

# Innovating with urban governance: municipal committees for inclusive, nature-based solutions

Isabel Ferreira<sup>1</sup>, Beatriz Caitana<sup>2</sup> and Nathalie Nunes<sup>3</sup>



Source: Vitório Leite (2020)

## Abstract

This policy brief explores the challenges and innovative opportunities for institutionalising participatory processes within municipal contexts. Specifically, we report on the creation of municipal committees, a proposal framed within the EU-funded project URBiNAT aimed at co-creating healthy corridors made up of a combination of nature-based solutions (NBS). The proposed committees aim to consolidate citizens' engagement in the process of co-creating NBS, by offering opportunities for: cooperation and co-production between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders; building consensus through possibilities to influence, negotiate and deliberate on decisions; handling emerging conflicts, dissensus and disagreement.

## About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

## Introduction

Healthy corridors in URBiNAT are nature-based solutions (NBS), developed as clusters that, in addition to green space, also emphasise social initiatives promoting territorial cohesion in deprived urban areas. The co-creation approach of healthy corridors in each URBiNAT city raised the need to introduce innovations in the existing governance models.

Municipal committees would gather citizens, municipal decision-makers and researchers in a regular and formal governance structure that is dedicated to making decisions collaboratively. These decisions aim to guide the implementation, production and monitoring of NBS, such as the territorial green walls and the social currency for a nature-based circular economy.<sup>4</sup>

The proposed committees aim to consolidate citizens' engagement by redirecting the energy and efforts generated at early stages of diagnostic and design in the process of co-creating NBS towards production and monitoring stages, as well as decision-making moments where

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, researcher, co-coordinator at H2020 project URBiNAT; isabelferreira@ces.uc.pt

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, sociologist and researcher, co-coordinator at H2020 project URBiNAT; beatrizcaitana@ces.uc.pt

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, researcher, co-coordinator at H2020 project URBiNAT; nathalienunes@ces.uc.pt

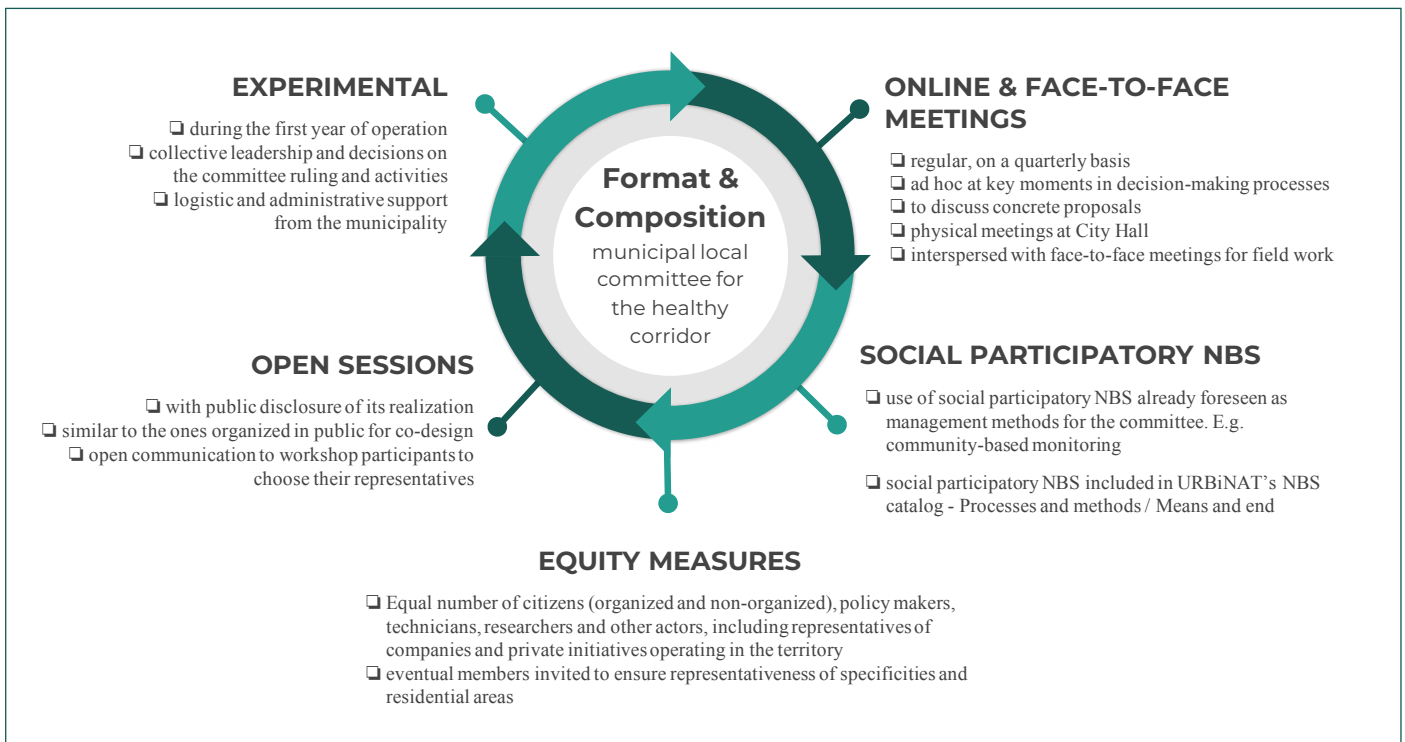
<sup>4</sup> NBS are solutions that seek to respond to social, economic and environmental challenges through sustainable alternatives. It relates to actions inspired, supported or produced from nature, strengthening existing solutions or exploring new solution models (European Commission, 2014).

URBiNAT aims to co-create healthy corridors with residents and stakeholders in areas under urban regeneration. Through its Community of Practice, the work carried out in URBiNAT is being implemented in seven European cities and beyond, making the most of different understandings and knowledges, based on co-creation and innovation in urban governance. URBiNAT is a five-year EU Horizon 2020-funded project running from 2018 to 2023. The project has three Frontrunner cities, Porto, Nantes and Sofia, based on their innovative use of public space through nature-based solutions (NBS), and four Follower cities, Siena, Nova Gorica, Brussels and Høje-Taastrup, sharing their knowledge and replicating URBiNAT concepts and methodologies. For more information see: <https://urbinat.eu/>.

engagement is less common. The committees institutionalize the collaborative interactions among citizens, municipal decision-makers and researchers.

The figure below illustrates the main characteristics of the proposed committee format and composition, namely:

- experimental;
- online and face-to-face meetings;
- open sessions;
- use of social participatory nature-based solutions, such as cultural mapping;
- guarantee equal opportunity of participation to all stakeholders;
- inclusive forms of interaction, through recognition of differences and adoption of equity measures;
- balanced number of participants among the different actors mobilised (technicians, politicians, researchers, citizens).



**Figure 1. Format and composition of municipal committee for nature-based inclusive and innovative urban regeneration projects**

Source: Figure elaborated by the authors of this policy brief

### **Benefits of establishing municipal committees**

At a co-creation stage where decision-making is intense, a municipal committee offers opportunities in particular for:

- cooperation and co-production between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders;
- building consensus through possibilities to influence, negotiate and deliberate on decisions;
- integrating and coping with emerging conflicts, dissensus and disagreement.

### **Citizen engagement at the crossroads**

Participation in URBiNAT is framed as a co-creation process that goes beyond the usual practice of urban planning, by involving municipalities, researchers, citizens and stakeholders. Active involvement is embedded in all stages to encourage ownership – these stages are co-diagnostic, co-design, co-implementation and co-monitoring (URBiNAT, 2018).

The objective is for citizens to implement their own solutions, according to their needs, specificities and ambitions. Much effort has been invested in citizens' engagement in the co-diagnostic and co-design stages, in a way that is tailored to the participatory culture of URBiNAT's front-runner cities (URBiNAT, 2019a; URBiNAT, 2019b). However, the intermediate analysis on citizens' influence in municipal decision-making is still not clear, in particular regarding negotiation, consensus-building and deliberation.

The conclusions from that analysis lead to deepen the research on how the municipal committees function, with a focus on these questions:

- What are the technical and political obstacles and opportunities?
- How can municipal decision-makers and technicians be given more visibility and voice in the process of reforming representative democracy?
- What are the norms, values and communication codes that need to be transformed or activated for co-decision?
- How can codes of conduct and arenas of interaction be developed that lead to active participation?
- What are the steps for a roadmap from a project-oriented participation towards a public policy for participation?





**Figure 2. Participatory activity gathering together citizens and municipal technicians in Porto**  
Source: Vitório Leite (2020)



**Figure 3. Sidestepping inspiration from Nantes, the 2019 European capital of innovation, which has developed a vision and practice of open governance in permanent dialogue with citizens, associations and experts**  
Source: Bronze sculpture of L'Éloge du Pas de Côté by artist Philippe Ramette. Image: ID 123061310  
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The proposal of municipal committees for the healthy corridors of URBiNAT cities aims to experiment with innovation in urban governance. These include new ways of working together (Figure 2); going beyond usual practices and comfort zones (Figure 3); and making the most of different understandings and knowledges for co-creation (Figure 4).

## COMBINED METHODOLOGY

### Mapping local participatory cultures and process-oriented evaluation

The methodological approach, applied in the three URBiNAT front-runner cities (Porto in Portugal, Sofia in Bulgaria and Nantes in France), is based on mapping local participatory cultures and process-oriented evaluation. The methodology was applied in the pilot case of Porto, with a deeper research approach, and then confirmed in all the other URBiNAT cities.

1. The mapping of local participatory cultures focuses on the research of participatory initiatives – formal and informal – led by citizens and the municipality, the identification of active organisations, and the analysis of participatory culture. It is applied by means of interviews and documentation revision (Ferreira, ongoing PhD research). It is inspired by cultural mapping, a field of interdisciplinary research and a methodological tool in participatory planning and community development. Cultural mapping consists of collecting, recording, analysing and synthesizing information to describe the cultural resources, networks, links and patterns of usage of a given community or group (Stewart, 2007). The fieldwork was performed from September 2018 to October 2019, by means of semi-structured interview questionnaire. It was applied in the pilot case of Porto, through meetings with stakeholders (including 5 with municipality departments, 5 with schools, local organizations and associations, 2 meetings/workshops with the municipality at political level and with technicians and 3 workshops with local organisations and associations). It was then confirmed in all the other URBiNAT cities through the same semi-structured interview questionnaire responded by 1 representative of the municipal local teams (URBiNAT, 2019a, 2019b).
2. The process-oriented evaluation includes ongoing interviews, direct observations and focus groups. It combines data collection and interpretation methods, assessing and describing results achieved in the participatory and co-creation process. Observations of participatory activities of co-diagnostic and co-design stages, as well as the semi-directive interviews conducted with municipal technicians, local associations, citizens, researchers and politicians,



Figure 4. Communicating technical discourse with citizens in Sofia: open-air exhibition and discussion on the local diagnostic for a healthy corridor in the Nadezhda district

Source: URBiNAT, University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy.

Image: Bozhidar Petrov (2019)

revealed different voices, perceptions, expectations and experiences of participation in the URBiNAT inclusive urban regeneration project. The results presented in this policy brief focus on in-depth interviews with participants of the co-creation process in the pilot case of Porto. Eight interviews were conducted between March and October 2020 as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the co-creation process. These interviews were divided into four categories of stakeholders: citizens, municipal technicians, researchers and political representatives.



## RESEARCH, RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

### **Understanding the local participatory culture, tailoring community-driven processes, and developing strategies to increase participation**

The results from the mapping approach were instrumental to developing community-driven processes tailored to local participatory cultures. They also helped to foster an understanding of the need for a municipal roadmap for the co-creation of nature-based solutions. This roadmap includes: 1) tracking the complex decision-making process within the municipal governance structures; 2) improving the level of understanding and commitment among citizens, politicians, technicians, researchers and practitioners; 3) generating new governance structures. Among these new governance structures, the municipal committees are particularly useful for supporting the decision-making processes.

The three URBiNAT front-runner cities (Porto, Sofia and Nantes) offer a diversity of contexts and local participatory cultures, paving the way for different formats for participatory processes. In Porto, the participatory practices promoted by the municipality in the intervention area have consultative formats. In Nantes, participation was adopted early in 2008, creating a participatory context that includes a number of tools to facilitate the engagement of residents. In Sofia, since the inauguration of the Green Sofia programme in 2011, the interaction with residents with regard to NBS has increased.

To be community-driven, the process must focus on raising the intensity of interactions among citizens, organisations and other stakeholders (URBiNAT, 2019b).

### **Challenges to increase participation**

Our research on NBS co-creation processes reveals the following challenges that arise when attempting to increase participation:

- What happens between and after participatory activities?
- How can these processes be made sustainable?
- How can expectations be managed after a strong initial momentum?
- How can this energy be channelled into concrete, actionable projects?

Additionally, the qualitative intermediate results highlighted several challenges and opportunities in the participatory process, which confirm the relevance of municipal committees, namely:

- 1.** The existence of disciplinary barriers among practitioners, architects and social science researchers, which hinder co-production.
- 2.** The government's prioritisation of technical projects over the needs of the participatory process – that is, over issues of interest for the community.
- 3.** Meetings to manage critical points and redesign strategies between different partners.
- 4.** Bureaucratic and technical discourses associated with the vertical hierarchy of governance.
- 5.** Community-based discourses, reflecting the negotiation relationship between stakeholders.
- 6.** Distrust in relation to completing the project, based on previous experiences that did not meet the expectations of the community.

A key goal of our research was to identify the kinds of structural changes that could be introduced to address these challenges and therefore improve the conditions for co-creating NBS and healthy corridors. Municipal committees that operate at the municipal level, integrating citizens, politicians and technicians, are an interesting space of participation for approaching those challenges.

As highlighted in comparative research (Ferreira, ongoing PhD research), committees constitute a formal space for dialogue, interknowledge and learning about the diverse interests of citizens, municipal technicians and politicians, as noted in the case of the City of Ottawa Arts, Heritage and Culture Advisory Committee during the elaboration of the Ottawa 20/20 Arts and Heritage Plan Renewal. The committees facilitate and strengthen the quality of the interactions between the State and non-governmental organisations, helping to deepen democracy and strengthen civil society.

As illustrated in Figure 5, our research on committees shows how they enable:

- citizens, whether organised or non-organised, to enter a space normally reserved for planners and decision-makers, expanding the interaction between technical decision-makers, politicians and citizens;
- opportunities for practices of 'learning-by-doing', speaking, leading and negotiating;
- wider networks of contacts, influence and participation;
- strengthened complementarity between participatory dynamics and representative dynamics of the democratic local system;
- informal intermediation by the members of the committee, bringing the different interests of the citizens with whom they live.

Independently of the format, these interaction spaces are important because they can:

- 1.** improve the quality of democracy;
- 2.** increase the culture of participation in the URBiNAT cities.

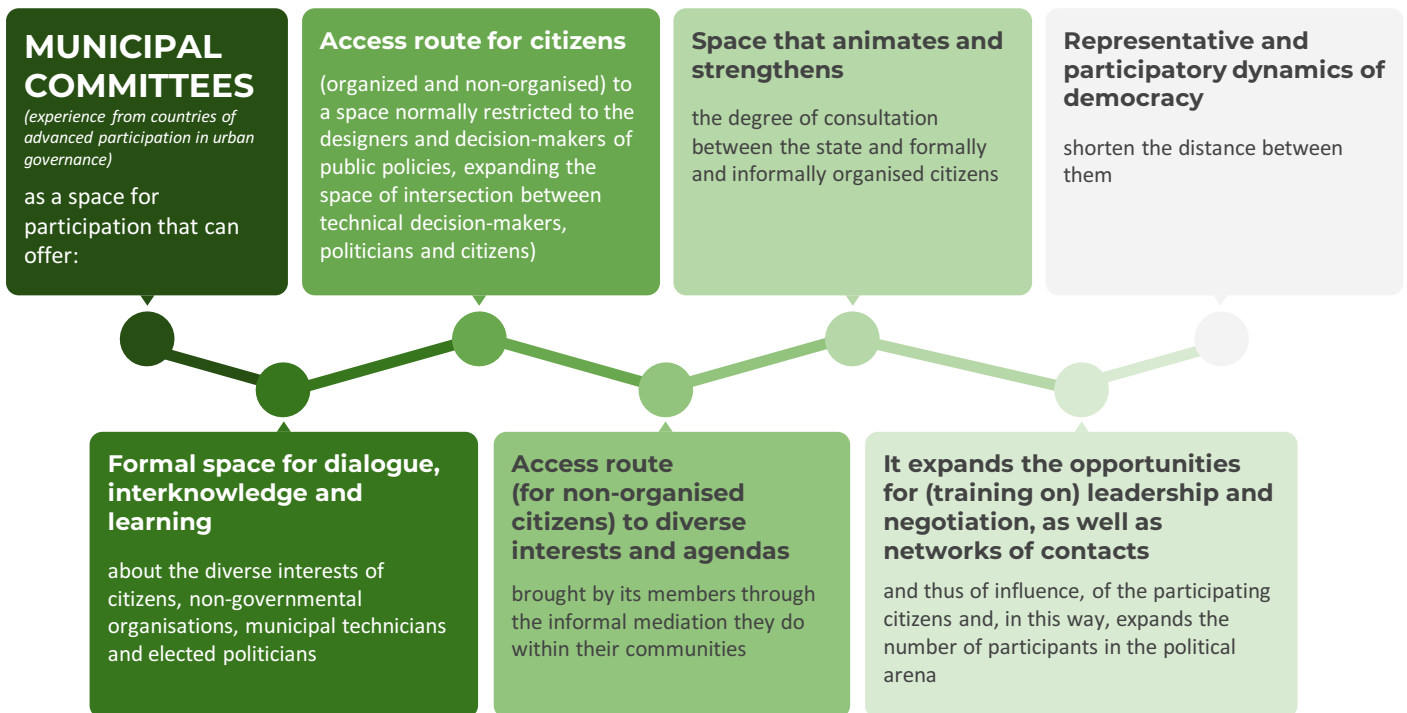


Figure 5. Municipal committees – spaces for interaction and intermediation  
Source: Ferreira, ongoing PhD research.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Relevance, format and composition of municipal committees for inclusive and innovative nature-based urban regeneration projects

In URBiNAT, although participation through citizens' initiative is welcome, participation by invitation (Blas & Ibarra, 2006; Bussu, 2019) predominates, or happens in spaces where the municipal initiative sets the tone.

In this context, co-creation is particularly challenging. As the intermediate results mentioned above suggest, co-creation within a municipal context requires participants to face the obstacles, resistance and sense of resignation that is felt by citizens, public and private organisations, politicians, technicians and researchers, in different ways and levels.

In order to fulfil the potential for exercising active citizenship for an inclusive urban regeneration, URBiNAT cities need to open up to innovation in their governance structures.

Based on our research, we propose that the following criteria be applied to guide and assess the effective use of participatory processes within urban innovation:



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

1. How do you integrate diversity measures in the participatory processes led by your government?
2. How can municipal policies from your government benefit from opportunities to negotiate and deliberate on decisions with citizens, local organizations and other stakeholders?
3. How do you monitor the inclusiveness of the participatory processes led by your government?

- I. the inclusion of a diversity of participants (e.g. by open call to invite members and, if needed, inviting targeted citizens to guarantee representativeness of specificities, such as gender, age, immigrants, ethnicity and racial diversity, etc.);
- II. the continued expansion of opportunities for discursive interaction (Bussu, 2019), as generated during co-diagnostic and co-design stages of the participatory process. All the actors should be involved to experiment and widen participation through dialogue, debate and discussion, both among participants and between participants and municipal actors (e.g. by establishing rules for equal distribution for time of speech and harnessing these rules to equal number of voting positions to organized and non-organized citizens, policy makers, technicians, researchers and other actors);
- III. cooperation and co-production between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders (ibid.; Pestoff, 2012; Peters & Pierre, 2018) (e.g. by co-organizing initiatives as solidarity markets or recreation activities in public spaces);
- IV. consensus-building through possibilities to influence, negotiate and deliberate on decisions (Bussu, 2019) (e.g. by recognising and legitimizing the process of co-creation, giving more room for citizens to actively lead the process of, for instance, publicly present the co-created results; also by openly and regularly monitoring discursive, negotiating and deliberative opportunities);
- V. integrate and handle emerging conflicts, dissensus and disagreement (e.g. by welcoming comments/ suggestions/ questions that, while not planned or expected, have a relation to the topics in the agenda or offer an unconventional perspective or contrary view; also by scheduling additional meetings to discuss these perspectives and views).

The creation of a municipal committee is particularly relevant for policy-makers in that it establishes a favourable environment to achieving criteria iii), iv) and v), where the decision-making process is particularly intense regarding shaping a healthy corridor. In this context, different understandings and knowledge may converge and co-produce new hybrid knowledge”.

Moreover, our research shows that committees can play a key role in monitoring and evaluating the NBS implementation process and the healthy corridors, taking advantage of participatory methods and processes such as community-based monitoring (Allegretti et al., 2014).

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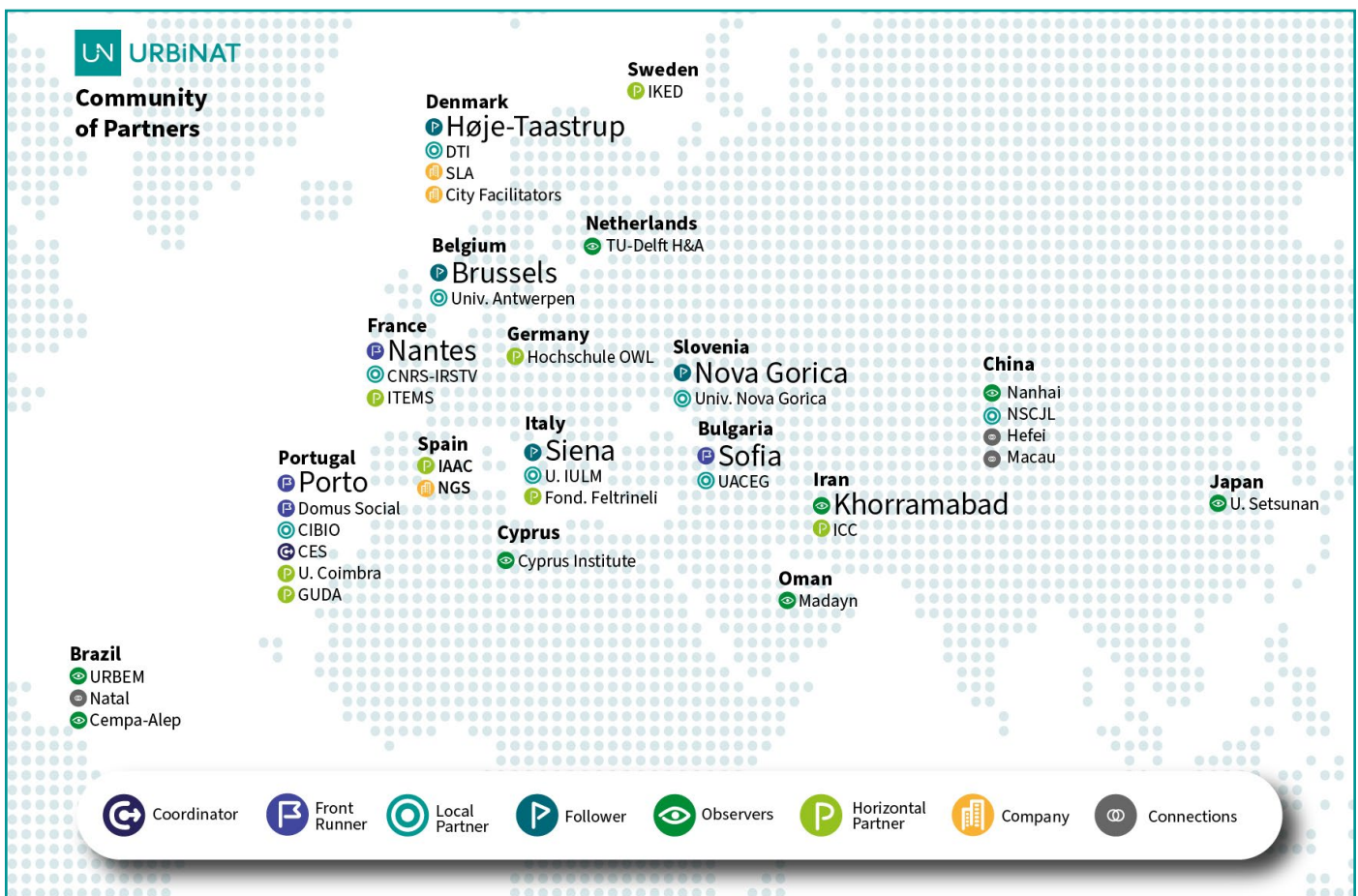
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**URBiNAT FUNDING AND OVERVIEW**

The URBiNAT project [Urban Inclusive and Innovative Nature] is funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme from 2018 to 2023, and focuses on urban regeneration of social housing neighbourhoods as intervention areas, through the co-creation of healthy corridors, as a flexible combination of nature-based solutions (NBS) in public spaces.

Seven European cities – Porto, Sofia, Nantes, Brussels, Høje-Taastrup, Nova Gorica and Siena – have joined the consortium to activate local Living Labs and to build a Community of Practice, in which municipalities, universities, companies and citizens work together.

[www.urbinat.eu](http://www.urbinat.eu)



URBiNAT’s Community of Practice  
Source: URBiNAT



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## Contact details

Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

Visiting address Söderväg 1D, 621 58 Visby

Telephone +46 498-29 91 00

E-mail [info@icld.se](mailto:info@icld.se)

Web [www.icld.se](http://www.icld.se)



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