



Interreg



Danube Transnational Programme

URBforDAN

**Del. 5.1.2 Joint Evaluation Report on Activities
Implemented in Selected UPF Areas
(including lessons learned and best practices)**



Developed by the City of Ljubljana and ZaVita d.o.o.

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Annex 1 – URBforDAN Self-evaluation Form - Step 6

Glossary of Acronyms and Terms

ES	Ecosystem Services
IMMP	Integrated Multi-use Management Plan(s)
LP / PP	Lead Partner / Project Partner
SFS	Slovenia Forest Service
UPF	Urban and Peri-urban Forest(s)
WP	Work Package

1. Introduction

1.1. About the URBforDAN Project

Management and Utilization of Urban Forests as Natural Heritage in Danube Cities (with acronym URBforDAN) is an EU co-financed project, which was designed to deliver a change in urban forest management and utilization of ecosystem services. URBforDAN project is being implemented in 7 Danube Cities – Ljubljana (SLO), Vienna (AT), Budapest (HUN), Zagreb (CRO), Cluj-Napoca (ROM), Belgrade (SRB) and Ivano-Frankivsk (UA). Its' implementation is closely observed by 3 associated partner cities – Prague (CZE), Sarajevo (BIH) and Podgorica (MNE), as well as by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Urban and Peri-urban Forests (UPF) in Danube Cities play extremely important role as “green city lungs” - preserving rich biodiversity of Europe and its vivid landscape. They also deliver many economically/socially important ecosystem services – UPF are key areas for experiencing natural/cultural heritage within cities, important tourist attractions, areas for recreation and high quality of living.

All URBforDAN Cities face similar challenges – all manage substantial NH areas (mostly UPF) within their city limits. Due to their characteristics they attract many users (citizens, tourists...), but also have many stakeholders (managers, owners, interest groups...) trying to manage those activities. Today, this is usually done without proper coordination of all stated key actors. UPF also lack appropriate infrastructure and equipment to cope with ever increasing number of users. Thus, UPF are under increasing pressure from diverse set of activities, arising conflicts and unsustainable use of resources – all leading to poor state of NH. Management of UPF in some cities is further challenged by the extreme fragmentation of the ownership (which is often mostly private).

This is why URBforDAN takes on the challenge of mobilization of key actors in URBforDAN Cities to ensure their active participation in integrated planning/management. Protection regimes, mapping/valuation of ecosystem services and development ideas will be combined through a participatory process to deliver Integrated multi-use Management Plans for UPF on strategic and operational level. UPF Danube Network will be established to strengthen the cooperation between key actors, ensure timely knowledge/best-practice sharing, dissemination/transferability of project outputs and enable further capitalization. UPF managers, owners and users will be equipped with management tools supporting multi-purpose use of UPF and exploiting new opportunities for sustainable development. Participatory Planning & UPF Management Guidelines will be developed, based on lessons learned and best practices used.

1.2. About URBforDAN Utilization of Ecosystem Services

The subject of this evaluation is the whole URBforDAN Utilization of Ecosystem Services process – represented by URBforDAN WP5 activities, alongside with its overlaps with WP3 and WP4. The key aim of this report is not only to present and explain the URBforDAN Utilization of Ecosystem Services process, but also learn from it and improve it based on lessons learnt.

This document represents a deliverable “D.5.1.2. Joint evaluation report on activities implemented in selected UPF areas (including lessons learned and best practices)” of the URBforDAN Project. It was designed and developed by the City of Ljubljana and a team of external experts from the company ZaVita d.o.o. tasked to provide expert support to the City of Ljubljana (Lead Partner) and the URBforDAN Partnership.

2. Reasons behind the need for utilization of ecosystem services

Urban lifestyle is fast and intensive, thus vast numbers of citizens and visitors actively search for places to relax from daily stress. Often, there is no time for “the escape from the city”, so they look for alternatives. Traditionally, they find them in Urban and Peri-urban Forests (UPF).

Their status of “green city lungs” is the main reason why UPF in 7 project partner Cities (covering over 35 km²) have so-far survived all urbanization pressures relatively intact. However, multiplication of activities and increasing numbers of citizens (6,5 mio in 7 cities) and visitors (over 15 mio per year in 7 cities) put UPF under unprecedented pressures. Even if many of UPF are protected as natural and cultural heritage areas, inappropriate management, overuse and poor coordination between key actors’ plague most of UPF today.

City of Ljubljana, being The Green Capital of Europe 2016, composed the transnational URBforDAN partnership in order to capitalize on its so-far achievements and present new standards in sustainable and participatory UPF management.

Through introduction of the participatory approach, URBforDAN project aimed to improve cooperation between key stakeholders and actively involve them in development of 7 Integrated Multi-use Management Plans (IMMP) – delivering not only improved UPF management and utilization of ecosystem services, but also a constructive dialogue with citizens and mind-change needed to resolve concrete conflicts.

It also aims to improve the current image of 7 UPF focus areas and turn them into places for socialization, relaxation, recreation, education and natural heritage experience for a diverse set of target groups. At the same time, it aims to diversify and enrich “the green content” of 7 URBforDAN cities through new and improved services and products, accessible on over 1.200 ha of UPF.

The key reason behind WP5 and utilization of ecosystem services was to make sure that “the theory, plans and ideas” are actually put into practice during the lifetime of the URBforDAN project and within its operational and financial framework. There were several reasons for that reasoning:

- ✓ To ensure first implementation steps of IMMPs are actually taken, thus showing in practice how operational parts of IMMPs should be implemented in practice, as well as making sure they will not be “forgotten in some drawer” after URBforDAN project ends.
- ✓ By doing so, people responsible for implementation of IMMPs were put in their future roles as “operational implementors” of IMMPs, embedding IMMPs in their mindsets, creating operational decision-making chains and standard operating procedures, empowering them for active implementation and creating ownership.
- ✓ Sending out a clear message from project partners to all stakeholders, that IMMPs will be implemented, that their participation and cooperation was not in vain – thus, reenforcing trust and expressing long-term commitment to operational UPF management. Furthermore, via best idea competition project partners clearly showed their citizens, that their ideas are taken seriously and that they can help in UPF management process – thus, building ownership and creating relationship between users and UPF. Subsequently, delivering the much-needed mind-change and change in behavior of UPF users.

3. Methodological approach

Selected UPF focus areas in 7 PP Cities were at the beginning of URBforDAN project were not or were poorly equipped with proper management tools or urban equipment, able to cope with ever increasing pressures. This is why WP5 aimed to implement management tools developed in WP4, set-up urban equipment, as well as diversify offer of UPF services and products to end users on over 700 ha of urban and peri-urban forests.



This improved UPF management, resolved many existing conflicts, mobilized key actors and ensured sustainable UPF development.

The overall methodological approach can be broken down into the following key stages:

- ✓ **Stage 1 – Implementation of activities in selected UPF areas** ensured installation of different types of urban equipment needed to manage and guide various activities already present in pre-selected UPF focus areas. For example, the following types of urban equipment were to be installed – entrance/info points, markings of trails (hiking, cycling...), rest areas (benches, tables, waste baskets...), outdoor recreation (fitness equipment, recreational polygons...), interpretation of natural heritage (quiet zones, bird-baths...), education in nature (educational paths & points, learning tools...), etc. All needed activities were identified in Operational parts of IMMPS developed in WP4 for each pre-selected UPF focus area and were implemented in line with them.
- ✓ **Stage 2 – Project ideas for 3 priority interventions were selected** for each pre-selected UPF focus area, based on a best idea open public tender competition held in all 7 cities. Citizens were encouraged to deliver innovative and attractive ideas. Appointed review committees selected 3 best ideas in each city and developed design concepts for them. Out of 21 design concepts a transnational level review board selected 3 transnational winners, which will be presented on the final conference.
- ✓ **Stage 3 - Experiencing UPF – Smartphone App**; the aim of this step was to provide a reliable and easily accessible navigation, information and awareness raising tool for users of all 7 each pre-selected UPF focus areas, as well as to promote URBforDAN cities and their efforts for improved management of UPF.

For easier understanding of WP5 and its most important links with other WPs, all stages and their steps are schematically presented on the URBforDAN development process model at the end of this chapter.

3.1. Activities in selected UPF areas

Step 1.1 – Preparation of detailed lists of needed urban equipment and its specifications

Every city was responsible to review the situation within its own selected focus area and prepare a detailed list of needed urban equipment. In majority of cases, such lists were prepared during field visits to selected focus areas within the process of development of Operational parts of IMMPs.

In the next step, experts were tasked to deliver [detailed specifications for specific elements of the urban equipment](#), while designers were in most cases used to [develop a common design for it](#). In some cases, cities decided to follow already existing specifications and design for the urban equipment, while others used this opportunity to prepare a comprehensive design to be further used in other UPF areas across cities. If [non-standard urban equipment](#) was planned (e.g. quiet zones, educational outdoor games and classrooms, etc.), special experts were used for its development and design.

Step 1.2 – Public tender procedures and sitting-up the urban equipment

Based on results from the previous step, responsible project partners developed the tender documentation and launched [public tenders for purchase of the urban equipment](#). Emphasis was given to the use of natural and whenever possible local materials. At the same time, in most cities, [quality assurance oversight](#) was selected (either internally or externally) in order to ensure delivery of appropriate urban equipment. Types, specifications and final design of the urban equipment was reported on by each city individually in reports, accessible on [the project website](#).

Step 1.3 – Official opening and promotion

Originally, urban equipment official opening events were planned in order to promote UPF and raise awareness amongst citizens. However, due to COVID-19 related restrictions, these events were either significantly reduced or moved on-line. Nonetheless, [all project partners made significant efforts to promote UPF, as well as newly installed equipment alongside with key messages for UPF users](#).

3.2. Project ideas for 3 priority interventions

Step 2.1 – Development and launch of the best idea competition

[Guidelines and a template for best idea competition was developed](#) by Slovenia Forest Service, to ensure structured, timely and comparable execution of the best idea competition in all 7 URBforDAN cities. These were discussed with all project partners, who were tasked to prepare [and launch public tenders](#), as well as to promote them via most suitable communication channels in each city. Tender documentation was composed out of tender instructions, scoring criteria and a simple [2-page idea description form to be filled out by citizens](#) and which could be returned in a digital or in a written form. The 1st page of the form was dedicated to a written description of the idea and the 2nd page was dedicated to its visual presentation. All received project ideas were collected and prepared for evaluation.

Step 2.2 – City-level best ideas selection process and development of their designs

A [city-level review committee](#) was formed from representatives of all project partners from the same city to assess all received best ideas. Official scoring criteria were pre-announced in the public tender in order to avoid any speculations. [3 best ideas on the city-level were selected](#) and their authors were awarded symbolic prizes. Furthermore, leading partner ensured unified best idea design templates and guideline, while responsible project partners in [each city hired external experts to develop these first designs](#). All designs were sent to Slovenia Forest service (charged to oversee this process), where they were prepared for the 2nd stage competition on the transnational level.

Step 2.3 – Transnational-level best ideas selection process

An [international review committee](#) was formed from representatives of all project partners to assess all received best ideas concepts from the national level. In order to avoid any speculations, review committee members could only vote for ideas from other countries. [3 best ideas on the trinational level were selected](#) and their authors will be invited to participate on the final project conference, where they will be awarded. All assessed best ideas will also be presented in a form of a poster session on the final conference.

3.3. Experiencing UPF – Smartphone App

Step 3.1 – Development of the Smartphone App

Due to multiplication of activities and increasing numbers of UPF visitors, [it was vital to ensure proper UPF presentation, as well as a navigation and awareness raising tool in a smart and easy way](#). In today's information rich environment and culture, it is important to harness the advantages of modern technologies and use them to our advantage.

URBforDAN project developed a smartphone App, which connected all 7 pre-selected UPF areas, as well as provided easily accessible information to UPF visitors. [The smartphone App contains the following contents:](#)

- ✓ Introductory page, where visitor selects one of the cities/focus areas;
- ✓ Presentation page of the focus area containing its general description and pictures from the area;
- ✓ Sub-page with the description of the city where the focus area is selected;
- ✓ Sub-page with a more detailed description of the selected focus area;
- ✓ Interactive map of the selected focus area for easier navigation with marked key points of interest;
- ✓ Entrance point information;
- ✓ Directions how to access the selected focus area with various options (e.g. by public transport, by bike, on foot, by car, etc.);
- ✓ An awareness raising quiz;
- ✓ Information about the URBforDAN project.

The App is [available in the English language for all focus areas, as well as in 7 national languages for specific focus areas on this link](#).

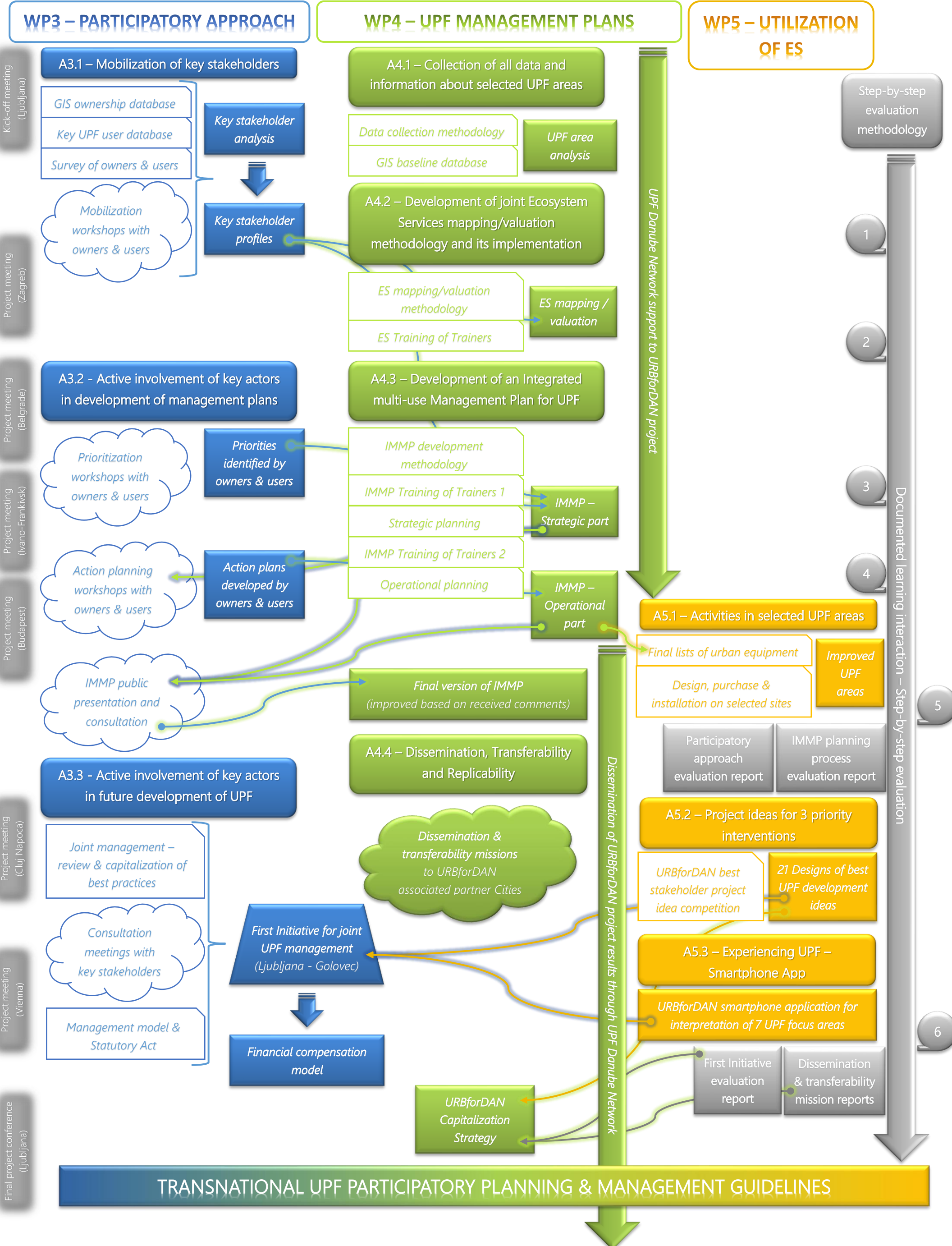
The App was developed under the supervision of the City of Belgrade by external experts. Its design and development process was quite long, and demanded lots of coordination between all project partners.

Firstly, experts prepared first design draft and provided templates for all cities to fill in. Base on received information, data, photos, etc. expert prepared the first version of the App and sent it for revision and commenting to all project partners. Such exchanges were repeated until all project partners were satisfied with contents of the App.

Secondly, the App was preliminary launched and tested by all project partners. Again, comments and suggestions for improvement were provided to experts from all project partners. After final improvements it was considered finalized. QR codes were developed and put on entrance points information boards in all focus areas, in order to make it easily accessible for UPF visitors.

URBforDAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS MODEL

(as implemented by an individual URBforDAN partner City)



4. Evaluation of the Utilization of Ecosystem Services

Evaluation of the implemented Utilization of Ecosystem Services was performed as a documented learning interaction – a continuous process that took place in parallel to other URBforDAN activities. It was especially strongly interlinked with the development process of the Integrated multi-use Management Plans (IMMPs).

After WP5 activities were completed, project partners were provided with a structured questionnaire in order to evaluate provided guidance, methodology, tools, as well as its operational execution and the level of success. Questionnaire not only documented the learning process, but also provided an important feedback of each implemented step in the process.

The main benefit of such approach was that the Core Management Team was able to monitor and evaluate effectiveness and efficiency after each key step and receive high quality feedback from project partners. At the same time, we were collecting important feedback on applicability of the proposed methodology in various environments, as well as the need for its modification to specific circumstances. On the other hand, it also provides an important feedback to project partners, as now they can benefit from a comprehensive overview that critically reflects their involvement, as well as provides them with an opportunity to adopt changes to their well-established operational mechanisms, methods and approaches in the future – thus, improving their capacities, capabilities and performance.

All in all, this proved to be a high-quality piloting and learning process for all involved. As such, its key benefit lies in “lessons-learned” that other cities and institutions entering the process of utilization of Ecosystem Services may benefit. All such lessons learned will be used in the methodological up-grade process and used for development of Transnational UPF Participatory Planning & Management Guidelines.

4.1. About the support in implementation and success of WP5 activities

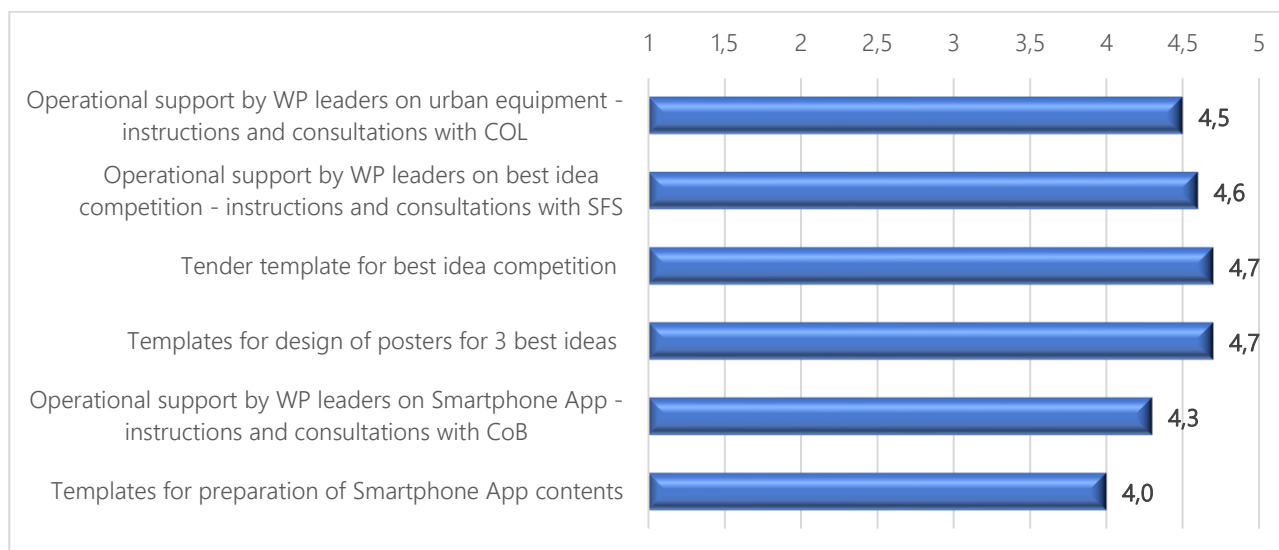
In the framework of WP5 - Utilization of Ecosystem Services, the following tools and support were offered by the City of Ljubljana, Slovenia Forest Service, the City of Belgrade and their external experts to the project partners:

- Operational support by WP leaders on urban equipment – instructions & consultations with COL
- Operational support by WP leaders on best idea competition – instructions & consultations with SFS
- Tender template for best idea competition
- Templates for design of posters for 3 best ideas
- Operational support by WP leaders on Smartphone App - instructions and consultations with CoB
- Templates for preparation of Smartphone App contents

In general, most of the partners were either “*very satisfied*” or “*more than satisfied*”.

As indicated in the figure below, Tender template for best idea competition and Templates for design of posters for 3 best ideas were given the highest score (4.7), followed by Operational support by WP leaders on best idea competition – instructions & consultations with SFS (4.6) and Operational support by WP leaders on urban equipment – instructions & consultations with COL (4.5). However, in the cases of both tools linked to the Smartphone App, some partners expressed “*satisfied*” or only “*partially satisfied*” scores – resulting in lower scores for Operational support by WP leaders on Smartphone App - instructions and consultations with CoB (4.3) and Templates for preparation of Smartphone App contents (4.0). Such lower scores can be explained by high expectations and a different vision some of project partners had for the Smartphone App, as well as by lengthy content revision process.

Figure 1: Level of satisfaction of the project partners with provided material and support for Utilization of Ecosystem Services (Source: Survey among project partners)

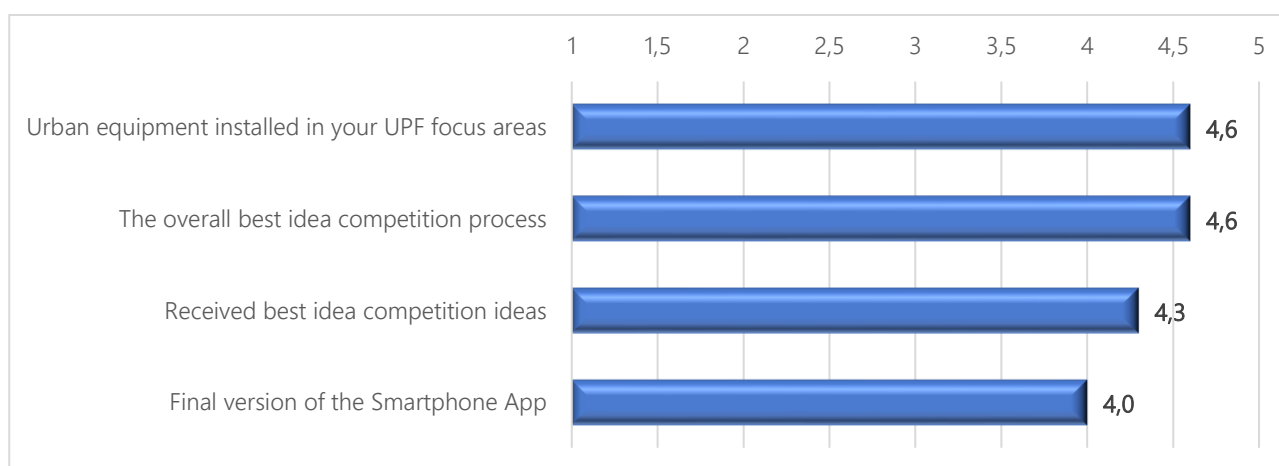


When asked about encountered difficulties during the implementation of WP5 activities, project partners exposed the following:

- In 6 out of 7 cities project partners reported COVID-19 related difficulties (e.g. modifications or delays of WP5 activities, etc.).
- In 3 out of 7 cities project partners reported tendering related difficulties (e.g. lengthy tendering procedures, poor response of contractors, etc.).
- In 2 out of 7 cities project partners reported complications during designing final outputs.

Nonetheless, above-described difficulties, do not reflect themselves in below presented scores linked to satisfaction with final results of WP5 activities implementation – leading us to the conclusion that all above exposed difficulties were successfully overcome.

Figure 2: Level of satisfaction of the project partners with final results of WP5 activities implementation (Source: Survey among project partners)



In fact, above results expose high level of satisfaction linked to installed urban equipment (4,6) and execution of the best idea competition process (4,6). Surprisingly, the satisfaction linked to received best idea competition ideas is lower (4,3) – as project partners from only 2 cities were actually “very

satisfied" with received ideas, while 5 of them were *more than satisfied*". The survey does not reveal any concrete reasons for such scoring, so we only assume (after discussion with some revision committee members) that they expected more and better ideas based on discussions held with users on workshops in WP3. Smartphone App received the lowest score – mimicking the scoring and reasoning form the previous section.

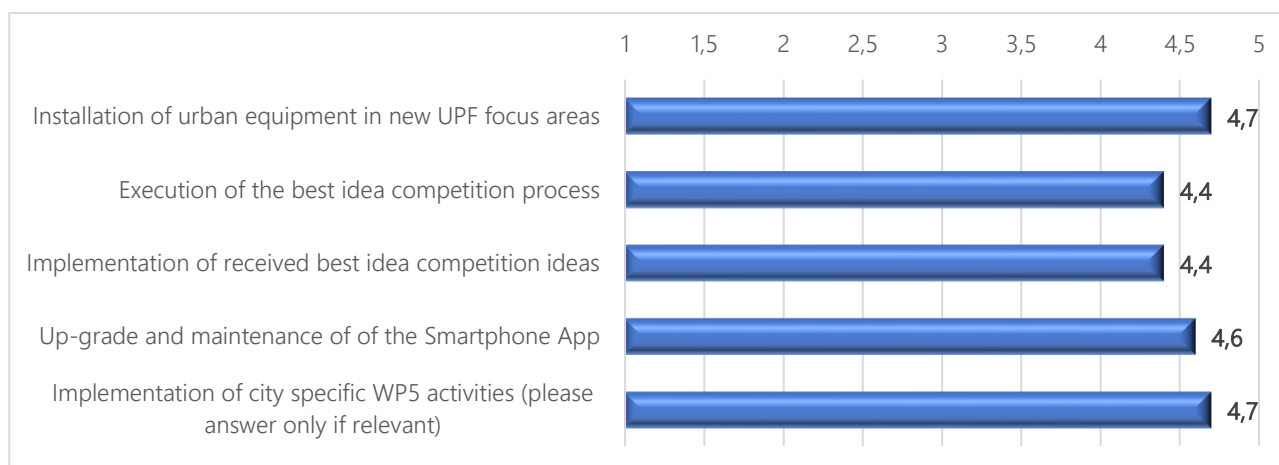
In 2 out of 7 cities project partners executed additional activities linked to promotion of newly equipped UPF focus areas:

- In Cluj-Napoca project partners organized visits with children in the forest, to point out the benefits of equipment installed in urban forest (e.g. information panels, information about biodiversity, amphitheater installed for outdoor classes, etc.) and how it can also contribute to their education.
- In Zagreb, an enduro race was organized, with a large number of competitors, as a direct result of the active cooperation with cycling associations. Also, field classes for students of the Faculty of Forestry were organized to present Grmošćica as an example of UPF management.

4.2. About the competences for replication of WP5 activities and their evolution

In the next segment of the survey, we asked project partners how competent for repetition of WP5 activities do they feel after they finished them in selected focus UPF areas.

Figure 3: Level of competence for repetition of WP5 activities (Source: Survey among project partners)



As presented above, project partners feel quite confident about any potential repetition of WP5 activities. In general, they also feel quite confident that they or their team will replicate URBforDAN approach to deliver additional urban equipment for other UPF areas in their cities. However, only 2 cities feel *very confident*" they will go down the same path, 4 of them are a bit cautious and feel *"confident"*, while 1 of 7 cities is only *"partially confident"*.

This opinion was further reinforced when project partners were asked how likely is it that their city will actually implement selected best 3 ideas in UPF focus areas. Just as before, 3 cities responded with *"likely"*, 3 with *"possibly"* and 1 with *"unlikely"*. When asked why it was *"possibly"* or *"unlikely"* they pointed out that some of project ideas were simply not appropriate for selected UPF areas, but might be used elsewhere. The most skeptical city simply pointed out that this is not how things are done in their city. Nonetheless, the overwhelming feeling in 6 out of 7 participating cities is very positive and optimistic.

5. Lessons learned and suggestions for improvement

The URBforDAN project partners and its core management team can expose the following lessons learned:

- 1) **Involving different stakeholders and ensuring efficient collaboration was the key to a successful implementation of activities implemented in UPF areas.** Taking into consideration the higher number of actors involved in the process, it is mandatory to have a good communication process with each part involved, so that the final result is the one all agree upon.
- 2) **Well equipped UPF attract new visitors and increase the popularity of the area, which can be a double-edged sword.**
- 3) **Proper quality supervision is absolutely necessary,** just as in-person daily communication with contractor and regular visits in the field. It is also wise to plan "spare parts or pieces" of urban equipment, as some might get damaged during its set-up.
- 4) It is always interesting and useful to receive different perspectives from citizens about the same area, and the **best idea competition proved to be an excellent tool for collecting them and allowing various types of citizens to participate on equal terms.** Results were also well accepted by decision makers, improving trust and willingness for future cooperation. **However, in some cities more effort had to be invested** in promotion and attraction of citizens to respond to the competition (in such cases education institutions were most commonly targeted), so the approach needs to be applied with appropriate level of promotion, using the right communication channels and adapted to the situation in each city.
- 5) To the surprise of some project partners, **people insisted on a minimum level of intervention in urban forests.** In all proposals received, they highlighted the fact that the forest should remain open to all visitors and that biodiversity should be protected – fitting perfectly with the purpose of the project, to provide means for leisure and relaxation while preserving the ecosystem.
- 6) In many cities, project partners kept close collaboration with the winners of the three ideas. After the templates were received, **designers worked together with authors in order to get the best result for the posters.** The winners were open to discussions and improvements, where necessary.
- 7) **When developing any tools for UPF visitors you must put yourself in the shoes of the end-user** and critically observe the tool from their perspective, needs and capacities. It also **requires high level of cooperation between all involved parties** and can be a lengthy and sometimes frustrating process, especially when expectations are not aligned. Nonetheless, the overwhelming feeling within the partnership is that the Smartphone App will prove to be a very useful and often used tool so ample effort will have to be put into its maintenance and regular up-grades.

Based on above provided lessons learned, we can list the following recommendations:

- 1) It proved to be quite challenging to visualize an idea and try to explain the whole concept just in 1 poster, despite provided template and guidance. Maybe it would work better if there was only one designer tasked to prepare all best idea competition winner idea designs.
- 2) It is highly recommendable to spend more time aligning expectations and vision of any tools, especially the ones intended for the widespread public use.
- 3) Despite the Smartphone App, in some cities in-person information points might prove useful or even necessary.

6. Best practices reported by project partners

Cluj-Napoca:

We focused on preserving bio-diversity and opening the focus area to the public, therefore we had a multidisciplinary approach, involving the academia (University), the citizens, the public administration, the users and the owners also activists.

Zagreb:

Once again, we want to emphasize that only by involving all stakeholders (local population, schools, local governments, cyclists, etc.) can we reach the best solutions, reconciling needs, reconciling disputes that are inevitable when one space is used in multiple ways.

Ljubljana:

A regular communication with forest owners turned out to be very useful as it prevented any disputes or appeals from the owners during equipment installation.

To have a designer available throughout the whole process was essential, because we had to adapt and add new the designs of educational information plates also in later stages of equipment installation.