

Fostering Nature Building Communities (NbC) for the long-term management of NbS in Szombathely, Hungary



The city of Szombathely, Hungary, implemented a school-based nature-based solution by greening the inner courtyard of Dési Huber István Elementary School. Like many public schools in Szombathely, the schoolyard had been built decades ago and was largely dominated by asphalt and concrete, serving primarily functional purposes and offering limited shade, greenery, or opportunities for diverse outdoor activities. As climate change intensifies, such environments contribute to heat stress, reduced comfort, and limited usability during warmer periods.

To address these challenges, the city aimed to foster nature-positive attitudes and climate awareness among younger generations while creating a healthier and more heat-resilient environment. In this context, Szombathely, a city of approximately 78,000 inhabitants, focused on transforming a primary school courtyard used daily by children and teachers.

The project replaced an asphalt surface with permeable soil and raised beds for use by children, parents, elderly residents, and school staff. The municipality had no prior culture of collaboration, but under the JUSTNature project, it decided to work collaboratively with teachers, pupils, parents, and local community members to design and implement the NbS, ensuring the solution matched everyday needs. The municipal team organised participatory workshops to shape the courtyard vision, develop the NbS concept, and evaluate the proposed design. School staff acted as facilitators, supported by a symbolic, one-time financial incentive, and by early managers; they included children of all ages and abilities, with children aged 10–11 particularly engaged.

The raised beds were successfully built. The result is a greener courtyard that cools the air, absorbs rainwater, and supports plants

and wildlife. New trees, shrubs, and hedges provide shade, while permeable surfaces improve drainage. The yard now includes a Kneipp footpath for sensory play, four raised beds for growing food, educational boards, and a small hedge labyrinth. Even in a small space, the design shows how nature-based solutions can enhance children's wellbeing, learning, and climate resilience, while fostering community ties. Students enthusiastically use the new features and this attracted the attention of many actors. Seeing these benefits, the municipality, prompted by its local partner ABUD, looked beyond construction and adopted a collaborative model for long-term maintenance and management.

With the support of JUSTNature partners, Szombathely was the first city in the project to develop and test the concept of Nature-Building Communities (NbCs)—voluntary local networks that help develop, restore, and manage urban ecosystems linked to NbS sites. The municipality partnered with existing initiatives such as a DIY club and a cooking club to integrate the NbC into extracurricular activities. The alliance grew around a shared commitment among students, teachers, parents, and school staff to maintain and activate the green areas. Motivation came from hands-on learning, outdoor activities, and climate education, and herbs and vegetables from the beds are being used in lessons and school events, strengthening the link between environmental care and everyday learning.

The school year opened with a formal handover of the greened courtyard to the school community. Ownership and strategic decisions remain with the municipality and the School District. The NbC has autonomy over daily tasks, while major changes require approval from the headmaster or School District. More complex maintenance is carried out by school personnel,



who remain responsible for irrigation, ensuring that responsibilities are shared and not placed only on the school or residents.

The collaboration with the NbC has proven supportive in responding to citizen feedback and strengthening long-term management. The actions developed throughout the project prompted valuable reflections and highlighted key aspects of experimenting with co-governance. The experience showed that schools can serve as effective starting points for Nature-Building Communities, although this requires deliberate effort. Clear agreements on roles and responsibilities, realistic expectations regarding contributions and autonomy, and continuous dialogue between municipal staff and local stewards are essential. Local

facilitators played a key role in enabling a more independent and collaborative process. The modest financial and symbolic compensation given played a major role in sustaining facilitators' motivation. These facilitators and project managers often needed to invest considerable effort in the early phases to address doubts, build trust, and demonstrate tangible results, and this support brought recognition and helped keep participants engaged and motivated over time.

"In Hungary, being a former socialist country, for about 40 years there were no civil organisations, and small communities were forbidden. We have to relearn it, and the important thing to keep in mind is that nothing is impossible. If you want to achieve something new and get a no for your first question, don't take it very seriously, but try it in a different way". Ágnes Györfy, City of Szombathely, Hungary.



KEY MESSAGES

- Schools can serve as effective entry points for Nature-Building Communities, but this requires clear roles, realistic expectations, and ongoing dialogue.
- Local facilitators are crucial for enabling collaboration and should be supported, including through modest compensation.
- Early phases require significant effort to build trust, address uncertainties, and demonstrate tangible results, but early engagement and visible results can foster long-term care of the NbS.
- Balanced, continuous support, and dialogue are necessary to initiate and sustain long-term engagement and stewardship.