; Dilger et al. 2016). In this spirit, Weaving Urban Futures encourages us to look closely at the everyday making of our cities, to those who are making the city based on care and solidarity.

It urges us to recognize and support the power people already have to imagine and create more just and climate-resilient futures.

Figure 5: Weaving Urban Futures is also an invitation to cultivate ideas beyond established approaches.



As a methodology, Weaving Urban Futures offers flexible recommendations that you can adapt to your local context. Rather than prescribing a single path, it encourages collaboration to develop multiple strategies that are connected to promote the necessary sustainable urban development.

Many current approaches to climate action focus quite narrowly on technology, assuming that new tools and innovations can reduce environmental impacts without changing the system itself (Long & Rice, 2019; Robin & Broto, 2021).

Such roadmaps frequently give limited attention to the social relationships and power dynamics that shape the crises of the present (Robin & Broto, 2021; Rosol et al., 2017; Wright, 2020). They also often fall into the trap of focusing on single environmental issues. An example is the so-called carbon tunnel, where the focus lies solely on reducing carbon emissions while ignoring how multiple crises are interconnected. While technology can certainly help and open up new possibilities for cities, it should not be seen as the only solution.

In contrast, our approach to building climate resilience emphasizes systemic change, recognizing that better cities depend not only on technological innovation but also on transforming socioeconomic structures and power imbalances.

Weaving Urban Futures is about exploring futures that are not yet mapped, imagining **desirable futures** that could be more **just** for all. Justice here is understood through its multiple dimensions (Abbas, Sandholz & van Schie, 2025). Redistributive justice focuses on equitable access to resources and opportunities. Recognitional justice ensures that diverse identities are acknowledged and valued in urban decision-making. Procedural justice guarantees that the process itself, from consultation to implementation, is just to all urban residents. Restorative justice seeks to repair past harms and rehabilitate the capacities of ecosystems and communities.

These lenses help guide concrete interventions that also lead to more **climate-resilient** futures. The IPCC defines Climate Resilient Development as the implementation of mitigation and adaptation actions in an integrated way to support sustainable development. It connects actions over time with a long-term perspective (Schipper et al., 2022).

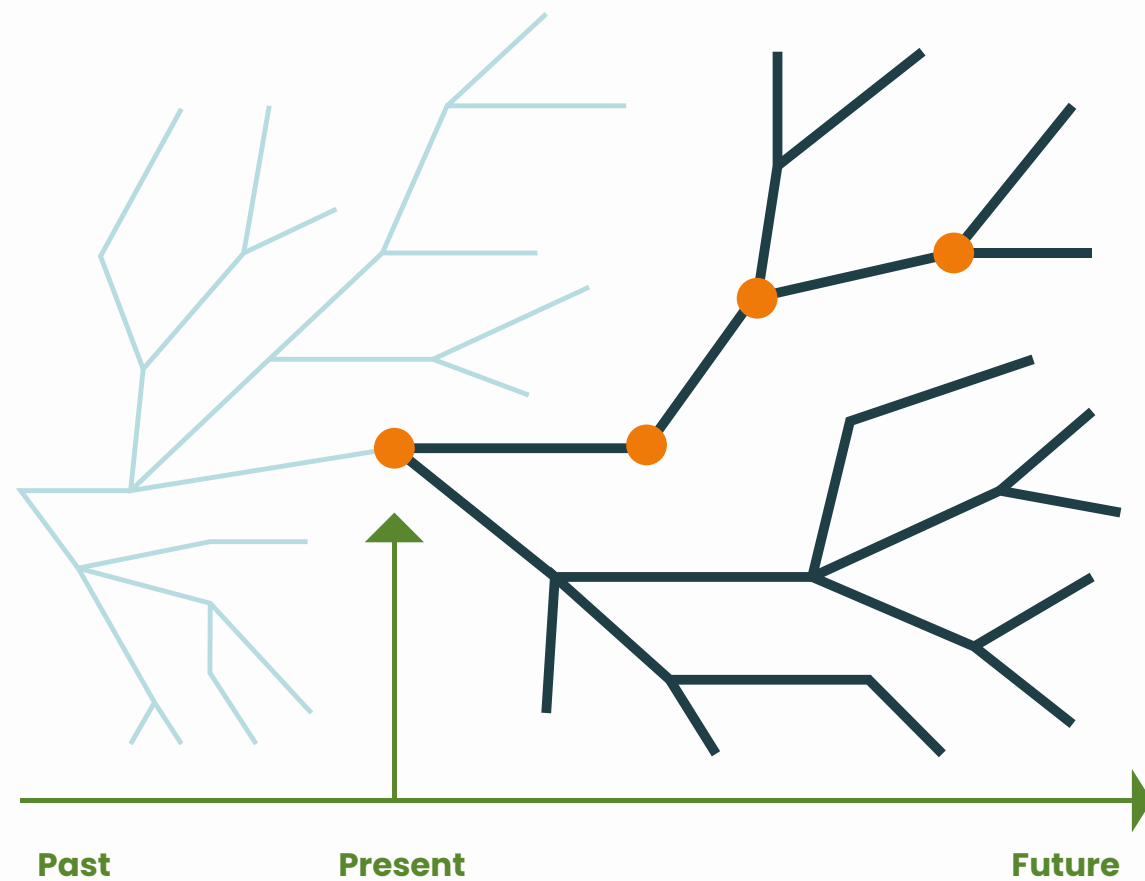


Figure 6: Multiple trajectories may unfold from where we are now.

The Weaving Urban Futures guidebook presents a fresh perspective on how your cities can be planned and shaped. Its approach encourages you to explore new ways of citymaking, rooted in community-based and participatory practices. It encourages collaboration through dialogue and negotiation with the diverse people shaping your city. In this approach, participation extends beyond consultation and means sharing responsibility for the transformation process and outcomes.

This approach also redefines the role of professional planners. Rather than acting as distant experts, planners are seen as facilitators who are part of the transformation process. They are encouraged to reflect on their own perspectives and methods, adapting and learning as change unfolds, both personally and within their institutions. The recommended actions are not prescriptive solutions but windows for

dialogue. This way of working can be applied in any urban context, including places that have developed without formal planning.

This guidebook encourages context-specific strategies that prioritize the well-being of people and nature. It calls for imagining future scenarios that prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable. The recommended actions aim to build diverse coalitions that include historically marginalized voices and perspectives, such as the ones coming from women, racialized people, as well as the elderly, among others. By doing so, it opens the door to solutions that not only share risks and benefits more fairly but also create more inclusive and just decision-making processes.

In this framework, the set of strategies formulated through collective imagination is called a **trajectory**. From any point in time, multiple trajectories can emerge, leading



Figure 7: Formulating trajectories through Weaving Urban Futures helps develop capacities.

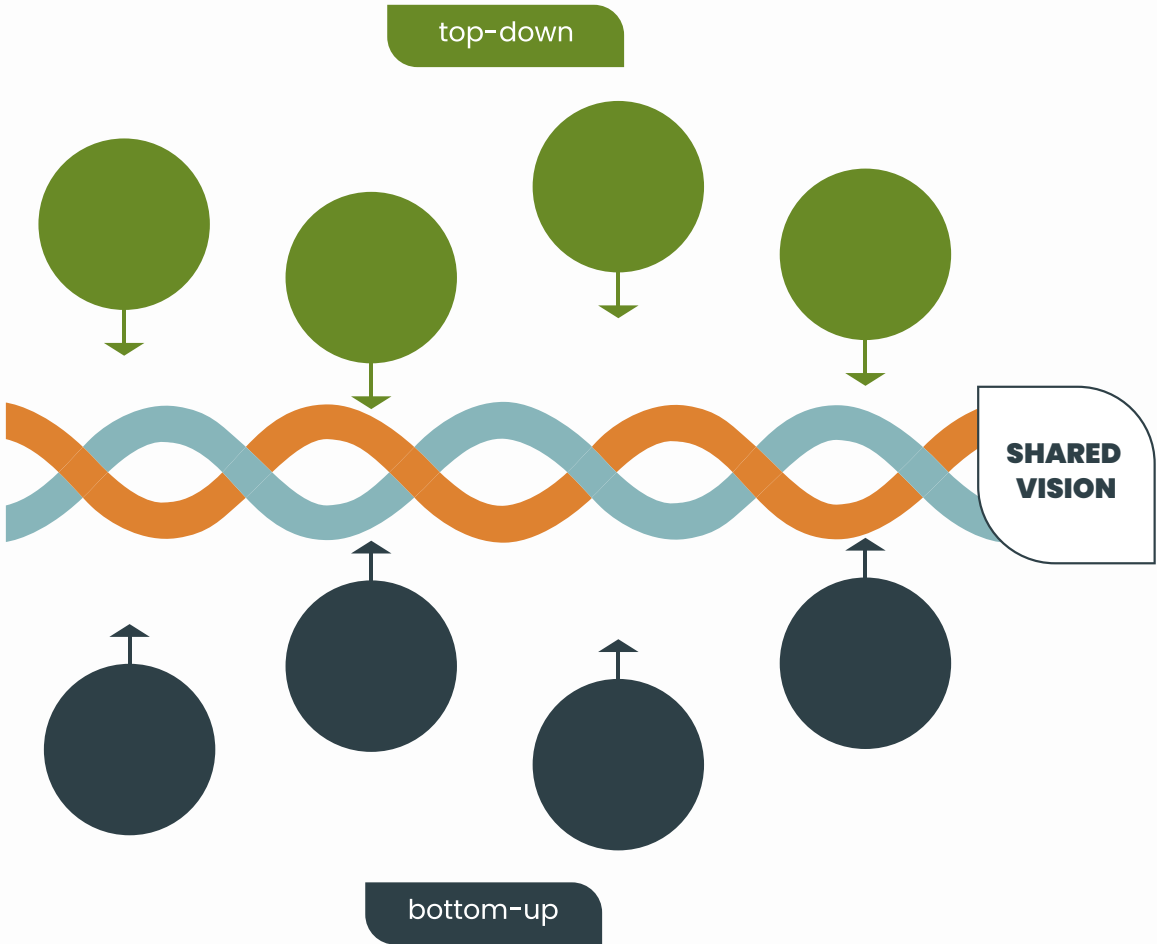
to outcomes that may align more or less with the objectives of justice and climate resilience. These depend on the decisions made across different sectors and levels of governance. This also means that a single fixed plan is probably never enough. Trajectories should remain flexible and evolve with the city and the people who make it.

When we recognize the complexity of cities, defining a single predictable step-by-step path towards transformation becomes impossible. **Transformation** is both a process and a moving target, constantly adjusted as communities reassess their demands. For this reason, Weaving Urban Futures is meant to help you find a way that highlights

the enabling conditions needed to chart our journey towards desirable futures, starting now.

Transformations go beyond small, incremental changes. They refer to structural shifts that fundamentally reshape cities, the way they are planned, built and governed, as well as the way we live in them. Transformations involve changing the underlying conditions that create and maintain problems in place. We speak of “transformations” in the plural form to emphasize the many possible futures that can emerge. Using the plural form also nurtures the idea of a world where multiple hopes and alternatives can coexist,

Figure 8: Weaving Urban Futures can serve as a backbone and provide coherence for actions across different sectors.



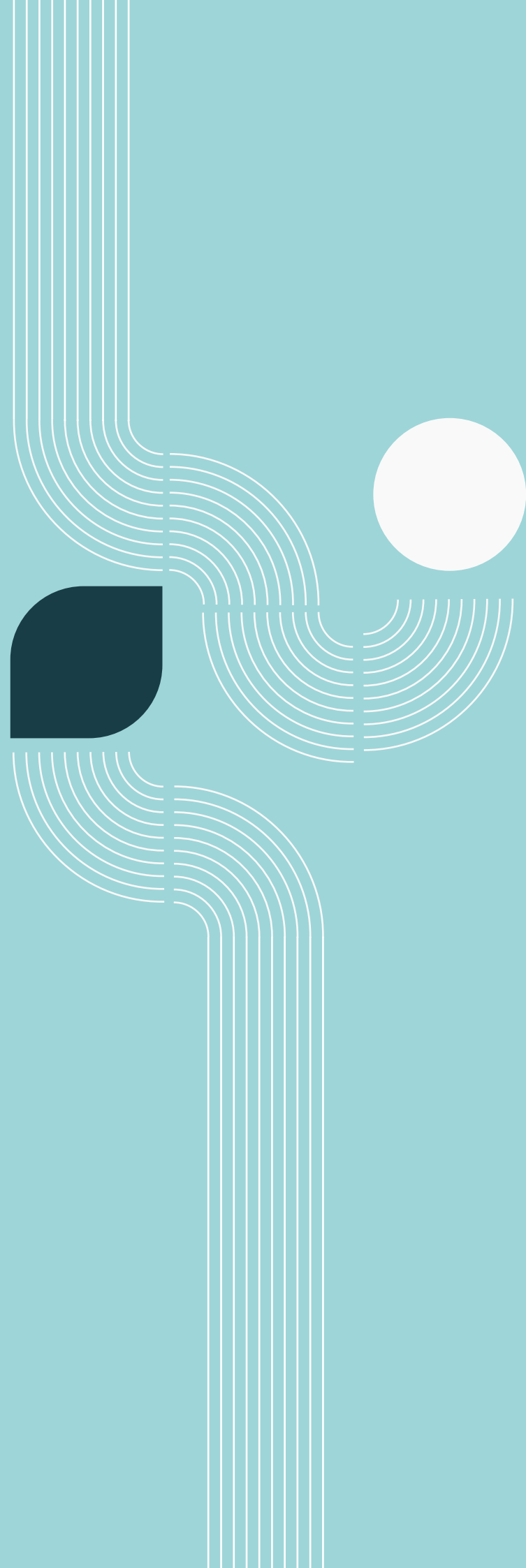
Buenos Aires, Argentina: Awareness-raising initiative using community-driven temperature monitoring in Villa 20, June 2024. © Artículo 41 / IIED-AL

a so-called pluriverse (Escobar, 2011). This plurality acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for the polycrisis we live in and that solutions should be responsive to local realities.

The process of developing trajectories using the Weaving Urban Futures methodology can itself be transformative. It brings together people and organizations who may not typically work together, strengthens existing capacities, builds new ones and empowers local leaders and communities to take ownership and carry the process forward beyond external interventions. The methodology promotes the important duo of individual leadership and collective action. Throughout this journey, coalition members are encouraged to transform the way they understand their city, how they perceive their role and purpose within the urban system and how they collaborate with others to shape it. This can be considered the basis for adapting proactively to changing conditions.

Throughout this journey, coalition members are encouraged to transform the way they understand their city, how they perceive their role and purpose within the urban system and how they collaborate with others to shape it.

Trajectories can also be considered as overarching narratives that create coherence between actions carried out across sectors and timescales, ensuring efforts align with a shared understanding and vision. As a backbone for local transformation, these trajectories provide a structure that enables both bottom-up and top-down actions to align and reinforce each other. This shared narrative can lead to shifts in mindsets and behaviour that contribute to just and climate-resilient futures.



3

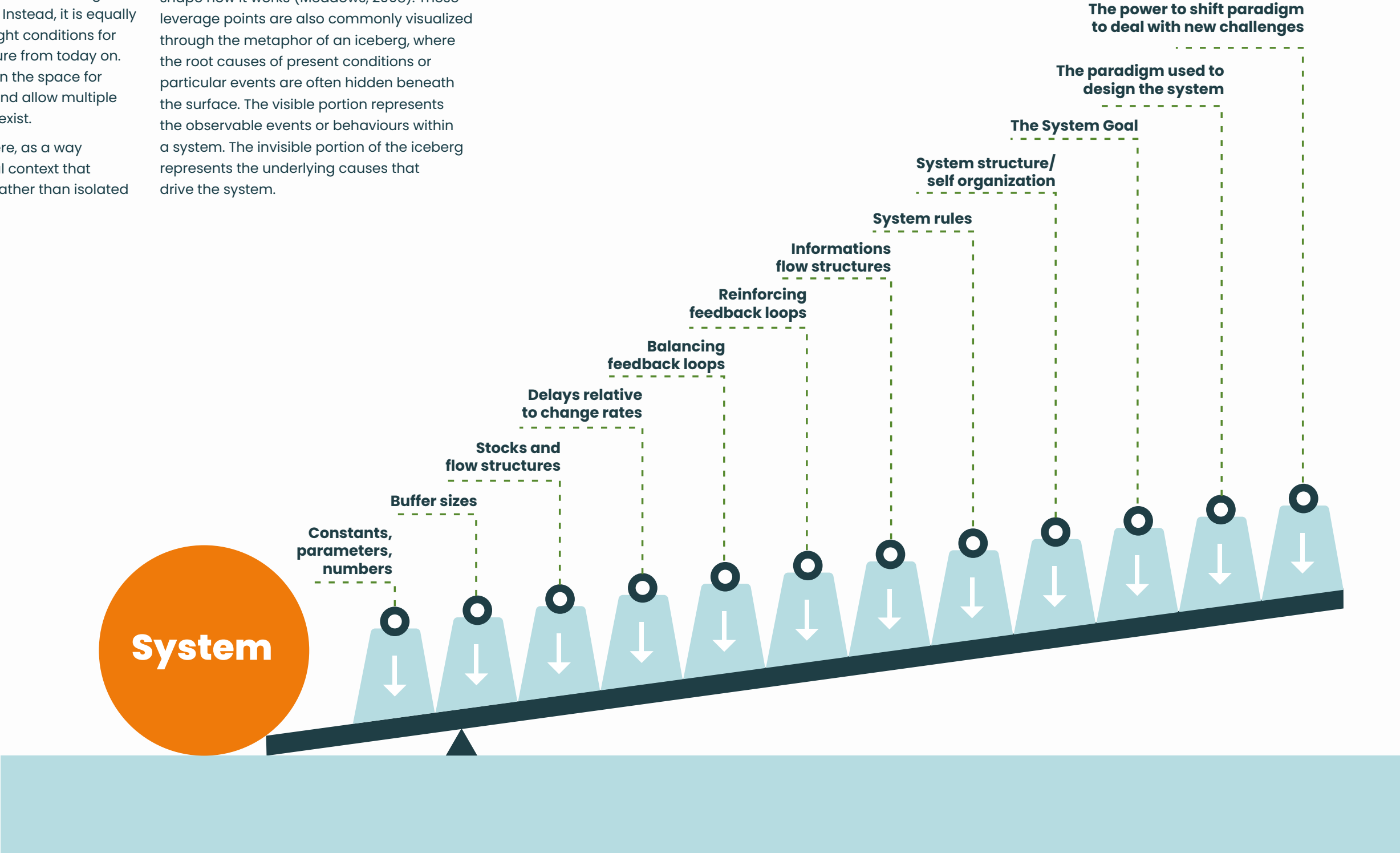
Enablers for just and climate- resilient futures

When thinking about the future, it is important to recognize that you can take multiple paths. Transformation is about the flexibility of moving through these diverse paths rather than following a single predetermined route. Setting a fixed goal can help provide you with a useful orientation, it alone is not enough to guide structural changes. Instead, it is equally important to create the right conditions for crafting this desirable future from today on. These conditions can open the space for ongoing transformation and allow multiple futures to emerge and coexist.

Systems thinking helps here, as a way of understanding the local context that focuses on relationships rather than isolated

elements (Arnold & Wade (2015). In complex systems, there are certain “entry points” where small actions can trigger changes in the whole system. The strongest leverage points are the deeper shifts: changing the system’s goals and the paradigms that shape how it works (Meadows, 2008). These leverage points are also commonly visualized through the metaphor of an iceberg, where the root causes of present conditions or particular events are often hidden beneath the surface. The visible portion represents the observable events or behaviours within a system. The invisible portion of the iceberg represents the underlying causes that drive the system.

Figure 9: Leverage points for a system change. Adapted from Meadows, 2008.



Problems in a system often stem from underlying conditions that repeatedly cause negative effects, creating self-reinforcing cycles. Leverage points can be thought of as those conditions that need to change to create broader system change (Meadows, 2008). Some conditions and the ways to address them are relatively straightforward, such as rules, habits and funding mechanisms. Others are less visible and more difficult to tackle, such as power imbalances putting particular groups at a disadvantage, prejudices and deeply held beliefs.

Iceberg Model for System Thinking

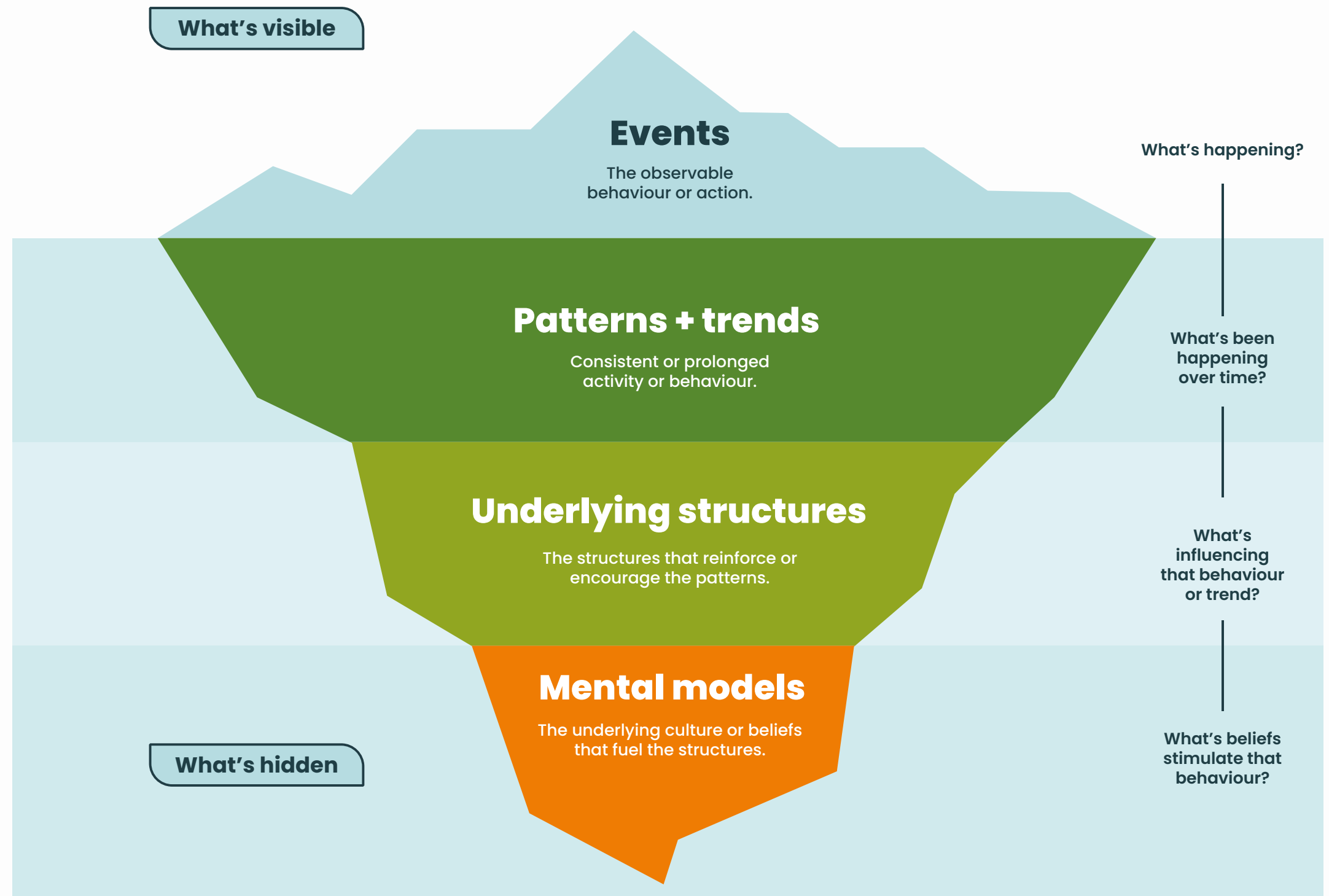


Figure 10: Iceberg model. Adapted from Kania et al., 2018.

We identified specific conditions that help create an environment in which transformation towards more just and climate-resilient cities can take place. We call these conditions **enablers** because they make transformation possible. Based on lessons from TUC Urban Labs and a review of existing literature on urban transformation, we collected **12 enabling conditions**.

They are grouped into three broad categories: everyday patterns, relational networks and embedded narratives. Although presented in different groups, these enablers are interconnected, meaning that progress in one area can influence others.

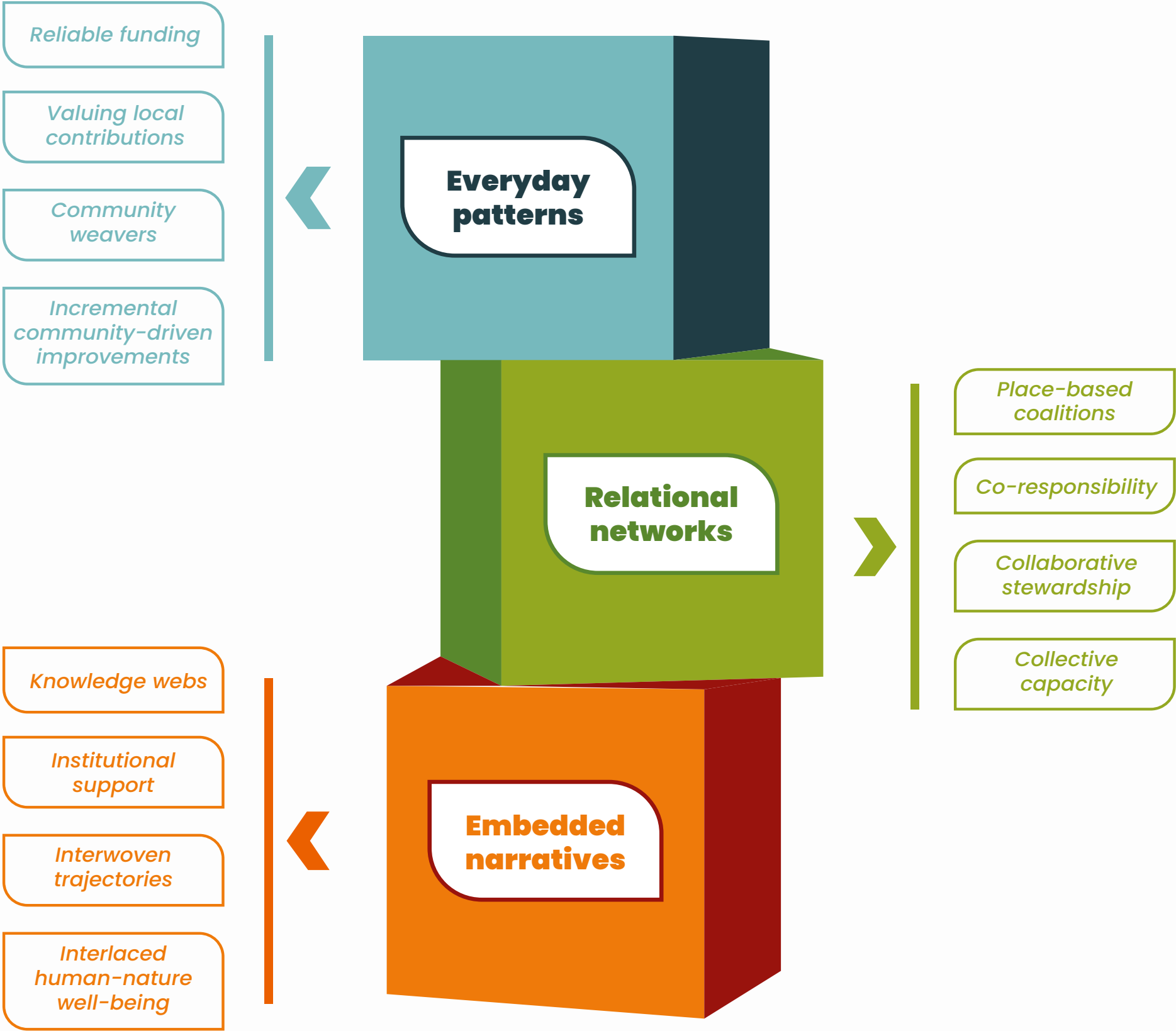


Figure 11: Enabling conditions to Weave Urban Futures



3.1 Everyday patterns

Figure 12:
Everyday patterns are daily routines and ways of working that contribute to shape your city.

Everyday patterns shape the daily reality of transformation. They are the daily routines and ways of working that people, organizations and networks use in citymaking. They include both formal practices, like rules, procedures, policies and funding mechanisms, and informal ones, such as habits or collaboration styles. Everyday patterns also depend on how key resources are allocated, including money, materials, services and people. Everyday patterns are also a reflection of how these resources are distributed and whether they reach the people and places that need them most.





3.1.1 Incremental community-driven improvements

Quick and low-cost actions can make a visible difference in people's daily lives. These improvements should actively involve the people that are directly affected, as well as other key citymakers, such as municipal authorities, local organizations and professional planners. Small incremental improvements should reflect the needs and interests of the community. They can include simple yet meaningful actions like restoring public spaces, fixing sidewalks, planting trees along streets or cleaning canals.

While the changes may be small, they show that positive change is possible and help build momentum for future initiatives. Combining visible results and active engagement fosters a sense of ownership among everyone involved. They also help shift perspectives away from overly technical solutions towards more collective approaches to transformation. They can demonstrate the feasibility of larger interventions and offer lessons about what works or not in that specific context.

3.1.2 Community weavers

Although transformation is a collective effort, it relies on individuals who are engaged and able to connect people, activities and the territory. We call these individuals community weavers. They have a deep connection to their neighbourhoods and communities, often because they live there themselves. Community weavers can be of different backgrounds. They have in common that they play a central role in connecting interventions to the people they are meant to benefit. Community weavers facilitate dialogues among citymakers, including neighbours, local governments, local associations and external partners. Often, they also serve as interpreters and help citymakers from outside the territory to navigate the local context.

Recife, Brazil: The tactical urbanism intervention implemented by the Recife Urban Lab in Comunidade do Pilar creates physical and symbolic connections across the neighbourhood, January 2026. © Nicole Rodrigues / WRI Brasil

In every location, there are usually a handful of community weavers. If they work together and complement their respective networks, they can greatly increase their impact. You can support existing and emerging community weavers by providing them with tools and resources, so they can effectively mobilize others. Individual leadership should be seen as an investment in collective participation, since participation often depends on individuals who inspire others to get involved.

3.1.3 Reliable funding

Transformative processes take time and need consistent support to move from ideas to lasting change. When funding is short-term or uncertain, it can interrupt progress, weaken community trust and push projects to prioritize quick results over long-term impact. Reliable and continuous funding, on the other hand, enables you to plan strategically, go beyond immediate physical changes and strengthen local capacities. It also ensures continuity, as it helps to preserve relationships, knowledge and momentum between project cycles. Long-term, continuous or interconnected funding sources support ongoing development more effectively than one-off or short-lived projects.

To guarantee continuity, it is wise to diversify your funding sources, for example from public and private funds or international cooperation or community-based mechanisms such as crowdfunding. You can also look for different forms of funding, including grants, insurance schemes, subsidies or loans. The selection of sources and forms depends on local needs and contexts, often implying the combination of several at the same time. Ideally, funding should also be flexible and accessible to all types of citymakers, including grassroots organizations and local groups. This means that donors work on simplifying disbursement and reporting processes so that smaller or less formal organizations can also access

3.1

3.2

3.3

and manage funds. Finally, resources should be distributed fairly, ensuring that all affected groups benefit, especially those most in need or facing barriers to funding access.

3.1.4 Valuing local contributions

Local citymakers – including community leaders, residents and grassroots organizations – often play an important role in shaping transformative initiatives. They contribute time, knowledge, networks and labour to citymaking. However, in contrast to other citymakers like researchers, government officials and consultants, local citymakers are usually not compensated for their contributions. Gender is an important factor here: many local contributors are women, and it is common to see women in the frontline of community-led initiatives. Yet, their contributions are often less visible, appropriated or undervalued, which can maintain some patriarchal power dynamics.

Recognizing and fairly compensating local efforts promotes inclusion and equity, making it possible for people from diverse backgrounds to participate. It also ensures that transformation does not rely on unpaid work from already burdened communities. Fair compensation enables local citymakers to dedicate their time and resources to collective goals. However, compensation should be seen as a tool to support participation, not as the sole motivation for engagement.

Fair compensation can take many forms, such as travel support, stipends or other forms of material support that lower barriers to participation. However, recognition can also include non-material forms, such as prestige and influence given through participation, training opportunities, access to decision makers and networks. This fair compensation requires legitimacy through transparency and collective support.



3.2 Relational networks



Figure 13: Relational networks refer to the quality of interactions between members of your community.

Relational networks refer to the quality of interactions between members of a group and how they engage with outside individuals and organizations. Strong relationships make it easier for groups to understand common challenges and design solutions that truly meet people's needs. Trust and solidarity are especially important, as they allow community members to support one another in times of crisis. Trust also depends on how conflict is managed, since there will always be differences among how individuals and organizations face challenges.

The quality of these networks also depends on how information flows or how openly and clearly people and organizations share knowledge. Another relevant factor is how power and authority are distributed. These power dynamics determine who has influence, whose priorities are addressed and whose voices are left out. Both formal authority and informal influence play a role in shaping these relationships (Figure 13).

3.2.1 Place-based coalitions

Place-based coalitions are partnerships that bring together citymakers from diverse sectors and backgrounds, including government, civil society, academia, private sector, NGOs and community groups. They have connections with the territory that might stem from physical presence or other forms of engagement, such as academic research, previous project implementations or similar activities. These coalitions are stronger when they build on existing organizations, networks and participation processes.

The place-based approach ensures that actions are relevant and responsive to the people who live and work in the territory. By focusing on a concrete territory, place-based coalitions connect global goals and policies with local priorities, community needs, aspirations and opportunities. Although their work is rooted in local action, they often engage citymakers from multiple levels, ranging from neighbourhood to international partners. This collaborative work helps bridge scales of action, pool resources and align strategies that might otherwise remain isolated.

Place-based coalitions are also a learning space, where members can share their expertise. They create opportunities for dialogue, enabling you and your fellow citymakers to explore new ideas beyond traditional hierarchies or institutional boundaries. Although they are intentionally created for horizontal exchange, they are not neutral. Coalition members bring their own perspectives and interests. When you recognize these dynamics, however, such learning spaces can help reshape relationships and rebalance power.

Figure 14: Embedded narratives are the underlying rationale of everyday practices.

3.2.2 Collective capacity

Transformation depends not only on resources or policies, but on people's ability to work together towards a shared idea of the future. Strong organization at the local level helps groups represent their interests effectively and coordinate their efforts with other citymakers to implement change. Collective capacity refers to the strength of social cohesion and the quality of relationships within communities. A sense of shared identity, or a feeling of being part of a community or belonging to a place can strengthen this capacity.

Building collective capacity means investing in the skills and relationships that allow communities to act together. Formal training, as well as informal exchange, can help to develop these capacities. By interacting with diverse people and perspectives, citymakers can deepen their understanding of dissonant realities and transform their own perceptions of the city.

3.2.3 Co-responsibility

Transformations cannot rely on a single individual or institution. Co-responsibility means that the task of shaping and sustaining change is shared among all citymakers: governments, communities, private sector, civil society organizations, academia and others alike. You should work together, combining knowledge and resources, to build the futures all of you want to see. Embracing co-responsibility, will allow you to move from isolated efforts to joint problem-solving. Co-responsibility goes beyond short-term transactions or one-off agreements, as it is built on long-term partnerships and mutual commitment.

Co-responsibility may also contribute to balancing power and accountability by recognizing the different roles and capacities

of citymakers. While formal institutions often have resources and decision-making power, communities contribute local knowledge and lived experiences. Co-responsibility also calls for a shift in how communities are perceived and how they perceive themselves. It means you need to move away from seeing communities as passive recipients of aid towards recognizing them as active agents of change. Putting community needs at the centre of transformation does not mean that communities should bear the entire burden, but rather that each citymaker plays a complementary role in making change happen.

3.2.4 Collaborative stewardship

Collaborative stewardship refers to the shared management, oversight and negotiated allocation of resources among different citymakers. Transformation often involves difficult decisions about how to use limited resources, such as land, funding or infrastructure. When resources are managed through open dialogue and joint decision-making, all citymakers may gain a stronger sense of ownership and legitimacy in the transformation process.

This approach can also help to address conflicts constructively. Because resource allocation is complex and often involves trade-offs, it helps citymakers understand different perspectives and negotiate fair compromises. Ultimately, collaborative stewardship turns citymaking into a shared practice rather than a top-down intervention.

Collaborative stewardship requires mechanisms that enable citizens to monitor, learn from and influence resource allocation. Examples include participatory budgeting, cooperative enterprises and community advisory boards, among others.





3.3 Embedded narratives

Embedded narratives include shared mental models and individual mindsets. Mental models are the deeper belief systems and assumptions that shape how people prioritize problems, perceive possibilities and imagine futures. Mindsets, by contrast, reflect the more visible beliefs, emotions, perceptions and attitudes of individuals, which can shift more quickly through participation in collective processes (Guerra, Roy, Muñoz Rosas & Sandholz, 2025). Although mindsets are individual, they are often shaped, or constrained, by shared mental models.

These collectively shared and individually internalized narratives define what people consider possible, important or acceptable. They have concrete effects on decision-making, laws, policies, plans and projects. These narratives shape which actions are prioritized and how they are implemented, setting the boundaries for how change happens. By identifying and questioning these narratives, citymakers can challenge limiting ideas, explore new perspectives and open space for alternative futures.

3.3.1 Knowledge webs

Urban transformation requires connecting many kinds of knowledge to build a more systemic understanding of the city. Knowledge webs bring together traditional, technical, scientific and locally rooted knowledge. They link diverse perspectives to design solutions that work in real contexts.

Different citymakers hold valuable different kinds of knowledge. Public authorities, for example, collect relevant public data and offer insights at the city level. Communities, on the other hand, hold crucial lived

experience and contextual knowledge of their territories. Traditional and local knowledge offer deep insights into how people live and care for their environments, often passed down through generations and rooted in everyday practice. Researchers and technical experts contribute scientific knowledge and evidence-based tools to make sense of complex systems and design innovative solutions, but this information should be communicated in ways that are accessible and useful to other citymakers.

When these forms of knowledge are woven together, they create a richer foundation for informed decision-making and action. Integrating knowledge helps to investigate the city beyond surface-level challenges. A knowledge web helps to uncover neglected everyday realities and the root causes of urban challenges. With this broader understanding, citymakers can also design interconnected solutions that move beyond siloed approaches.

Knowledge webs turn knowledge into a shared resource, one that grows evolves through collaboration. This shared process of understanding the city also transforms the citymakers themselves, changing perspectives, strengthening individual skills and building collective capacity. They bridge gaps between institutions and disciplines, enabling mutual learning.

3.3.2 Interlaced human-nature well-being

People's relationships with nature take many forms. In some worldviews, nature is seen as something to dominate and control, something separate from humans and cities.



Naucalpan, Mexico: Two residents painting a mural along the banks of the río Hondo while contributing to the revitalization of a degraded area in September 2023. The intervention also incorporated nature-based solutions to improve local environmental conditions. © Héctor Ríos

In others, it is viewed as an equal, a partner or even a sacred relative (Merchant, 2006). Worldviews also vary in the way they address human needs. Some emphasize individual gain and material growth, while others focus on collective well-being and harmony with the environment. These perspectives matter because they shape how societies define progress and build their living environments (Martinez-Alier, 2014; Sen, 1998).

Traditional development often prioritizes short-term material gains at the expense of long-term health of ecosystems and overlooks social realities (Schipper et al., 2022). Interlaced well-being means moving beyond this divide. Creating more just and climate-resilient futures involves shifting away from practices that harm people and nature, and instead recognizing that their well-being is deeply connected. Transformative action requires placing the rights and well-being of both nature and people at the centre (Narvaez et al., 2025), especially for the most vulnerable groups, such as low-income families, women, racialized people and the elderly. Positive system changes prioritize the needs of nature and the global majority over profit, addressing the root causes of urban challenges.

Developing new perspectives and relationships with nature is also essential. Restoring ecosystems, expanding green-blue and hybrid infrastructure and protecting biodiversity not only reduce environmental and climate risks but also strengthen local identity and opportunities for recreation and livelihoods (Dodman et al. 2013; Nesshöver, Assmuth, Irvine, et al. 2017). Community-led initiatives that reconnect people with their

environment, such as urban gardens, river restoration or collective care of public spaces, can foster both ecological recovery and social inclusion. This approach calls for a shift from seeing nature as a backdrop to urban life to consider it a partner in transformation.

By valuing diverse relationships with nature and understanding the needs and aspirations of the most vulnerable, citymakers can design solutions that regenerate the capacities of both ecosystems and communities.

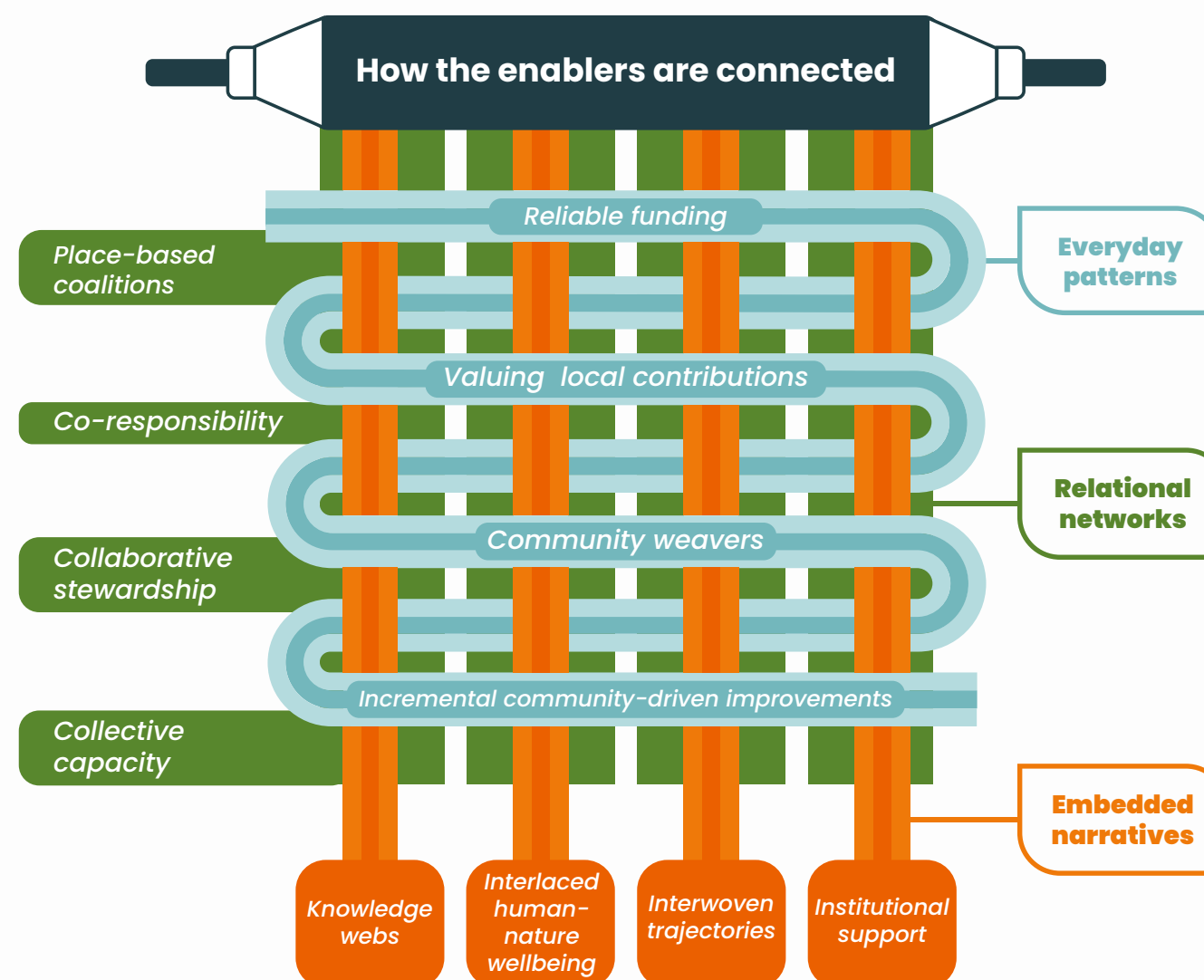
3.3.3 Interwoven trajectories

Citymaking is a complex process shaped by many citymakers and layers of interventions. Governments, communities, civil society, researchers and businesses each follow their own paths, contributing through different interventions and at different scales. However, these efforts are often designed and implemented in a fragmented way, which limits their long-term impact.

Urban transformation is not a single or linear process. Stand-alone projects rarely create the deep and lasting change our cities need. Transformation should be understood as an ongoing process of change nurtured by interconnected actions. New interventions work best when they build on what already exists, reinforcing ongoing efforts, creating continuity and strengthen what is already rooted in the territory. Even some overlap between initiatives can be beneficial, helping to keep things moving beyond short-term projects or funding cycles.

The contributions of different people and organizations can also benefit from their complementarity. For example, policy reforms may move slowly but provide a long-term framework for change, while community initiatives often act more quickly and show what transformation looks like in everyday life. When these trajectories align and connect, short-term local action can inform broader

Figure 15:
The enablers are connected and have mutual influence.



policy development, and policy can, in turn, support grassroots initiatives.

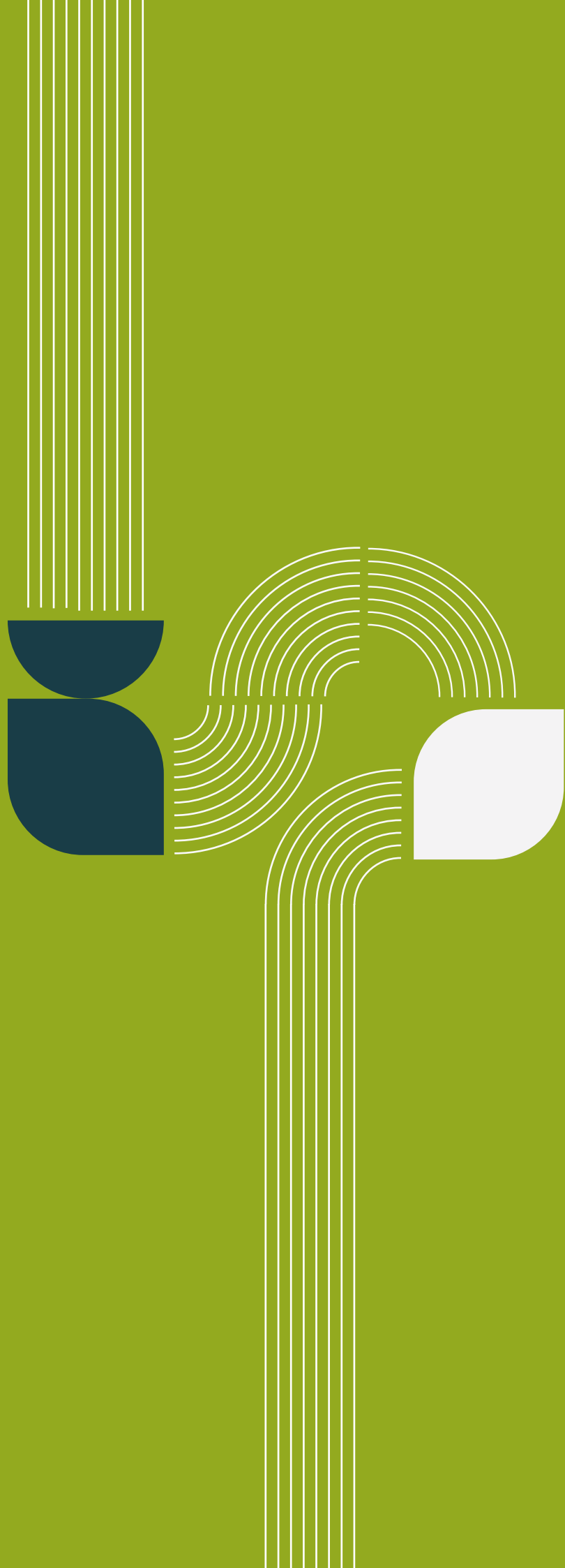
Weaving Urban Futures proposes creating shared visions that serve as overarching narratives to align the efforts of diverse citymakers. Rather than a single thread, it embraces the coexistence of multiple paths that interlace over time. This pluriverse of approaches can still find coherence when developed collectively and guided by the needs and realities of each territory.

3.3.4 Institutional support

Transformative change in cities needs sustained backing from institutions, particularly from local governments. Political will, the commitment of decision makers to support ambitious and inclusive action, is key to making ideas a reality. Institutions set priorities and define how resources are used. Without their support, even the best local initiatives struggle to grow or last.

Gaining this kind of support is not always easy. It requires trust and a shared understanding of why change is needed and what it aims to achieve. Early engagement of decision makers and open dialogue with other citymakers can help. After all, political will is not only about leaders at the top. It also depends on collective commitment. Citymakers with strong organization and clear demands have a better chance of gaining support.

Institutional support also creates legitimacy and accountability. It shows that transformation is a public priority, not just a temporary project. Institutions can bridge the gap between vision and action by investing in capacity and recognizing community leadership. They can also help share ideas that put the rights of the most vulnerable and the health of nature at the centre of public debate.



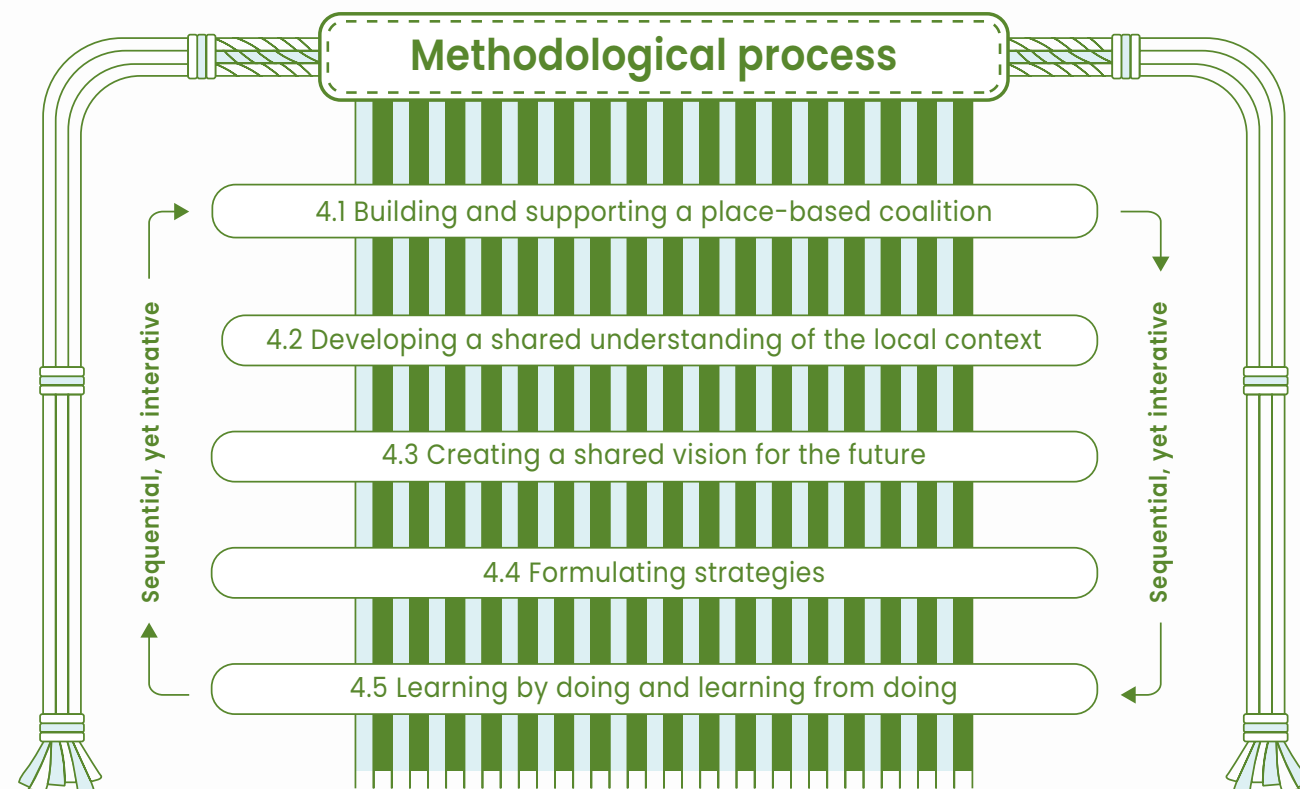
4

Five steps to weave urban futures

The guidebook aims to support transformations towards more just and climate-resilient cities in a participatory way. This chapter introduces a sequenced approach for building place-based coalitions and developing strategies that lead to systemic change. It outlines practical steps that you can follow to bring together diverse people and organizations, foster collaboration and design interventions that are grounded in local realities. Each step is presented as part of a process that helps cities organize, coordinate and implement transformative actions, while remaining flexible and adaptable to evolving contexts.

The recommended actions across the steps not only guide the implementation of concrete interventions but also aim to create or strengthen the enabling conditions outlined in [Chapter 3](#).

Figure 16:
Steps of Weaving Urban Futures.



4.1 Building and supporting a place-based coalition

Cities are complex systems. They are dynamic overlays of physical and social structures shaped by individual and collective action. They concentrate both opportunities and risks, which are increasingly interconnected. Given the scale and complexity of urban challenges, no single individual or organization can address them alone. Solving these issues requires diverse perspectives and integrated approaches.

Cities are also spaces of inequality, and measures that fail to account for this risk often reinforce existing injustices. Any intervention will impact individuals and groups differently, making urban problem-solving a process of negotiating diverse needs and aspirations. Moreover, interventions in the city are never neutral. They reflect the interests of those in positions to make decisions and act, and not necessarily the priorities of all. For urban transformation to succeed, it depends on acceptance from affected communities and secure commitment from decision makers who are willing to champion and sustain the proposed actions.

A **place-based coalition** brings together diverse citymakers, people and organizations working on the city's challenges. It creates a space for dialogue, especially among groups that do not usually work together. In a place-based coalition, they can develop innovative solutions together to improve their territory. It is a way to co-create the city, share responsibility and take ownership of solutions.

This collaboration often implies redistributing power and building partnerships across different sectors.

It is also an opportunity to amplify the voices of those who are often left out, like women, youth, older people, ethnic and religious minorities, informal workers and residents of informal settlements. As part of a coalition, disadvantaged groups can also actively participate in shaping their city and defining the future they want to live in.

A place-based coalition depends on its members' ability and willingness to work together and establish trust-based relationships. When it works well, it fosters a shared understanding among different members and strengthens social cohesion through the sense of belonging and collective purpose.

A coalition can also support capacity development and knowledge-sharing. Members can share their expertise and lived experiences, as well as develop new skills to better navigate urban transformations. Creating spaces for knowledge-sharing is also a matter of justice, as it gives everyone an equal footing in decision-making and encourages more meaningful participation.

For a place-based coalition to work, you need to ensure it embodies the following characteristics:

- **Diversity:** ensuring broad representation from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, including people with diverse perspectives.



Naucalpan, Mexico: A community workshop in parque Revolución in March 2026 to integrate local needs, experiences and aspirations into the vision for the park. © Ana Iris Enríquez / WRI México

- **Inclusivity:** welcoming new members, valuing all voices and transparently communicating progress and decisions.
- **Flexibility:** being responsive to evolving challenges and changes in the group composition and collaboration dynamics.
- **Accountability:** establishing clear governance mechanisms to build credibility and trust.
- **Commitment:** sustaining efforts for meaningful engagement beyond short-term interventions.
- **Innovation:** creating a space that encourages exploration, learning from mistakes and turning lived experiences into new solutions.

4.1.1 Structure of a place-based coalition

A place-based coalition should include members or representatives of the groups and organizations that can have a relevant impact on urban transformation. Members of the coalition represent different capacities and interests. They are themselves part of the challenge that they are working on. Each individual in the coalition should bring important insights and be committed to change, even if their visions of change might differ significantly. They are also influential in their respective sectors and able to engage in dialogue with the organizations or groups they represent.

To plan and carry out interventions, you need to identify who could participate and how they could work together. This composition of the coalition should remain flexible to incorporate people and organizations that were not initially mapped or to adjust to fluctuations in participation. The way that members interact and collaborate also evolves over time with collective work.

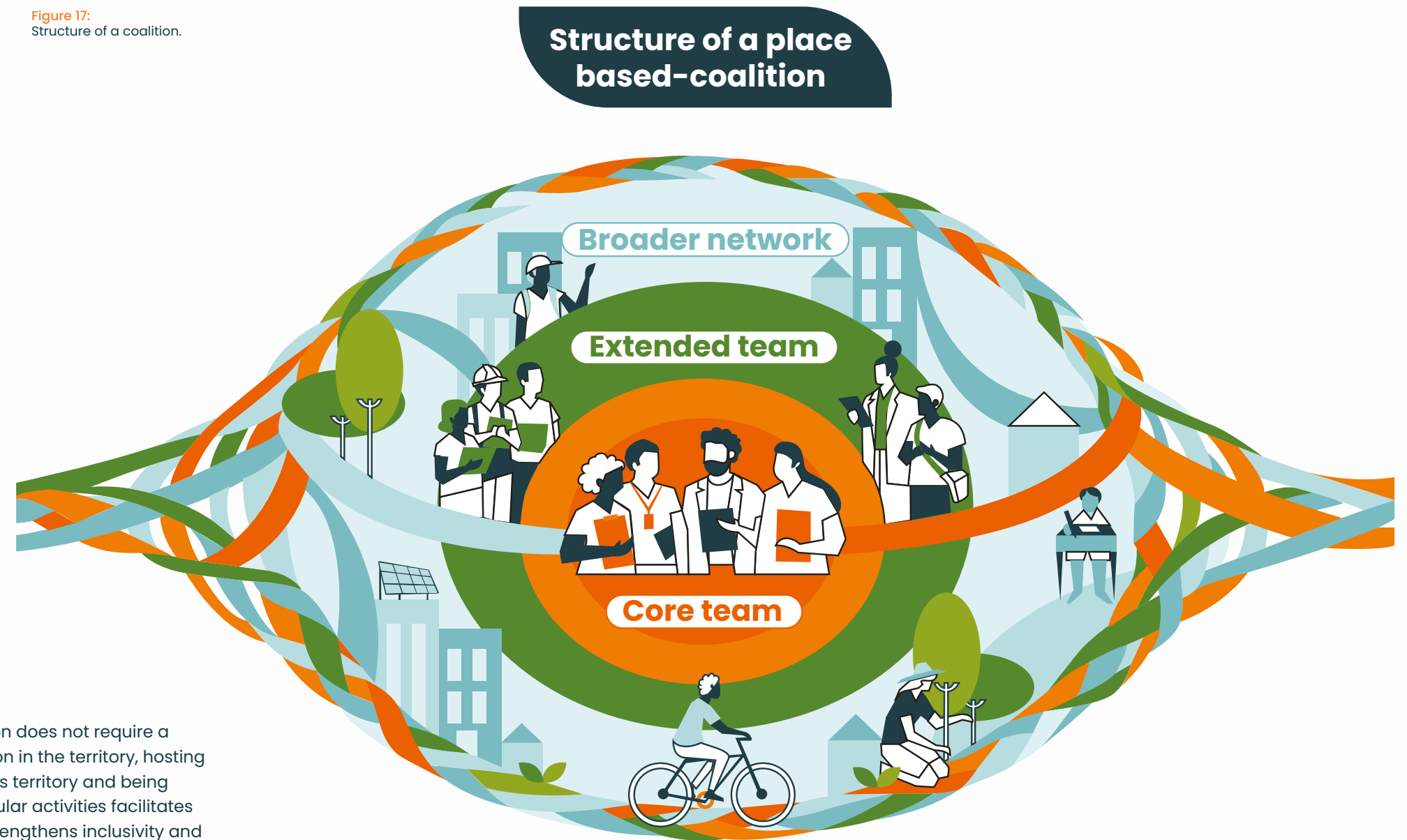
This usually begins with establishing a **core team**, a small group of individuals or organizations that guide the process and keep things moving. The core team often remains the same over time, which helps maintain continuity within the coalition. However, that does not mean that they should control decisions or how decisions are made.

Beyond the core team, an **extended team** includes individuals and organizations interested in contributing their skills, knowledge and resources. It is essential to actively include individuals and organizations that are often left out of urban transformation processes. Unlike the core team, this group is more dynamic, with coalition members and their levels of involvement shifting in response to changing circumstances. Changes in political priorities or election cycles may play a relevant role in these shifts. Given these dynamics, the coalition should remain adaptable to respond to fluctuations in participation, needs and goals over time.

Additionally, the coalition interacts with a **broader network** of individuals who are affected by or benefit from its actions or engage with it at specific moments, further enriching its impact. These might include the residents of a territory, technical or regulatory experts who participate in key decisions or other external partners.

A recurring theme throughout the steps is participation. Here, collaborative governance and inclusive participation are seen as essential means to achieve more just futures. While the place-based coalition is the main participatory space proposed in Weaving Urban Futures, members should continuously assess when and how to **engage broader networks**. This may involve expanding participation beyond the core and extended teams, especially residents, workers and others directly affected in the territory.

Figure 17:
Structure of a coalition.



A place-based coalition does not replace existing governance structures. It complements them and can even inspire changes in how they work. It involves and works alongside governments, planners and policymakers, while creating a dedicated space for innovation. This innovation can take the form of testing new ways of making decisions collectively or addressing power imbalances. In doing so, coalitions can fill gaps in participation, providing underrepresented groups with a space to vocalize their needs. They show what co-design and decentralized decision-making can look like in practice. Over time, capacities are developed, and successful practices can be institutionalized or adopted by member organizations, contributing to broader systemic change.

Although the coalition does not require a fixed physical location in the territory, hosting meetings in the focus territory and being present through regular activities facilitates participation and strengthens inclusivity and trust. Meetings in locations that are both physically and symbolically accessible to community members enable a wider range of voices to be heard. Furthermore, consistent engagement through regular workshops, events and informal gatherings fosters a sense of reliability and accountability.

This continuous presence demonstrates commitment and responsiveness to local concerns, reinforcing the coalition's connection with the territory. It shows that trust is built through concrete actions and genuine presence, especially during challenging moments.

4.1.2. Citymaking as facilitation and negotiation

One key message of this guidebook is that interconnected challenges in our cities need interconnected solutions. Using climate action as an entry point can also help address other urgent urban problems. Climate change might not be everyone's top concern, but it can be linked to issues that people already care about, making it easier to act now rather than face bigger impacts later. This approach helps bring different interests to the table and opens space for honest dialogue.

Not all coalition members will share the same vision or priorities. Some may resist change or shift their opinions over time. A coalition needs to navigate these differences by finding common ground and

demonstrating the benefits of collaboration towards a common goal. Engaging members who are sceptical or less willing to collaborate takes patience and strategies to balance different interests. An essential role of the coalition is to manage conflicts and find resolutions through dialogue. Investing in this alignment helps build long-term sustainability and broad agreement on what the coalition plans to achieve.

Trust is the foundation of successful collaboration. Building trust requires long-term and consistent engagement that demonstrates that the interest in collaboration extends beyond the immediate results or stand-alone consultations. At the same time, trust also depends on delivering tangible and short-term results that demonstrate reliability and seriousness. These visible results provide “proof” that the coalition is responsive and capable of turning dialogue into action. Over time, this combination of quick concrete actions and sustained engagement helps create fairer processes and strengthens the commitment of all people and organizations involved. Active listening and responsiveness to demands are helpful practices. To sustain credibility, coalition members should follow through with tangible actions and remain transparent about their intentions and decision-making processes.

Some people or organizations hold significant influence over urban processes. Engaging these **community weavers** early helps secure access to networks, boosts legitimacy and ensures that interventions reach the community. However, this engagement should be carefully balanced. While gatekeepers should be part of the decision-making process, they should not dominate discussions. Rather, they should open spaces for broader participation.

Coalitions also need to acknowledge and address existing distrust, past conflicts or difficult relationships between key individuals and organizations. The goal is not to force consensus, but to recognize differences and

find collective ways forward. Ignoring these social dynamics can undermine collaboration and stall transformation efforts.

Urban challenges go beyond the local level. They require coordination of local, regional, national and even international authorities. A coalition can act as a bridge, connecting different levels of governance. Dialogue within a coalition helps integrate bottom-up with top-down initiatives, aligning them with a shared vision of the future.

4.1.3. Capacities for collaboration

Weaving Urban Futures presents transformation as a process in which citymakers change themselves and their relationships to work towards more just and sustainable futures. Through the coalition, members reshape how they understand problems and collaborate, enabling new imaginaries and actions to emerge.

Transformation requires both individual and collective capacities that can be nurtured within the coalition. These include hard skills, such as Nature-based Solutions, sustainable mobility, renewable energy, waste management and project development, as well as soft skills like leadership, communication, problem-solving and collaboration.

Capacities can be both collective and individual. Collective capacities refer to what groups can do together, such as a coalition collaborating to design strategies, share knowledge or influence policies. Individual capacities are the abilities of each person, such as a community leader's skill in mobilizing neighbours or a municipal official's technical expertise in urban planning. Both levels are important, as individuals make contributions that strengthen the group, while collective efforts create space for individuals to learn and grow.

For transformation to be inclusive, coalitions should attempt to intentionally engage marginalized and vulnerable groups, who

face the greatest risks but are often excluded from decision-making. This requires removing barriers to participation and creating safe, supportive spaces for meaningful engagement. Impacted communities should build collective power through active participation, not just consultation.

Engaging communities directly requires careful ethical consideration. External citymakers should avoid extractive practices, such as taking data, stories or knowledge from communities without giving anything back. The coalition should prioritize long-term relationships in which participation leads to tangible outputs for the people who live and work in the territory. Local knowledge deserves recognition, fair compensation and the respect given to other expertise. Communities are not just beneficiaries but citymakers shaping more just and climate-resilient urban futures.

4.1.4. Recommended actions

Map relevant people and organizations

To ensure that different interests are fairly represented, it is important to identify the key people and organizations involved in shaping the area and the issues that matter most to the community. This mapping should include government agencies, **Civil society** groups, NGOs, businesses, relevant grassroots initiatives and marginalized groups. It should also look at how committed each individual or organization is to supporting change and who might resist it. The map should go beyond listing names. It should help understand each citymaker's role, interests, level of influence and relationships within the urban system.

Identify existing initiatives

It is key to map out ongoing and emerging initiatives that affect the territory to build on existing trust, strengthen collaboration and avoid duplication of efforts. The map of initiatives should be broad, since one of the coalition's roles is to break siloes and connect initiatives that improve the territory and the quality of life of people living and working there. This means that even initiatives not directly connected to the main challenge, but that contribute to improving the territory and the engagement of the community, should be listed. Building on existing efforts helps recognize the contributions of local groups already active in the area. It is equally important to identify opportunities for collaboration and gaps that the coalition could help fill.

Convene regular meetings

Hold regular meetings in locations that are easily accessible for everyone. This means not only physical accessibility but also selecting places where people feel comfortable. A highly politicized

venue or a building associated with a specific group might hinder broader participation. Ensure that everyone has adequate conditions to participate. Sometimes, this means providing alternatives for transportation, support with caregiving or adjusting meeting schedules, for example. This helps keep dialogue open and builds trust among coalition members.

Consistent engagement shows commitment and fosters a more reliable space where people can voice their needs and take part in decision-making processes. Regular gatherings are also a chance to share updates, learn more about the territory, tackle challenges and co-develop solutions. Meetings should be held in welcoming spaces and at times that accommodate different people’s schedules. While some citymakers will participate in the coalition as part of their daily work, others will only have their free time to invest in this collective effort.

Formulate a plan for engagement

More meaningful forms of participation redistribute power. It gives underrepresented groups a real chance to shape decisions and hold decision makers accountable for their actions. Different citymakers that are part of the coalition share the responsibility over planning, implementing and maintaining changes. Most importantly, community members feel engaged when their contributions help to shape real interventions rather than serving as symbolic exercises. Fair participation also requires those in power to be willing to compromise. A place-based coalition can help with this by acting as a collective space where dialogue and negotiation can happen.

To make this happen, engagement measures need to fit different groups and create safe and welcoming spaces for people to contribute. Prioritizing accessibility means reducing language barriers, expanding digital literacy and improving physical access to meeting spaces. Both formal and informal mechanisms are needed to sustain ongoing engagement.

Participatory planning methods, workshops and digital tools can be helpful, as long as facilitators are well-prepared and understand both the strengths and limits of each method.

Meaningful participation goes beyond consultation. The coalition should make deliberate efforts to include those directly affected – such as residents and workers – in decision-making spaces. People who are often treated as aid-recipients should be supported to take **active roles in shaping decisions**, including participating in negotiations with local authorities or representing the coalition in public forums. Engagement needs to be strategic and continuous, not only instrumental (Figure 18).

Establish and maintain accessible channels for communication

Communication should be a core activity of the coalition. It keeps your coalition members, affected communities and other citymakers informed at every step of Weaving Urban Futures. Work with the coalition to define clear and accessible ways to share information about meetings and other activities. This might involve using community radios, messaging apps or even door-to-door invitations if needed. These simple measures help make sure everyone feels included and informed. Understanding local customs and how people usually share information is crucial. The coalition can build on these existing practices to strengthen trust and accountability.

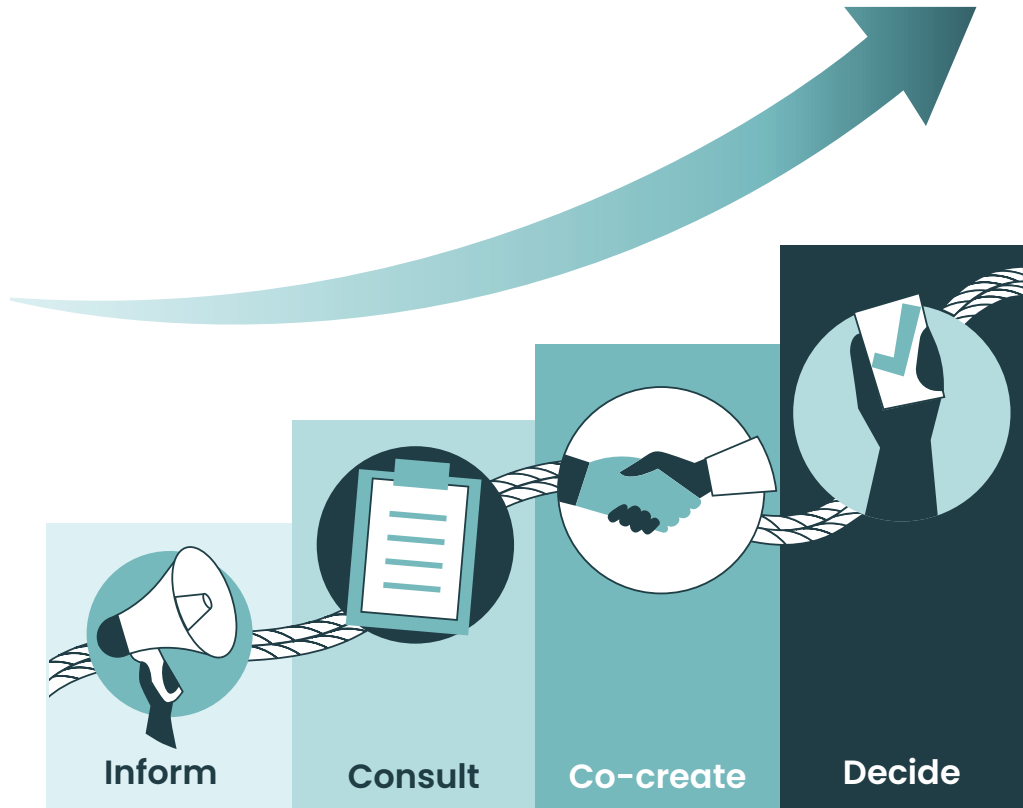
Develop capacities for transformation

Meaningful participation and collective organization depend on having the right skills and support. People and organizations need the capacity to take part in transformation, not just be invited to it. Strengthening capacities also helps empower those who normally do not speak up. Capacity development in areas like advocacy, negotiation and participatory governance helps individuals and groups express their

needs and collaborate with others. However, capacity development should not stop at the individual level. Collective organization should also be nurtured, especially at the local level. Local groups are often the backbone of transformation, keeping efforts connected to daily realities and helping turn plans into action. Formal organizations

also need the right capacities to carry out and sustain transformation, such as trained staff, adequate resources, clear policies and systems to manage knowledge. By investing in both people and institutions, participation can move from short consultations to informed co-responsibility.

Figure 18: Different levels of participation. Adapted from Arnstein, 2015.



Toolbox

To put these actions into practice, you can use the tools in the toolbox for this step, along with any other methods you know. The goal is to create and support coalitions that reflect local needs by bringing together diverse people and organizations to co-create solutions for complex urban challenges. This is more than token participation. It means amplifying underrepresented voices, sharing responsibilities and building partnerships to create fairer and more inclusive cities. You can adapt, combine and test tools based on your goals. Suggested tools include **actor mapping**, **icebreakers**, **the climate mindset quiz** and **world café**. You can also refer to the section on **principles for meaningful social engagement**.



4.2 Developing a shared understanding of the local context



Cities are not unjust and carbon-intensive by chance. These problems are built into how cities are imagined, planned, constructed and managed. Recognizing these root causes can help to find out where real change can happen.

Local dynamics, such as historical marginalization, cultural practices, governance structures, power relations and existing community initiatives can influence how problems emerge and how solutions are received. If actions are not grounded in this reality, they risk being ineffective or even harmful.

At the same time, cities cannot be understood through simplistic cause-and-effect thinking. Linear analyses oversimplify how different structures interact. To design just and lasting solutions, we need to use systems thinking and look for the shared underlying causes of unjust and carbon-intensive cities.

4.2.1. Seeing the urban space as a system

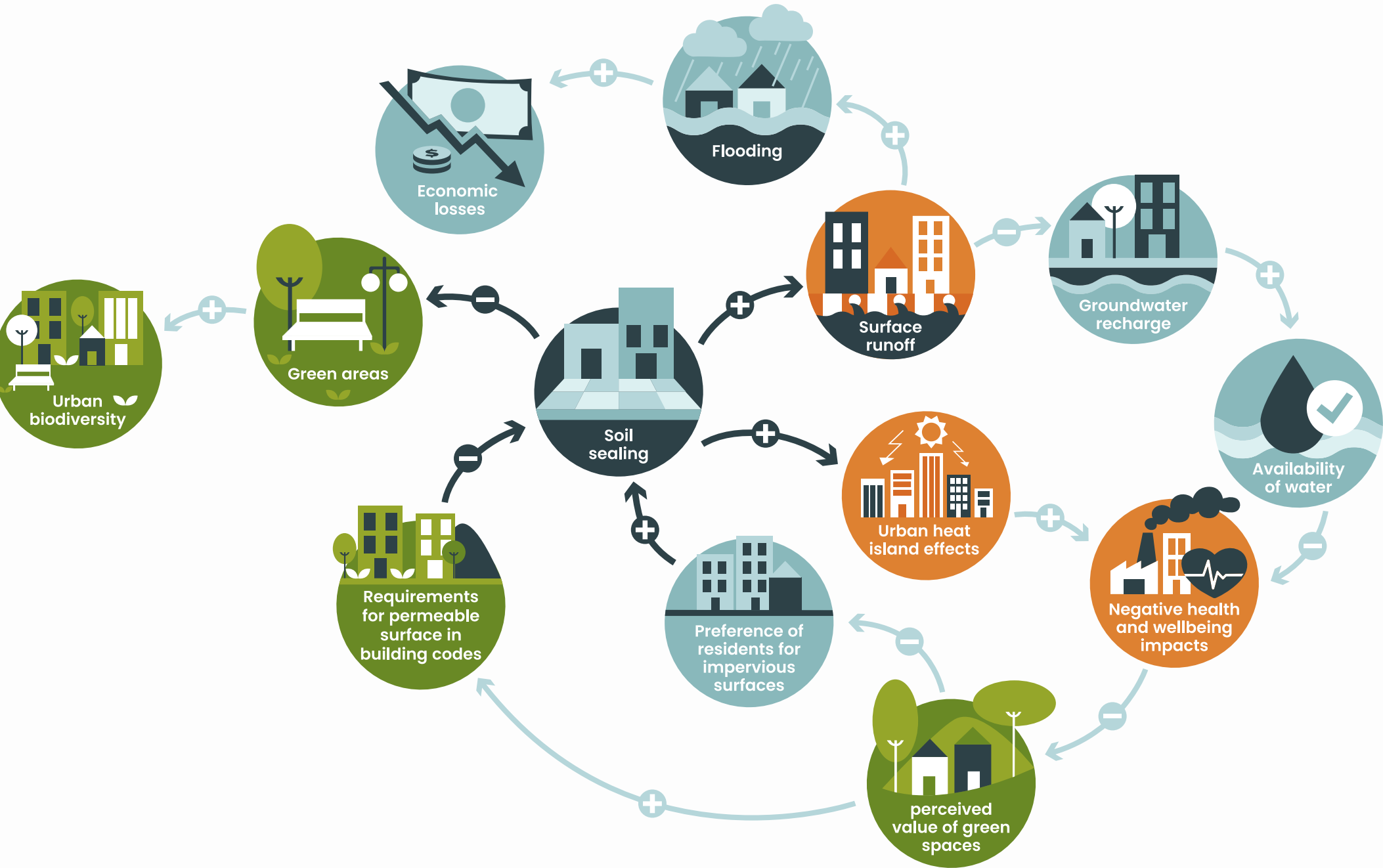
Working together as a coalition, your first action is to develop a shared understanding of the territory and assess its current conditions. The very process of understanding the city also transforms those who engage in it. When citymakers look beyond the surface, they start to see hidden connections and gain new perspectives. This shift in how they see their urban space can be supported by systems thinking.

Seeing the urban space as a system means recognizing that no single part can explain the whole picture. You cannot understand a neighbourhood by looking only at its green spaces, transport system, housing or demographics. You need to see how these parts interact. It is also important to acknowledge both explicit and implicit elements. Some parts are visible, like physical infrastructure, institutions, laws and funding, while others are less tangible, such as social norms, power relations and habits.

All these parts are interconnected and influence one another. One way to understand the system that you intervene is by looking at the relationships between different urban elements and how they create chains of influence. This does not mean there is a single line of cause and effect. It is quite the opposite. Many connections are happening at the same time, shaping a web of relations. These connections may extend beyond the limits of the territory, including factors that are out of the hands of the local actors. For example:

Recife, Brazil: Children plant edible seedlings in shared wooden boxes and are guided by a mentor in Comunidade do Pilar in December 2023, helping them discover food cultivation in the heart of the city. The text on the mentor's shirt translates to "awaken the forest".
© Marília Farias / WRI Brasil

Figure 19: Example of how different elements connect in the urban system



Often, these connections form cycles or recurring patterns. We can see many of these cycles in our cities. Some lead to positive effects, while others create negative impacts.



Figure 20: Vicious cycle: recurring patterns lead to negative impacts.

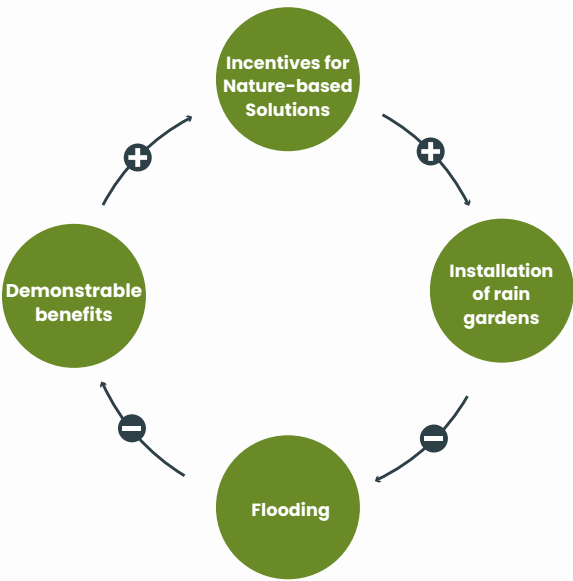


Figure 21: Virtuous cycle: recurring patterns lead to positive impacts.

When looking at feedback loops, which are processes where a system's output feeds back into itself to influence future behaviour, we can also explore the deeper values and assumptions that shape how the system works. These are called mental models and they often take more effort to identify. For example, the idea that nature and cities should be separate has shaped how most cities are built, leading to more grey infrastructure and fewer green areas. The idea that development equals economic growth has also guided most decisions about how urban land is used. This often means prioritizing profitable buildings over the well-being of people and nature that could come

from preserving and expanding green areas. Mental models are hard to change, but they play a big role in how systems evolve. Shifting them can open paths for real transformation.

A good map is not the one with the most elements or connections, but the one that tells a clear story. What matters is that it shows how things are connected and helps explain the logic behind a problem in a way that makes sense to different people. To do so, you may have to decide which elements are most important, and leave others out. A strong map balances clarity and depth, so both technical and non-technical audiences can understand it. It should trigger dialogues and serve as a shared tool for reflection.

4.2.2. Data collection

Deep understanding helps to focus on actions that solve several problems at once and address issues at their roots instead of their symptoms. When we see how problems connect, we can act in ways that create wider benefits instead of treating each issue in isolation. To build that kind of understanding, it is important to start with good questions. The first step in getting close to a territory is much like research: exploring, listening and observing without rushing to solutions. This means you not only need to understand what the challenges are, but also why they exist and for whom they matter.

Coalition members will often bring different views and priorities. When members build a shared understanding of the territory and its challenges, they can find common goals and complementary actions. This helps to move discussions from individual agendas to collective strategies.

Good questions require good answers, and these depend on reliable data. However, urban data is often incomplete or missing, especially in informal areas. These gaps can also come from neglecting certain groups, who are often left invisible in the city. Bridging them requires a deliberate intention of inclusion and using different ways of knowing.

Taking a mixed-methods approach can help. Technical tools such as spatial analysis or environmental modelling reveal patterns of flooding, heat, land use or service access that might otherwise remain hidden. Community knowledge adds what data is usually left out from official reports: people's lived experiences, informal practices, coping mechanisms and local priorities. Community-driven data collection can contribute with shaping a more complete picture and closing data gaps. When residents are engaged in mapping their neighbourhoods, conduct surveys or monitor environmental conditions, they also generate knowledge.

When technical and local knowledge come together, they build a fuller picture of the territory. This makes interventions more relevant and grounded in real conditions. The construction of knowledge webs also helps build trust between communities, researchers and decision makers. This also builds local ownership, strengthens scientific literacy and fosters trust between communities and institutions. Data can also help to gain access to necessary finances or other support. In this way, understanding becomes more than an analytical step. It becomes a transformative process.

While community-driven approaches are relevant, they work best when combined with other methods and existing data sets such

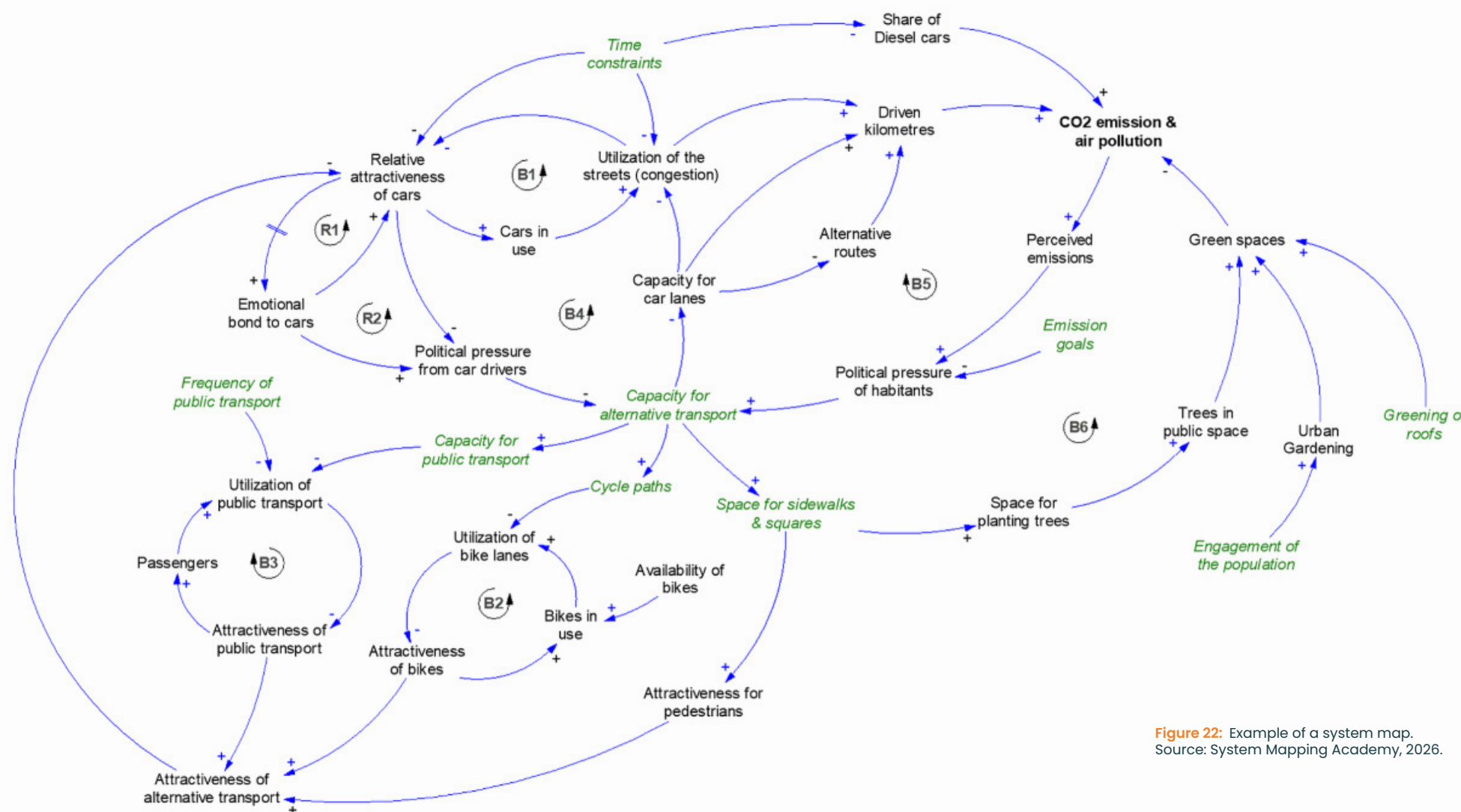


Figure 22: Example of a system map.
Source: System Mapping Academy, 2026.

as census records, infrastructure databases or climate projections. These resources provide important baselines and broader perspectives beyond the identified territory.

Finally, it is essential to respect local knowledge and ownership, especially when working with vulnerable groups, Indigenous people and local communities. The principle of “nothing about us without us” reminds us of the importance of directly involving people in shaping the visions and strategies that affect their lives. It is also a reminder that data collection can be a regenerative practice, when the community is ensured access to the data and the results allow to produce meaningful benefits.

4.2.3. Recommended actions

Frame the problem

A place-based coalition comes together to solve challenges in a specific territory. But defining the problem depends on who looks at it, since people and organizations see things differently. The same situation can have many interpretations, so the coalition needs to agree on an initial way to frame the problem. This first definition does not have to be final and members of a coalition should get progressively more comfortable with provisional definitions. As members learn more about the territory, their understanding of the problem will likely change.

It helps to start with a concrete and undesirable situation that is specific to the local context. For example, instead of saying “there is not enough public transportation,” a coalition might identify that residents in a certain neighbourhood have to walk long distances to reach the nearest bus stop, making it difficult for children to get to school safely. This kind of problem can be identified through open dialogue among coalition members and the ones that experience the territory every day, such as local shopkeepers, commuters, neighbourhood associations or teachers in the local school.

At the same time, the problem should be framed broadly enough to allow investigation and creative solutions. Simply defining a problem as a “lack of something”, like “there is no park”, can be limiting, because it already suggests a solution without exploring the deeper issues. Instead, the coalition might ask why there is no park: is it due to limited public investment in green spaces, competing land uses or lack of community involvement in planning? By questioning the underlying issues, members can design solutions that address the root causes rather than just the symptoms.

Identify gaps in knowledge

To move forward, coalitions need to understand not only what they know about the territory, but also what they do not know. Together, members should identify the gap or the missing information that limits their ability to act or make real change. A good way to start is by asking simple questions:

- What do we already know about this issue?
- What are we assuming to be true?
- What do we still not know?

Putting these questions on the table helps the group see what knowledge they have and where the uncertainties lie. It is especially important to write down assumptions, such as ideas people take for granted but have not actually confirmed. Many decisions are made based on assumptions, and this can lead to unexpected or harmful results. Working through this together also uncovers the group’s shared beliefs and expectations. Making these explicit builds transparency and helps the coalition decide what information to gather next.

Collect data

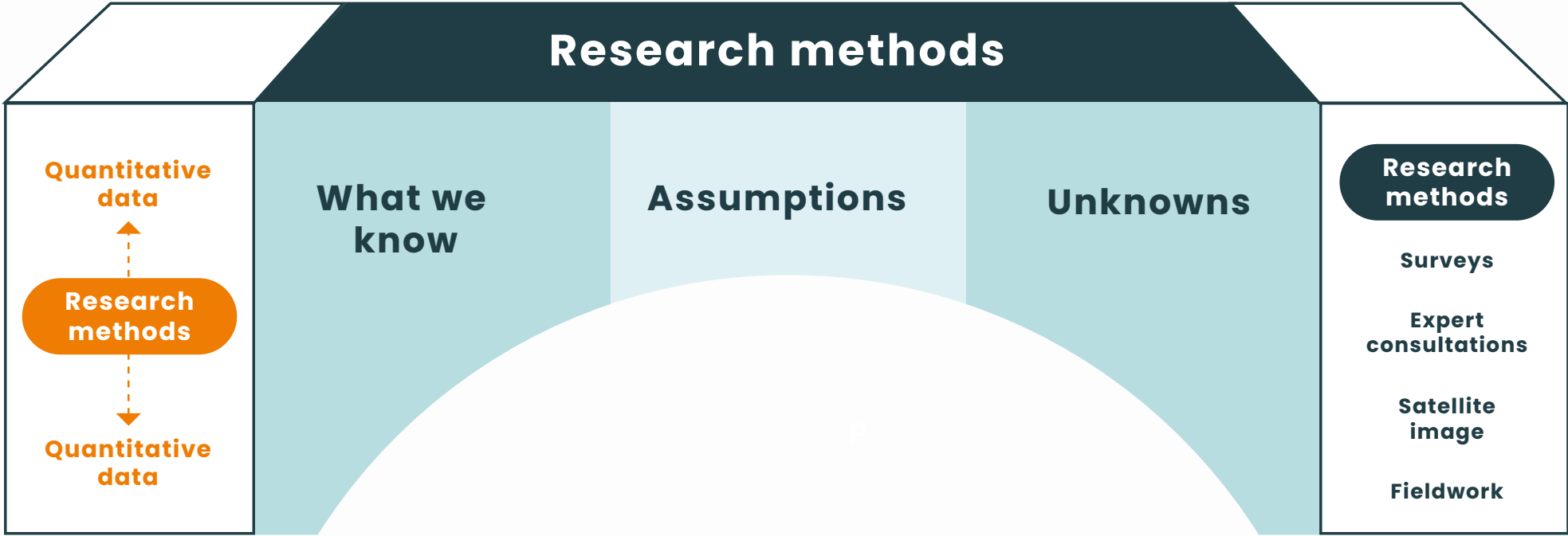
At this stage, the coalition will have identified several information gaps that need to be filled. Once these gaps are clear, the group

should decide how to collect the data needed to confirm what they already know, test their assumptions and explore what they still do not understand.

Different gaps need different approaches. This might include reviewing documents, interviewing experts, talking with neighbours or doing fieldwork. It will also involve collecting different kinds of data. Some may be quantitative – things that can be measured, such as rising temperatures, the number of people affected or the cost of home repairs. Others may be qualitative – the characteristics of or ideas behind what is observed, such as perceptions of risk, motivations to improve a public space or which groups are most affected by heavy rainfall.

Coalition members who already have experience with data collection, such as universities or research institutes, can help choose the right methods. Useful approaches might include focus groups with residents,

Figure 23: Different research methods can help bridge data gaps.



direct observation in the territory, surveys, use of sensors, satellite imagery, door-to-door interviews or consultations with experts and practitioners. Some questions can be answered with a simple check from the right institution, while others may require more detailed technical analysis. What matters most is that the chosen methods fit the context and help the coalition build a shared understanding of the territory.

Involve other citymakers in data collection

All citymakers hold valuable knowledge to share, including local practitioners and community members. A place-based coalition benefits from having these people in gathering, interpreting and sharing information. People who live and work in the area are often closest to the challenges and develop a detailed understanding of the territory. They should be part of the process from the start, not just consulted or asked for data. Their perspectives should also shape what questions are asked and how these questions will be answered. Approaches that can work well to capture local realities are participatory methods such as community-led surveys, participatory mapping, focus groups or affective mapping. These techniques not only generate richer knowledge but also strengthen collaboration and create a shared sense of ownership over the results.

Understand the rules of the game

Any coalition operates within a broader sociopolitical context that also shapes the conditions of the focus area. It is important to look beyond the immediate territory and understand how it was formed and how it fits within the larger dynamics of the city. This helps reveal the “rules of the game” and identify which of those rules may need to change to enable deeper transformation. An analysis can begin with document searches, by reviewing the laws, policies and plans that influence local realities. These may include urban development plans, climate

action strategies, municipal budgets or other regulatory frameworks. Examining them helps to clarify how they tackle – or sometimes reinforce – local challenges. It is also useful to look beyond formal policies and explore the broader political and institutional landscape: who holds decision-making power, which interests shape public debate and what recent political or strategic choices affect the territory?

Together, these insights highlight both opportunities and barriers for local action. Coalition members can gather existing documents and engage directly with decision makers to better understand how their territory is influenced and to identify where change is possible.

Create a shared understanding of the territory

Collecting data is only the first action. Coalition members also need to make sense of what they have gathered and represent the dynamics of the territory in ways that others can understand and engage with. Data only becomes useful when it is interpreted collectively and connected to the lived realities of people. This analysis should also include other citymakers, especially local organizations and residents who know the area well. Their participation helps ensure that the interpretation reflects multiple perspectives and not just technical views.

One useful way to analyse this data is making a system map, which is a visual representation of the key elements of a territory, how these elements interact and how the interactions form reinforcing cycles. Building the map collaboratively allows coalition members to see the bigger picture and identify dynamics that were not initially clear to them. This is where a system map becomes truly powerful. It is more than a diagram, because it tells a story. A good system map shows how causes and consequences are connected and highlights opportunities for action.

Identify and prioritize points for intervention

Once the coalition understands what drives local problems, it can begin identifying the entry points that could lead to broader change in the system. These entry points are ways to interrupt reinforcing cycles and create new dynamics. They might include policy adjustments, shifts in everyday practices or even support for ongoing social movements. This discussion should happen collectively, so that different perspectives shape the interpretation and decisions.

Understanding the territory also includes prioritizing which problems or entry points to address first. Not everything can be tackled at once, so the coalition should agree on clear criteria for selection. Two useful ones are feasibility and impact. Feasibility considers what can realistically be achieved with available resources, time and political support. Impact looks at the potential for the action to trigger meaningful change. Because people and organizations often have different priorities, prioritization should be collective and transparent.

Tell a story about the findings

Raw data or detailed maps alone rarely move people to action. What makes a difference is the story behind the data, showing how different conditions and decisions have shaped today’s challenges. Storytelling is a skill worth nurturing among coalition members. Turning data into a compelling narrative helps to make complex issues understandable and emotionally engaging. When stories connect evidence with lived experience, they can inspire empathy and motivate change.

Sharing these stories publicly also opens space for dialogue. Different groups might resonate with different ways of telling the story. To make their findings resonate, coalitions should also explore diverse ways to communicate them. This could include short reports for local organizations, videos highlighting key stories, social media content, physical models, exhibitions or even theatre pieces. What matters is that the format should fit the audience and context.

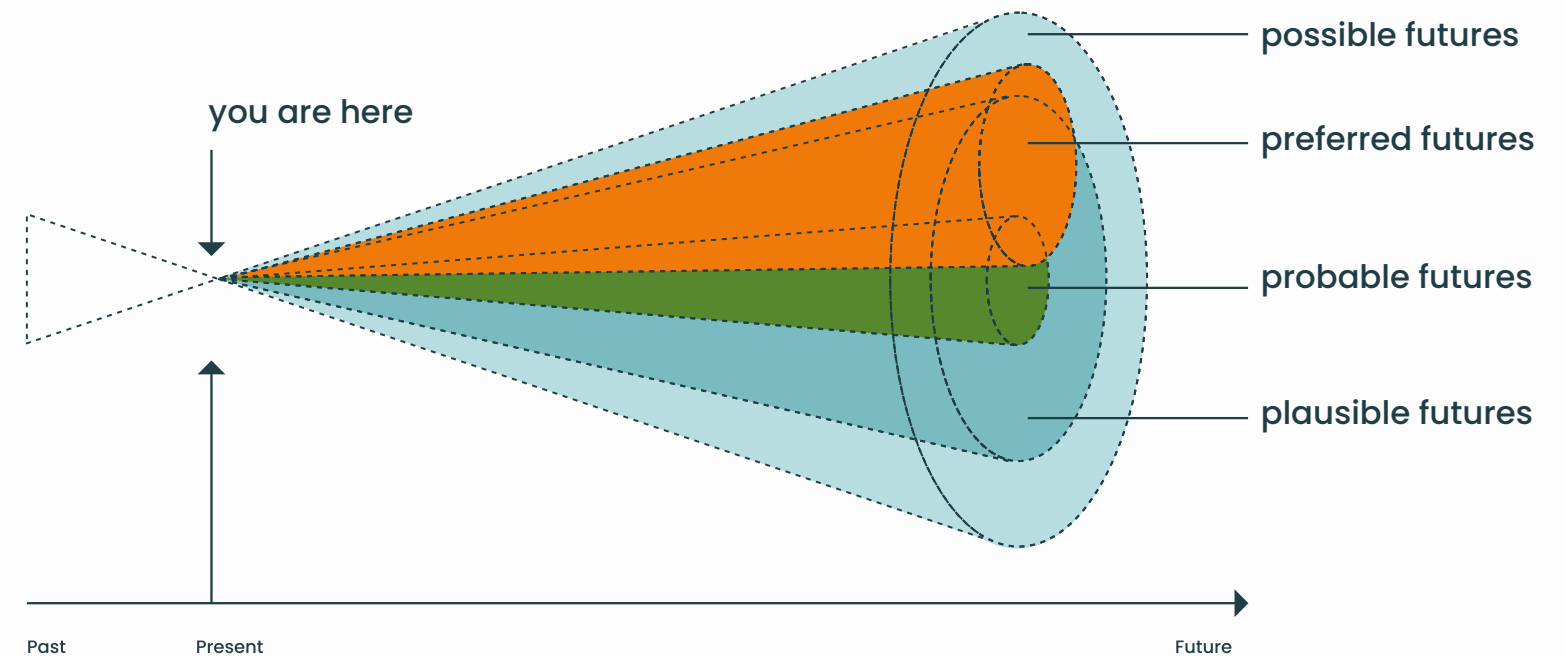
Toolbox

To develop a shared understanding of the local context, you can use the tools in the [toolbox](#) for this step, along with any other methods you know. The goal is to develop an understanding of the territory that is both deep and broad, making sense of the challenges and their root causes. This requires using different sources of data and coupling technical and community knowledges to have a complete picture of the urban space. Suggested tools include **affective mapping**, **collaborative mapping**, **community-based enumerations**, **transect walk**, **photovoice** and **the urban loom: threading citymaking card game**.



4.3 Creating a shared vision for the future

Figure 24: Cone of futures. Adapted from Gall et al., 2022.



Creating change in cities starts with people who care about building a better future. No single person can change a whole system alone, which is why building a shared vision is so important. It helps bring people's ideas together and guides collective action around shared goals.

A shared vision is a way to agree on what kind of futures we want and what needs to change to get there. This works best when you include a wide range of voices, especially of those who are often left out. Involving people from different backgrounds allows their aspirations and ideas to shape the vision. While individuals and groups may have different priorities, they often agree on the same broad aspects such as a good place to live that has clean air, moderate temperatures, green spaces, public safety, affordable housing, and others.

Having this shared direction also helps keep teams motivated and focused, even when challenges arise. It gives people a sense of belonging and ownership because they know their input matters to achieve the common goal. A shared vision and imagination can then serve as your guiding star, connecting

different initiatives and linking global goals – like the Sustainable Development Goals or climate targets – to local realities.

4.3.1. Thinking about futures in different ways

Stories help people see things from new perspectives and make ideas more concrete. They combine our rational and emotional parts, making complex ideas easier to connect with. Stories can also inspire people to think about how their own city might change for the better in more creative ways. They often have more impact than facts alone, especially when we are talking about bold or uncertain changes. Stories make future goals feel real and possible, not just distant dreams, and they bring people together around shared aspirations.

Art is another way to expand our imagination about the future. Cinema, painting, photography, songs, animation and other forms of art can push us beyond what we normally expect. They help create new imaginaries of how cities and communities could grow and transform, and allow

everyone to choose the expression they feel comfortable with. These visions often mix hopes with reality, leaving space for new ideas to emerge. Because visions are open-ended, they invite more people to participate in shaping what the future might look like.

New ways of imagining our cities can also come from valuing Indigenous and traditional knowledge and acknowledging marginalized voices. Inspiration can come from grassroots organizations and community-led initiatives that are already testing new ideas. These practices act as real utopias and show glimpses of what the world could look like. They help us to visualize changes through innovative governance, sustainable technologies or new ways of thinking. Here lies the role of utopia: not as a perfect and unreachable dream, but as a tool to stretch our imagination, break away from what feels fixed and open space for possibilities we might otherwise overlook.

Trajectories should be seen as technical plans, but also as storytelling exercises that paint snapshots of desirable futures. They should send a clear message: to make these imagined futures real, we need to

act together today to build a more just and climate-resilient world.

When we think about the future, it helps to set a clear timeframe. Having some idea of what the future could look like helps you in planning the actions to make that vision a reality and to measure if you are on track. This is the first step for backcasting, or working backwards from the desirable future to figure out the strategies needed to get there. Short-term goals are useful because they guide immediate action and are easier to picture. Long-term goals, on the other hand, can be more ambitious. In practice, people often stay conservative when setting long-term goals, instead of daring to imagine more radical or unexpected possibilities.

This guidebook helps visualize many possible futures. The future is not predetermined, nor can it be perfectly predicted. Tools like visioning and foresight help us to catch a glimpse of what the future could look like and the trajectories that could lead us there. By exploring scenarios, we can identify possible, plausible and probable futures and highlight which ones are preferable.

4.3.2. Coherence

A shared future vision can act as a guiding story, connecting different strategies under a common direction. When policies and actions align, efforts from different groups reinforce each other instead of working against each other. Such coherence is key for real change in cities.

Coherence can be created across sectors when different policy areas, such as urban planning, health and environment, climate adaptation and mitigation, coordinate their actions. Creating coherence occurs horizontally, when departments or units within the same level of government or institutions align their programmes and decisions. This ensures consistency across their actions. Coherence can also be achieved vertically, across different levels of governance, from local to national. This includes alignment with international frameworks, a process often called multi-level governance. When levels and sectors are well aligned in these ways, decisions are more effective and resources are used more efficiently.

Coherence is ultimately about collaboration, making sure everyone's efforts fit together. A common challenge in many cities is that, often, multiple priorities compete for resources, including climate action or improvements for the vulnerable groups and low-income communities. One way to address this is by highlighting the synergies between existing challenges and efforts. When representatives from different municipal departments work together, local climate action can showcase the need for more coherent policies and start building the connections to achieve them.

4.3.3. Recommended actions

Secure informed decision

Coalition members need clear information to make decisions and take action. The data that was collected should be a practical tool

to spark dialogue. Discussions can start with the shared understanding of the territory that was built before. Coalition members can link what they have learned to their own lived experiences. When people see how the data reflects their own realities, they are more likely to engage meaningfully in the creation of a future vision.

Everyone should be able to access the information, regardless of their technical expertise, education level or professional background. Support should be provided to help everyone understand the data, especially when some coalition members are more familiar with certain types of data and can guide others. Such inclusive approaches prevent knowledge hierarchies and ensure that all voices carry equal weight in shaping the collective vision.

Establish a time horizon

Set clear time boundaries for visioning by defining short-, medium- and long-term horizons. This structure helps coalition members organize their ideas and expectations, making discussions more focused and actionable. Working with these different horizons helps to reveal how actions are connected over time, such as how early interventions lay the groundwork for later shifts and how long-term visions can guide near-term choices.

The **short-term horizon** (for example, achievable over the next 1-3 years) focuses on immediate priorities and measures that can be realized relatively fast. It highlights quick wins, easier policy adjustments or small-scale interventions that demonstrate early results. The **medium-term horizon** (achievable within 5-10 years) encourages coalition members to think about how today's actions can evolve into broader changes. It is the space to explore more ambitious ideas and how the organizations involved can also change to support transformation. The **long-term horizon** (achievable within 10-30 years or more) opens the door to imagining deeper



Buenos Aires, Argentina: a pilot project at a school features a shaded outdoor area with pergolas, improving thermal comfort and creating shared spaces for gathering and connection. © Daniel Kosak / IIED-AL

transformations. Here, the coalition should really think out of the box and consider shifts in urban systems, social relations or governance structures. Long-term visions should reflect the most ambitious aspirations of the group.

Explore future scenarios

Engage coalition members in imagining multiple future scenarios and exploring different pathways for transforming their cities. Scenario thinking helps to move beyond a predefined vision and opens space for creativity. Different tools can be used to stimulate creative thinking and ambitious aspirations. Identifying current trends and drivers of change can be a starting point for the discussion but coalition members should also be encouraged to think beyond the current limitations. Understanding what might happen if nothing changes helps the coalition grasp the urgency of transformation and the risks of maintaining the status quo.

Next, explore alternative pathways that range from incremental improvements to major transformations. Comparing the alternatives helps coalition members reflect on what kinds of change are both desirable and feasible in their local context. Throughout the process, invite coalition members to

question their own assumptions about what is possible, who holds power and whose interests shape urban development. Create a space where people feel safe to challenge dominant narratives. Exposing coalition members to other visions of futures can be inspiring. This can include exchanges with other territories, artistic representations coming from Afrofuturism (an aesthetic that combines African culture with science fiction), ideas drawn from science fiction, documentation of similar experiences in other parts of the world, et cetera.

Identify desirable futures

After discussing different possible scenarios, coalition members should also discuss what a desirable future looks like for their community. This implies creating a shared vision grounded in collective aspirations, which should be specific and tailored to the focus territory. The vision is more engaging when it includes vivid details about what truly matters: the kind of place people want to live in, the relationships they want to build and how they can enjoy their lives. Adding sensorial descriptions also help people to visualize and get involved, including sounds, smells, et cetera. Instead of only fixing current problems, an ambitious vision should allow for imagining new possibilities

beyond current constraints. Framing the discussion in positive terms can encourage people to think in terms of opportunities and transformation.

Creative and participatory methods help stimulate imagination. Techniques such as drawing, mapping, storytelling, creating a collage or doing theater-based exercises can help coalition members express ideas that may not emerge in technical discussions. Collaborating with artists, educators or activists can enrich the process, connecting cultural and emotional perspectives with practical planning. This shared vision becomes the foundation for action planning. By working backward from the future they want to create, the coalition can figure out the steps needed to achieve it.

Connect local visions to global agendas

It can be beneficial to show how local initiatives connect to global agendas to help coalition members see their efforts as part of a larger movement for change. This action links community-level visions with broader international commitments. Coalition members should identify how their ideas align with local, national and international frameworks, such as municipal master plans, regional development plans, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), the Paris Agreement or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

By aligning local visions with these frameworks, the coalition reinforces the idea that every contribution matters, no matter how small it might be, which can inspire others to act. Highlighting these linkages can also open practical opportunities. Alignment with established policies and frameworks can make local initiatives more visible and attractive to potential donors or government programmes. It can also help attract partnerships with NGOs, research institutions or international agencies.

Identify milestones

Once a shared vision is in place, the coalition should start bridging imagination and action. Intermediate goals that make the journey more tangible can serve as milestones, since they help the group decide what comes first and what success looks like along the way. Milestones should be adequate to the local context. Externally driven

goals can lead to frustration. Defining intermediate measures before reaching the vision also helps identify gaps and priorities. Milestones provide a foundation for monitoring, evaluation and learning. They serve as reference points for tracking progress, reflecting on what works and making adjustments when needed.

Document the vision

Work together to create a clear and inspiring vision statement that reflects the coalition’s shared aspirations. This statement should explain, in simple language, what you want to achieve and why it matters. It should capture the values, hopes and priorities that emerged during the visioning activities, so the vision becomes a guide for action and a source of motivation.

A strong vision statement turns abstract ideas into a shared story. Use creative ways to share the vision in different formats so it reaches diverse audiences. Beyond written documents, consider murals, photos, comics, videos, theatre or storytelling events. Artistic expressions make the vision tangible and emotionally engaging. They also help bridge gaps across generations, cultures or literacy levels, allowing more people to connect with the message.

The vision can also strengthen commitment. Encourage coalition members – particularly relevant organizations such as governmental agencies – to make pledges that link their actions to the vision through concrete actions. These commitments reinforce accountability and can serve as a reminder of the future you want to build together, as well as of the shared responsibility to move towards it.

Toolbox

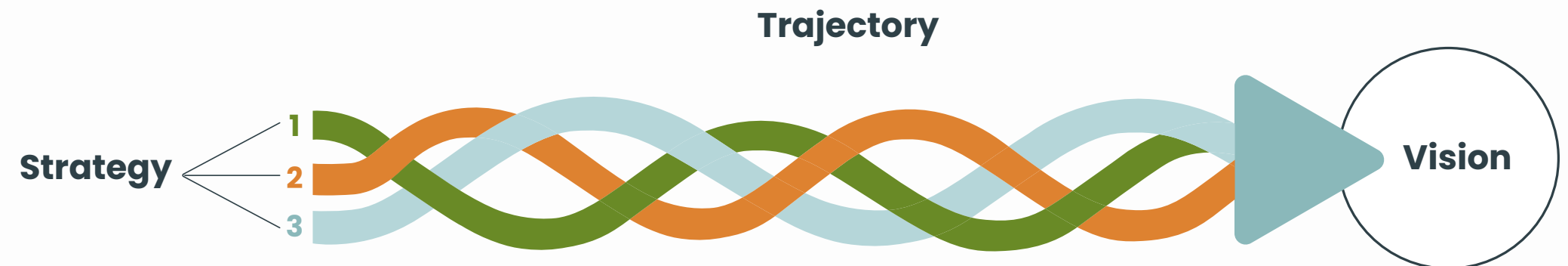
To create a shared vision of future, you can use the tools in the toolbox for this step, along with any other methods you know. The goal is to create a clear placed-based narrative and vision for your territory and community that allows the coordination of multiple strategies. Suggested tools include **collaborative collage, co-creation with models, future story and newspaper headline**.

Teresina, Brazil: Residents of Residencial Edgar Gayoso of all ages join hands in a circle, demonstrating collective commitment, November 2023. © Eduardo Sousa / WRI Brasil



4.4 Formulating strategies

Figure 25: Relationship between entry points, vision, trajectories and strategies.



Once coalition members have agreed on a shared vision for the future, they can start building its **trajectories** to move towards that goal. These trajectories are a set of **strategies** resulting from collective imagination, selected initiatives that you can implement to achieve the vision that was collectively created collectively for the territory.

It is hard for one coalition to bring about broad change entirely on its own. However, you can work towards it, showing what is possible at the local scale, and then try to scale it. For transformation to take place, other factors beyond the selected territory are relevant, many of which are outside of the coalition's reach. Policies, laws and supply chains are examples of such factors. For this reason, local activities need to be embedded in the larger system.

Strategies can take many forms: physical interventions, changes in the way that citymakers collaborate, new policies or laws or even adopting new forms of thinking and making decisions. Whatever their form, strategies should be co-designed by the place-based coalition to ensure they are relevant and adequate.

The formulation of strategies builds on previous steps. They should be grounded on the coalition's shared understanding of the territory and the entry points for transformation identified earlier. As discussed in [Section 4.2](#), tools such as system mapping can help identify the entry points, those aspects of the system where small shifts can lead to deeper change.

At this stage, the focus is on identifying strategies that can deliver quick improvements while also paving the way towards the long-term vision. As mentioned in [Section 4.3](#), a vision is not just about fixing immediate problems but also about creating new possibilities and fostering a positive outlook on the future. The trajectories, therefore, are the pathways of strategies that connect today's actions with tomorrow's desired outcomes.

Because transformation takes time, a phased implementation approach is often most effective. This means identifying which strategies to prioritize, starting with what can realistically be done first, while keeping sight of more ambitious and longer-term goals. At the same time, flexibility is

essential. Strategies should be regularly adjusted in response to feedback and changing conditions to stay relevant and effective. [Section 4.5](#) will further explore how flexibility can be integrated through continuous learning.

Each strategy should also be detailed enough to become actionable, which can be done by defining how it will be implemented and what is needed to move from plan to practice. In doing so, several practical questions will emerge: about partnerships, resource allocation and the capacities required to make change happen. Addressing these concerns early helps ensure that strategies are not just ideas, but concrete measures towards transformation.

4.4.1. From vision to action

While forecasting is the projection of how the city might evolve based on current trends, **backcasting** starts from a desirable future and works backward to identify what must be in place to make it real. The group can ask: What needs to change for this future to happen? What conditions should be created?

What barriers should be removed? What capacities or reforms are required?

These requirements should then be translated into **strategies**: a small number of actions that are realistic and can achieve maximum impact. For example, if the vision includes climate-resilient housing for all, several strategies could support this goal. These might include updating building regulations; upgrading precarious houses in risk-prone areas, such as those that are regularly flooded; training local builders in sustainable methods; creating incentives to implement Nature-based Solutions and sustainable materials. Strategies should also connect and reinforce one another. A strategy of community-led housing, for instance, could be linked to a local skills programme or a participatory budgeting initiative, creating stronger and more coherent trajectories for change.

The process of defining strategies benefits from being collective and drawing on the coalition's shared intelligence. When working on defining strategies, it is key to involve different sectors and citymakers in the implementation. The realization of a

vision might require strategies at different scales, spanning from local and city-wide to national measures. This often requires you to work with organizations and institutions operating at different levels to ensure alignment and support.



While public-private partnerships are well-known mechanisms for action, coalitions can go further by forming public-people partnerships. In this model, communities and local citymakers are not just consulted but become active partners in planning, implementing and monitoring interventions.



Finally, the enablers described in [Chapter 3](#) can serve as a guide for the definition of strategies. When discussing a specific challenge, coalition members can ask whether their strategies strengthen these enabling conditions. For example, do they create new collaborations, build trust or shift mental models towards transformation?

4.4.2. Working together

Some strategies focus directly on changing governance structures, for example, creating new spaces for participation or improving coordination between organizations. Reshaping how power, authority and responsibilities are distributed is in itself a powerful strategy for transformation. In other words, changing the way people work together can be as transformative as changing physical infrastructure.

At the same time, governance is not only a goal but also a means to implement other strategies. No single person can drive transformation alone. Implementation depends on defining adequate means to make decisions together and to establish **partnerships and networks** that bring together different resources and perspectives. Building on collaborative structures that already exist – such as local committees, community groups, thematic networks or ongoing participation processes – helps to make initiatives more relevant and easier to implement.

While public-private partnerships are well-known mechanisms for action, coalitions can go further by forming public-people partnerships. In this model, communities and local citymakers are not just consulted but become active partners in planning, implementing and monitoring interventions. They share responsibility for making change happen. This distributed ownership ensures that transformation is not dependent on a single institution or project, but that it becomes part of a broader culture of collaboration.

Working in networks connects people, groups and organizations around shared challenges. Networks are strongest when they promote long-term collaboration and shared responsibility, distributing tasks and roles fairly among partners. They can take many forms, as some are formal with written agreements and defined roles, while others are informal and built on trust and

personal relationships. Both types matter. Informal networks, rooted in everyday cooperation, can be just as powerful as formal arrangements. They often make collaboration more flexible and responsive, and can even evolve into formalized partnerships when needed.

4.4.3. Resource allocation

Finding adequate financial mechanisms is a crucial measure to turn strategies into action. In the long run, without adequate resources, even the most innovative ideas may remain on paper. Examples of such resources can be money invested, but also time allocated, for instance. To mobilize resources, it is important to develop well-prepared projects that clearly explain the problem being addressed, the actions planned and the outcomes expected. A strong proposal should also show how the strategy contributes to broader transformation, making the case for why investing in the initiative will create real and lasting impact. A clear and structured project proposal helps funders see the link between actions and results.

Understanding the funding landscape is equally important. Public resources are often available through national or local government programmes, public calls for proposals or direct investments. When governments are partners in the initiative, it can strengthen both financial support and political legitimacy. Public funding can also help align projects with broader development goals, such as social inclusion or environmental protection.

Beyond public resources, external funding can play a major role, such as financial support from international organizations, philanthropic foundations, development banks and private investors. These sources can bring in different formats of finance, like grants, loans or blended finance. Exploring a mix of funding options increases the chances of securing sustainable support.

4.1

4.2

4.3

4.4

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Knowing the different options requires effort from coalition members. The available options are very different from city to city. For this reason, it is important to keep an updated list of options that list can be built through online research and informational chats with experts or even with the funders themselves. Informational chats can also clarify the conditions to access each kind of fund, since they are very different from each other.

In the context of climate action, **climate finance** is an especially relevant opportunity. Climate finance refers to resources, often from international funds, that support projects tackling climate change mitigation and adaptation. Examples include renewable energy projects, sustainable transport or measures for disaster risk reduction. For communities and cities, accessing climate finance requires connecting local priorities with global climate agendas.

4.4.4. Developing the capacities needed for implementation

In [Section 4.1](#), we have already discussed the importance of strengthening both individual and collective capacities within the coalition. This is essential not only for keeping people engaged, but also for making participation more inclusive. On top of that, different strategies often require different types of knowledge, skills and ways of working together, meaning that without certain capacities, strategies cannot be implemented. For example, a project on climate-resilient housing might require technical knowledge about sustainable construction, financial skills to manage budgets, as well as communication skills to engage the community. The project might also need leadership to mobilize local residents or organizations, and negotiation skills to build partnerships with government agencies.

No matter the type of capacity, one of the most valuable outcomes is leaving a lasting

legacy through community organization. To achieve this, it is important to ensure that, after a project ends, the community remains more organized and better equipped to continue driving change – perhaps by starting a new initiative that builds on previous successes. For instance, training local youth to collect data on flooding risks not only supports one project, but also provides them with skills the community can use in the future.

Finally, technical capacity development focused on specific challenges, especially those related to climate change, is crucial. Issues like heatwaves, flooding or sea level rise demand specialized knowledge. Training citymakers in performing climate risk assessments and teaching community members to monitor air quality or developing expertise in Nature-based Solutions are all practical examples. These efforts strengthen both the coalition and the wider community, preparing them to respond more effectively to emerging risks and opportunities.

4.4.5. Recommended actions

List possible strategies

After having identified the main entry points, the first action is to brainstorm possible strategies that can move the coalition closer to its shared vision. This includes identifying opportunities that already exist in current policies and programmes, as well as pointing out gaps where new action is needed. For example, if a city has a policy to promote green spaces but has no implementation plan for informal neighbourhoods, this gap could be turned into a strategy to develop small-scale parks in underserved areas. At this stage, it is important to gather input from all different kinds of citymakers.

Prioritize strategies

Once you have identified possible strategies, the next action is to decide which ones to

focus on first. Not everything can be done at once, so prioritization is key. You can carry this out through a mix of participatory methods and reasonable criteria, which can include urgency, available resources, opportunities from political priorities, potential impact and community demand. For example, while long-term waste management reform is important, a short-term strategy such as setting up community-led recycling points may be easier to start with, and it immediately delivers benefits. Ranking strategies together within the coalition helps to create shared ownership of the choices.

Detail the priority strategies

Once priorities are agreed upon, each strategy should be translated into a clear action plan with concrete tasks, responsibilities, timeframes and budgets. Breaking strategies down like this makes them more actionable and easier to monitor over time.

If the coalition already has a potential funder or call for proposals in mind, the project can be adjusted to meet those specific requirements. Aligning the plan with donor criteria from the start saves time later and increases the chances of securing support while keeping the strategy grounded in the coalition’s shared vision and local priorities.

Define governance mechanisms for implementation

Good governance requires that organizations at the same level (horizontal) and across levels (vertical) work in alignment towards the same goals as much as possible. This also includes setting up clear mechanisms for coordination and decision-making related to the subsequent actions or projects defined by the coalition. Governance arrangements should include strategies for community empowerment, such as establishing neighbourhood committees with capacity to influence decisions on the project definition or resource allocation.

Identify potential partnerships and networks

It is important to identify potential partners who can bring resources, expertise or legitimacy to the work. Partnerships might include universities that can provide data and research support, local businesses that can sponsor initiatives or offer technical know-how and international organizations that can share best practices or help attract funding. Decision makers, policymakers and politicians are also important partnerships to be cultivated by the coalition.

Engaging with existing networks and coalitions, such as climate resilience forums, city-to-city exchanges or thematic alliances, can also strengthen strategies and expand their reach. These connections allow local people and organizations to learn from others, share experiences and position their work within broader efforts for urban transformation.

Assign roles and responsibilities

Each participant should have a clear role, but also be encouraged to rethink how they contribute as a citymaker. This can challenge traditional assumptions, for example that governments are the only actors that handle infrastructure or that

NGOs alone engage communities. Instead, private companies could take responsibility for providing technical support for solar panels, while residents lead in managing and maintaining them. This collective rethinking of responsibilities creates space for new leadership and more dynamic collaboration.

Identify funding sources

Financing strategies is often one of the biggest challenges. Identifying potential funding sources early helps avoid delays when it comes to implementing the defined actions. This could include applying for public funds from municipal or national governments, seeking grants from international donors or developing partnerships with private investors.

The coalition can maintain an updated list of potential funders, including their requirements, focus areas and important deadlines. This list should be regularly revised as new opportunities emerge. Members can take turns researching funding calls online or reaching out directly to donors to gather up-to-date information. Keeping this knowledge organized and shared within the group helps the coalition act quickly when opportunities arise.

Toolbox

To elaborate strategies collectively, you can use the tools in the toolbox for this step, along with any other methods you know. The goal is to formulate strategies that can promote improvements in the territory and realize the long-term vision created by the place-based coalition. Suggested tools include **action plan, backcasting, participatory diagramming, risk matrix** and **roleplay**.



4.5 Learning by doing and learning from doing

Urban transformation is a constantly evolving process. You will inevitably face complexity, tensions and uncertainty when addressing climate change and climate-related conflicts. No single strategy guarantees success, especially in the long run. Working together, trying out ideas, seeing what works and learning from the process can help you to keep improving the coalition over time, for example through cycles of co-creation, monitoring, evaluation and learning.

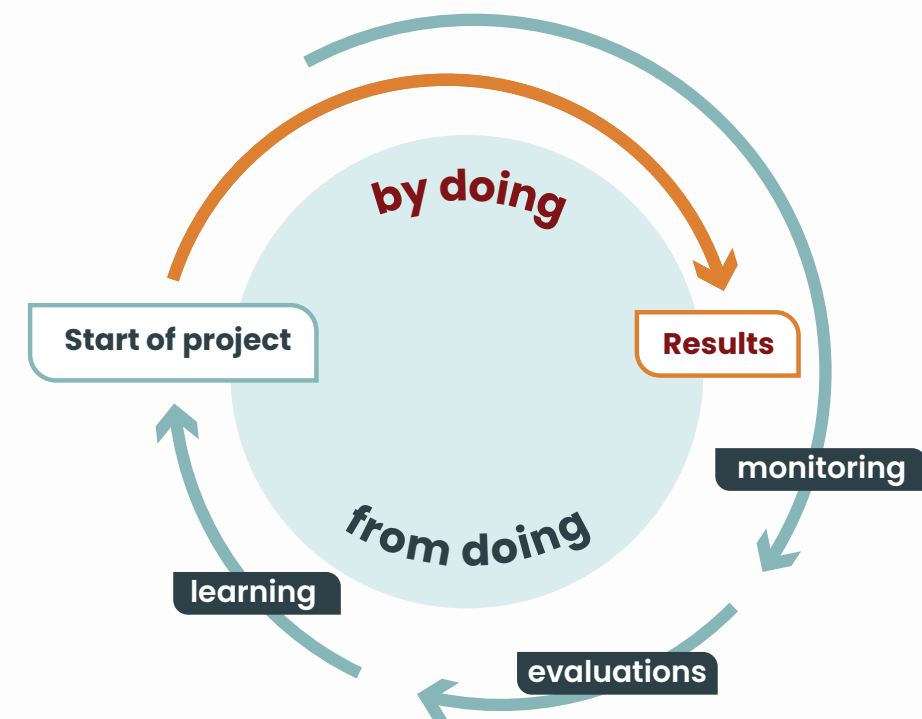
Charting new futures always comes with uncertainty. Transformation is a process of continuous learning and adaptation. This learning often happens through practice, also called **learning by doing**. It means gaining hands-on experience, knowledge or skills *during* action and involves active participation in a task or activity. This exploration of possibilities naturally involves trial and error. Some interventions may not achieve the expected results and that is part of the process. Understanding why something did not work, and what happened instead, is just as important as celebrating successes. This reflective approach helps you to improve

and adapt strategies, avoid repeating mistakes and design better interventions in the future.

As part of this learning process, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) are important:

- **Monitoring** is an ongoing process to gather data for tracking progress and ensuring activities remain aligned with set goals.
- **Evaluation** refers to systematically assessing whether desired outcomes have been achieved, while also identifying unexpected results. Unlike monitoring, which is continuous, evaluation occurs at specific intervals to analyse overall performance. Evaluation can build on monitoring data.
- **Learning** connects the dots. It uses insights from both monitoring and evaluation to improve decision-making, strengthen strategies and guide future action. **Learning from doing** happens *after* completing an action. It emphasizes reflection and extracting lessons to improve future efforts.

Figure 26: Cycles of learning by doing (co-creation) and learning from doing (monitoring, evaluation and learning, MEL).



Although we refer to learning that happens after action, MEL should not be treated as an afterthought. For it to be effective, it should be built into projects and strategies from the very beginning. When learning is part of the design, place-based coalitions are better equipped to adjust course towards just and climate-resilient futures.

4.5.1. Learning by doing: Exploring possibilities

Exploration plays a central role in transformation because it allows citymakers to test new ideas in practice. Complex problems like climate change and inequality do not have simple solutions. On top of that, cities are constantly changing – requiring us to develop innovative solutions. Instead of waiting for a perfect plan, exploring possibilities creates space to try things out on a smaller scale, learn from the process and

adapt. It is also an opportunity to realize the visions formulated by the coalition.

Pilot projects and low-complexity interventions are especially powerful tools for exploring alternatives. They act as laboratories for innovation, where new policies, technologies or practices can be tested in a controlled environment before being scaled up. For example, a local coalition might trial a bike-sharing programme in one neighbourhood before expanding it citywide or to other communities. These pilots show visible results that help build momentum, foster trust and sustain engagement over time.

Exploration also creates opportunities for collective learning. Failures are not just setbacks but can reveal why certain approaches do not work and suggest ways to improve. By encouraging continuous engagement, reflection and dialogue, small interventions can help shift mindsets and open doors for deeper transformations.

4.5.2. Learning from doing: Monitoring, evaluation and learning framework

Because urban transformation is context-dependent and inherently experimental, many aspects cannot be predicted in advance. Because of this, MEL frameworks need to move beyond rigid indicators and predefined outcomes. An indicator is simply a measure that helps track change, like emissions reductions or the number of trees planted. But in transformation processes, outcomes are often moving targets. Instead of focusing only on results, it is just as important to measure enabling factors and assess how the process contributes to a shared vision.

The first action in MEL is to define what will be monitored, how it will be monitored and who should be involved. It helps to make monitoring a continuous practice from the start, rather than something to be added later, because it should provide real-time feedback so that strategies can be adjusted as conditions evolve.

A well-structured MEL framework combines both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitative approaches, such as emissions reduction measurements, infrastructure improvements and financial investments, provide measurable milestones. Qualitative insights, on the other hand, capture less tangible but equally critical shifts, such as strengthened governance, expanded social networks, community empowerment or changing mental models. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive understanding of how and why change is occurring.

A robust MEL framework also blends technical assessments with participatory methods. Involving communities in defining success and shaping evaluation metrics in both the planning stage and later assessment ensures transparency, trust and a sense of ownership. Instead of being passive subjects of evaluation, communities become active



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contributors to knowledge production, strengthening the legitimacy and impact of the monitoring process. However, participatory MEL requires investment in capacity development, thoughtful design and incentives to empower rather than overburden communities. Examples of more or less participatory methods include:

- **Citizen science**, such as community-led assessments of air quality, heat mapping or environmental monitoring.
- **Community-led surveys**, including enumeration or perception surveys, this can also be done in partnership with academic institutions.
- **Storytelling**, capturing personal and collective experiences of transformation.
- **Ethnographic observations**, understanding lived experiences and changes in behaviour over time.
- **Focus groups and interviews** to explore local drivers, challenges and impacts of transformation.

4.5.3. Institutionalizing learning

Urban transformation should deliver short-term results, like better infrastructure or new services, but more importantly also strengthen the capacities of people and institutions in the long term. This means supporting both individual and collective learning so that citymakers develop new ways of thinking and working. Shared reflection and evaluation can help shift mindsets, routines and institutional practices, making transformation more durable over time. Adopting a culture of learning across scales – from individuals to organizations and from local to city-wide – strengthens collective knowledge and deepens trust. It also facilitates the identification and dissemination of good practices while helping to avoid repeated mistakes.

Institutionalizing learning requires dialogue and exchange. Workshops, peer-to-peer dialogues, learning platforms and mechanisms that feed lessons learned back into policy and practice all help embed knowledge within institutions. Documenting experiences and sharing them widely ensures that insights from individual projects contribute to broader governance strategies, moving learning beyond isolated interventions.

Collaboration with academic and research institutions can strengthen MEL and leave a lasting legacy. Universities and think tanks can work with practitioners to test methods, generate evidence for policymaking and learn together through participatory methods of research. However, these partnerships should not privilege academic knowledge over local expertise. Instead, they should value community experience, traditional knowledge and lived realities as equally valid forms of data. True co-production requires that the people directly

Teresina, Brazil: Undergraduate students join residents in a mutirão in Residencial Edgar Gayoso, August 2022. © Paulo Sérgio / WRI Brasil

affected remain central decision makers in research and learning processes, with academic institutions acting as allies. Such an approach encourages that different ways of knowing are respected and integrated into urban sustainability transformations.

4.5.4. Recommended actions

Learn by doing

Recognize opportunities for exploration of practical alternatives

Look for moments where small changes can be tested without major risks. This might mean, for example, having a specific day for local government and community to collaborate in a clean-up day, piloting a small rain garden in a limited area of a public space or running a small participatory budget exercise. Not every action needs to be perfect or fully planned in advance. Waiting too long can result in “analysis paralysis” where nothing happens and people might get frustrated. Instead, see pilots as safe spaces to try things out, learn and adapt. The key is to move from ideas to practice quickly, even if outcomes are uncertain.

Co-design short-term and low-complexity interventions

Start with manageable pilots that are directly connected to the long-term vision and trajectories, but simple enough to test.

Work with local people and organizations and users to design interventions and, whenever possible, to implement them. This could be done through workshops, simulation exercises or simple mock-ups of interventions in the public space. Keep the scope small (for example, one site, one route, one public square) so it is easy to manage and adapt. Always plan with accessibility and safety in mind and secure the necessary approvals.

Plan MEL from the start

MEL should be built into the pilot from the beginning, not added afterward. Decide



Documenting experiences and sharing them widely ensures that insights from individual projects contribute to broader governance strategies, moving learning beyond isolated interventions.

León, Mexico: community members revitalize a public space through painting sidewalks, tree planting and installing urban furniture in August 2023, reclaiming the area to encourage community use, gathering and connection. © Héctor Ríos

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early how you will know whether the project is successful. Combine numbers (like data from sensors or counts) with stories (for example, interviews, photos or reflections). Build in short reflection sessions during the pilot to make real-time adjustments.

Budget and resource realistically

Make a clear budget that distinguishes between one-off costs (materials, permits or services) and recurring ones (maintenance, community time). Ensure local people and organizations are fairly compensated for their contributions, whether those are specialized skills, services, knowledge or time. Also account for the conditions that enable participation, such as transport, refreshments, materials, childcare, et cetera.

Develop capacities

A pilot is also a chance to build people’s capacities. Provide training to develop the technical skills of community leaders and volunteers so they can confidently take part in the planning and implementation. Use checklists and guides to make tasks easier and run small tests of the intervention before the full launch, allowing the coalition to learn from practice. Beyond the pilot, cultivate teamwork, leadership and communication, which will strengthen the place-based coalition for future projects.

Collaborative project implementation

Put the plan into action in a collaborative way. In many places, collective voluntary workdays can be powerful opportunities for collective action, where people come together to implement a project, such as rehabilitating a square, cleaning a canal, planting trees on a hillside or running an evacuation drill. Joint implementation and engaging people in the process is not only about results but also about building a sense of ownership, pride and shared responsibility among participants.

Promote reflections about the innovations and alternatives

After the pilot, take time to reflect with all involved citymakers on what worked, what did not and why. Document lessons learned and share results broadly, particularly with the affected community. Create spaces for peer exchanges with other neighbourhoods or cities so that experiences can inspire and inform new pilots elsewhere. Reflection and sharing can turn one small project into a stepping stone for broader transformations.

The pilot project should be understood as one step in a broader trajectory towards the coalition’s shared vision, rather than as a stand-alone effort. Its main value lies in generating lessons and insights that inform future actions. By prototyping

low-complexity interventions, the coalition can identify new opportunities and build confidence to test additional approaches. This iterative learning process helps the coalition expand its ambitions over time and encourages further exploration.

Learn from doing

Lay the groundwork for participatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

MEL activities should begin alongside the development of the vision and trajectories, as described in [Sections 4.3](#) and [4.4](#), to ensure alignment between goals and measurement. A practical approach is to co-create a theory of change that explicitly links local actions to short-term outcomes and long-term transformation. A theory of change also builds on the understanding of the territory and should explain how the planned interventions will promote significant changes.

From the beginning, it is important to train and empower local citymakers so they can lead participatory monitoring. This means developing skills to collect data, engage residents and interpret results. When the people that are directly affected take the lead, monitoring becomes more relevant and trusted.

Set up adequate indicators

Work with coalition members to decide what will be measured and why. The enablers described in [Chapter 3](#) can help define indicators that are relevant to the local context and meaningful for tracking system change. Avoid creating too many indicators, which can lead to “analysis paralysis.” Instead, focus on a mix of simple but useful measures that balance feasibility and depth. Between 5 and 10 well-chosen indicators is often the sweet spot, while more than 10 becomes hard to manage for a coalition. Revisit and adapt them regularly so they remain relevant as challenges and opportunities evolve.

Define data collection methods

Decide where the data will come from and how you will obtain it. Start by using existing local and national data sets (such as demographics, emission inventories or climate records) to establish a baseline. Then, clarify how new data will be gathered, who will collect it and how often. Use a mix of approaches: technical assessments (like sensors and surveys), community-driven methods (such as community-led surveys and focus groups) and creative tools (like photovoice, that uses photo documentation to empower individuals). Keep the process accessible by combining digital tools, like WhatsApp for quick updates, with low-tech options for those without internet access. Make sure data is easy to understand and use for everyone involved, from community members to policymakers.

Strengthen collaborative partnerships

Work with research institutions, universities or think tanks to improve the quality and credibility of your data. These partners can help refine methods and support analysis, although it is important that the process remains grounded in local realities. Encourage all partners to question their own assumptions and biases. Acknowledging power dynamics and diverse perspectives helps to ensure that MEL is inclusive and genuinely supports transformation. This collaboration can take various forms: as citizen science projects, through community engagement led by research organizations or via individual researchers contributing their expertise.

Cultivate safe spaces for shared learning

Dedicate time and resources for people to reflect together, share experiences and learn from one another on regular intervals. This can happen through local workshops, peer exchanges between different communities or participation in national and international events. Treat failure as a valuable source of learning and an opportunity to improve strategies.

Document and disseminate lessons

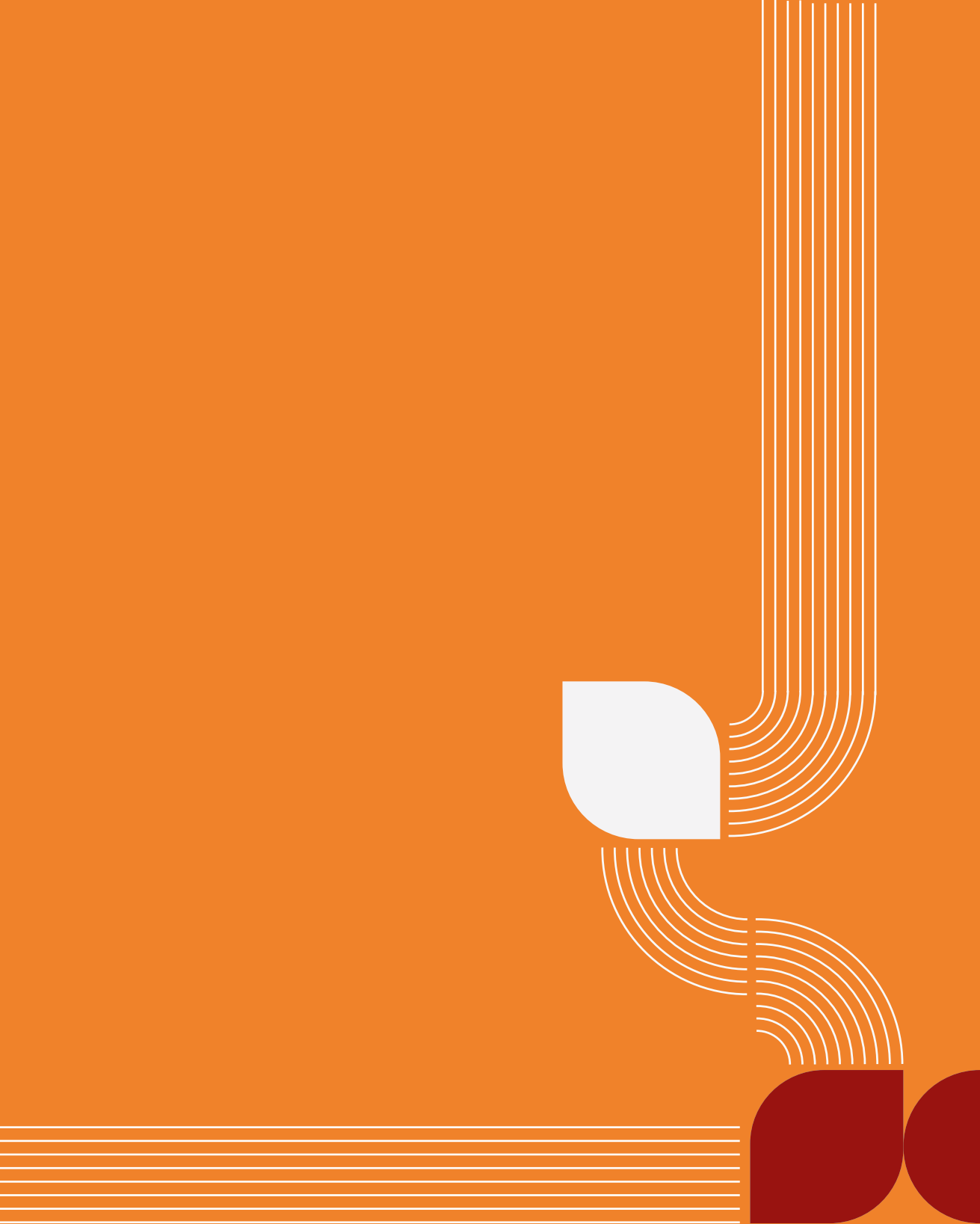
Regularly report on progress in ways that are clear, accessible and engaging. Use formats that reach different audiences: plain-language pamphlets for communities, short videos or infographics for social media and policy briefs for decision makers. Share lessons widely to inspire others and help ensure that successful practices influence broader policies and long-term urban transformation strategies. Actively involving policymakers and other stakeholders in dissemination can also improve the likelihood of results being sustained and scaled up.

Local interventions can make a big difference for communities by improving daily life and

showing that change is possible. They can also spark imagination about alternative futures. But local change has its limits: sometimes broader conditions, such as city-wide policies or national regulations, can constrain what is possible. To keep transformation moving, it is important to think about how lessons learned locally can be shared, adapted and applied across different contexts and scales. We suggest five ways to spread and amplify impact: embed changes into existing structures, translate lessons so they fit new contexts, replicate successful approaches in similar settings, scale up when possible to reach wider audiences or larger geographies and scale down to make broad strategies practical at the local level.

Toolbox

To learn by doing and learn from doing, you can use the tools in the toolbox for this step, along with any other methods you know. The goal is to enable continuous learning and adaptation within the coalition by testing ideas in practice, reflecting on successes and failures and improving strategies through iterative cycles of exploration, monitoring, evaluation and learning. Suggested tools include **collaborative murals, demonstration activities, harvesting achievements, mutirão, participatory monitoring and evaluation and perception surveys**.



5

Invitation to weave new futures

The process described in this guidebook is an ongoing cycle where actions are tested, reflected upon and improved. Coalitions may often need to return to earlier steps, rethink choices and adjust strategies. This back-and-forth movement is not a failure, but allows each new attempt to build on what was learned before. Over time, this way of working makes local groups stronger and better equipped to create meaningful change in their own communities.

At its core, the guidebook is an invitation to dialogue among different people and organizations that contribute to making better cities every day.

Urban transformation is never neutral or purely technical. It always involves negotiation, conflict, choices and power. By opening space for discussion, place-based coalitions can ensure that different voices are heard and that decisions reflect shared priorities. This political dimension is essential: it reminds us that climate solutions should not only solve environmental challenges but also strengthen fairness, trust and cooperation among people.

Another important element is the ability to dream and imagine. Many of our cities today are shaped by limits and scarcity: of resources, opportunities or imagination. This prevents new innovative solutions from emerging. By reclaiming the capacity to envision different futures, coalitions can break away from these constraints. Imagining a better future is not only an exercise in creativity but also a tool for mobilization, giving people hope and motivation to act together. Dreams that are dreamed collectively can be the start of something bigger. Change is part of our lives. The more proactively we deal with it, the more we can use it to our advantage.

Transformation is necessary. The challenges of climate change and inequality in our cities require structural changes in how we live, build and govern our cities. But these transformations should also be fair and inclusive. A just transformation ensures that no group is left behind and that the benefits of change are shared by all.



Recife, Brazil: Urban Lab members come together in a mutirão to bring the Childhood Route (Rota da Infância) in Comunidade do Pilar to life through tactical urbanism interventions, October 2023.
© Marília Farias / WRI Brasil

Finally, this guidebook is also a call to action for all kinds of citymakers:

- **For local governments:** To move closer to the communities served. To foster transparency, openness to innovation and co-creation by actively engaging with residents in decision-making and policymaking, especially those most affected by climate and inequality. Through these efforts, local governments can set an example for higher levels of government to rebuild public trust and demonstrate what responsive, just governance looks like.
- **For local communities and marginalized groups:** To step forward as co-designers of change. To assert your unique knowledge and lived experience. To participate in coalitions, articulate priorities and help hold institutions accountable. Your voices and ideas are essential in shaping fair and effective solutions. True transformation will only happen with your leadership at the centre.
- **For researchers and experts:** To bridge technical and local knowledge. To translate complexity into accessible insights and help guide exploration of alternatives and learning. To support coalitions in measuring progress, adapting interventions and documenting what works, always with humility and in partnership, not as external authorities. To, together with citymakers, use data and analysis to shape larger national, regional and international research and policy agendas.
- **For the private sector:** To invest in innovation that meets both commercial and community needs and to help pilot new models for resource sharing, circularity and workforce transition. To contribute skills, resources and creativity to coalitions focused on equitable and sustainable urban futures. Opportunities and synergies for investments and job creation are likely to exist.
- **For NGOs and practitioners:** To facilitate dialogue and capacity-building. To act as connectors across sectors, championing inclusion and justice. To advocate for the scaling of proven practices and help broker collaboration, ensuring that marginalized voices remain central from agenda-setting to implementation and evaluation.

For all citymakers, test the ideas of this guidebook, adapt them to your local context and share your experiences with others. In doing so, the material itself will continue to evolve, enriched by new perspectives and practices. Through exchange and collaboration, we can make the collective effort towards more just and climate-resilient cities stronger.

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