Policy Brief

From Local Action to European Impact:
Enabling Transformative Change for Biodiversity

Across Europe, local actors are developing responses to biodiversity loss in diverse contexts. BIOTraCes findings suggest that such initiatives can contribute to broader transformative change when supported by enabling governance. This policy brief outlines key priorities for more inclusive and effective biodiversity governance in Europe.

Recommendations for Policy

1. Cherish local biodiversity innovations
2. Make room for marginalised voices
3. Foster cross-scale learning and amplification
4. Encourage civic engagement and contestation of biodiversity policy priorities
5. Mainstream biodiversity and social justice into broader policy agendas
6. Imagine nature-positive and just futures
7. Tailor EU funding to local needs

Enabling transformative change is a key commitment of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, reflecting the recognition that biodiversity recovery requires engagement across society. According to IPBES, of which all EU member states are members, biodiversity restoration and reduction of social inequalities must go hand in hand. But what does this mean in practice, and how can transformative change be enabled? This policy brief presents recommendations for policymakers at all levels, from local to EU, and for businesses and NGOs.

The BIOTraCes project draws on in-depth case studies of biodiversity innovations across Europe, each embedded in diverse geographical, institutional and political contexts and involving a wide range of stakeholders. We call them innovations because they differ substantially from the status quo: they propose alternative practices, structures and views aligned with a nature-positive and just future. They represent alternative views on human-nature relations that could drive nature-positive behaviour. Several of them rely on traditional knowledge that has fostered much of Europe's biodiversity. The innovations are often explicitly inclusive, making room for marginalised groups and perspectives.

The BIOTraCes case study innovations offer opportunities for learning, adaptation and collaboration, and can build momentum over time. While locally grounded, the initiatives are connected across scales and can contribute to broader change, especially when supported by networks and governance arrangements that enable diffusion and scaling.

The recommendations in this policy brief therefore aim to inform policymakers on how to support local biodiversity innovations and to create conditions for transformative change for biodiversity and equity.

1. Cherish local biodiversity innovations

Across Europe, local actors are developing innovative responses to biodiversity loss. Evidence from case studies suggests that recognising and supporting these efforts can contribute to broader systemic change.

Local biodiversity innovations play an important role in driving transformative change and can be recognised as strategic partners. Biodiversity governance has much to gain from closer engagement with these actors, e.g. by drawing on their experiences and involving them in co-governance arrangements with shared decision-making. Supporting ongoing innovation requires reducing administrative barriers and increasing flexibility, such as simplified procedures and financial support.

Sustained support is key to impact. This includes investing in community-led experimentation, supporting the uptake of successful practices, and providing longer-term resources for coordination and activities. Stable political backing can reduce vulnerability to short-term policy shifts. Empowering local biodiversity innovations can foster inclusive, resilient, locally grounded and scalable solutions to Europe's biodiversity crisis.

A schoolyard greening programme in *Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain*, initiated by the local school communities, shows how local initiatives can link biodiversity with social goals. Led by the municipality, it is transforming paved schoolyards into inclusive, nature-based spaces that enhance biodiversity, climate resilience, and children's wellbeing. However, its impact remains fragile without stable funding and political support, highlighting the need to protect these local initiatives and guarantee long-term continuity by being a priority of urban planning.

Among some small-scale private forest owners in *Sweden*, there is growing interest in alternative forest management approaches that support biodiversity and recreational values. Instead of conventional clear-cutting, these approaches focus on continuous cover forestry. Local initiatives, supported through cooperation among neighbouring landowners and knowledge-sharing efforts, illustrate how change can develop from the bottom up. With additional support, for example through the development of regional associations, such approaches have potential for wider uptake.

2. Make room for marginalised voices

Inclusive biodiversity governance entails making space for marginalised voices. Diverse perspectives and knowledge systems contribute to informed and equitable decision-making.

Biodiversity governance is strengthened by engaging plural perspectives, values, and knowledge systems. Reflecting these values in decision-making often means giving greater weight to biodiversity, while supporting dialogue and shared learning from nature-positive practices. Linking biodiversity goals with broader social objectives, particularly those related to local justice, can help align different priorities. Policy development benefits from integrating local and traditional knowledge, and views of those affected by decisions, such as women and youth. Expanding biodiversity knowledge across society further supports these efforts.

Creating space for marginalised voices also involves addressing the distribution of power within governance systems. Facilitation can help bridge policymakers, experts, and local actors. Ensuring continuity may involve embedding participation in governance structures through permanent fora such as biodiversity councils or diverse citizen assemblies. Accountability mechanisms, including participatory monitoring and transparent reporting, can support meaningful integration of these perspectives.

Herders in *Hungary* sustain biodiverse grasslands through traditional knowledge that is often excluded from policy, including the perspectives of women herders who remain underrepresented in decision-making. This case highlights how herders' knowledge, practices, and perspectives can inform more effective and locally adapted biodiversity management. Including these marginalised actors in decision-making not only strengthens ecological outcomes but also improves legitimacy, trust, and social equity in governance processes.

3. Foster cross-scale learning and amplification

Fostering cross-scale learning can help amplify the impact of local biodiversity initiatives. Stronger links across geographical-administrative levels enable knowledge and practices to circulate and develop over time.

Expanding the reach of local initiatives requires stronger connections across local, regional, national and international levels. Networks linking actors can facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experiences and practices. Exchange programmes across diverse socio-ecological and geographical contexts support mutual learning and adaptation, and targeted efforts to share biodiversity innovations promote diffusion to new settings and actors.

Sustaining these dynamics requires trans-local networks that give local groups access to knowledge and resources. Moving beyond short-term, project-based approaches towards stable support structures can ensure continuity and enable uptake of biodiversity practices across different local contexts.

In *Mértola, Portugal*, regenerative strategies by local organisations represent a successful example of biodiversity regeneration and rural revitalisation together. Through a co-governance model, principles of syntropic farming are adopted to boost a local food system. Although the regenerative strategy fosters alliances with surrounding municipalities towards a Regional Food Basin, regional, national, and EU guidelines have not properly supported it for reaching its full potential. A deeper alignment between local transformative practices and broader policy frameworks is still needed.

4. Encourage civic engagement and contestation of biodiversity policy priorities

Biodiversity governance benefits from making space for contestation. Civic movements and local actors, including the more critical ones, play an important role in shaping more effective and responsive policy outcomes.

Civic engagement with policy priorities can support progress on biodiversity and sustainability goals. Civic actors can help clarify challenges and ecological priorities, provided that safeguards are in place to prevent dominance by narrow interests. Reflexive governance approaches, including dialogue platforms and self-assessment tools, can help ensure support for broader social and environmental objectives.

Policy processes benefit from engaging with critique rather than resisting it. Biodiversity initiatives and advocacy efforts often challenge established practices, creating opportunities for improvement. Maintaining a willingness to revisit policies in light of new insights, and avoiding superficial forms of consultation, can strengthen meaningful participation and policy effectiveness.

In *Amsterdam, the Netherlands*, the civic initiative Foodpark Amsterdam challenges plans for industrial land-use by promoting alternative, biodiversity-friendly visions for urban development. By mobilising citizens and engaging in public debate, it brings new perspectives and priorities into policy discussions. However, mostly, the municipality has not been responsive to their demands so far. Yet, fostering citizen participation and contestation can improve governance, support learning, and lead to more socially grounded and environmentally ambitious outcomes.

5. Mainstream biodiversity together with social justice across broader policy agendas

Mainstreaming biodiversity together with social considerations across policy areas supports more coherent and effective action for transformative change. Integrating these priorities beyond environmental policy strengthens impact and equity.

Achieving biodiversity and sustainability goals requires ambitious and coherent policies across sectors. This includes strengthening and embedding existing legislation and tools at different levels and improving collaboration across administrative boundaries. Biodiversity and equity can be better integrated in policies for agriculture and food, forestry, water management, building, education and social well-being. Stronger coordination of biodiversity goals is also needed across policy instruments and funding streams, including the European Green Deal, the Common Agricultural Policy and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, where implementation often remains siloed despite aligned objectives.

Ensuring that funding and regulatory frameworks support both social justice and biodiversity entails integrating biodiversity regeneration and conservation criteria into sectoral funding schemes, particularly in areas with high environmental impact and for marginalized groups and places. This can be combined with incentives for practices such as soil restoration, reduced livestock pressure, wildlife stewardship, and nature-based solutions in rural and urban contexts. Reviewing regulations that contribute to biodiversity loss, while avoiding rigid rules that may limit innovation or neglect traditional knowledge, can further support progress. Streamlining administrative processes and lowering access thresholds for local initiatives can help broaden participation and impact.

In *Wageningen, The Netherlands*, an eco-community envisions to increase biodiversity and provide housing for diverse social economic groups at the edge of a Natura 2000 area. However, their vision for 'human inclusive nature' mismatches with current regulations related to nature conservation, building and spatial planning. Strict building and conservation protocols, together with limited funding opportunities prevent them from getting their initiative realized. The case shows that transformative change requires rethinking structures in multiple governance domains.

In *Transylvania, Romania*, biodiversity-rich farming systems depend on traditional practices that are increasingly under pressure from economic change, depopulation, and social inequality. These dynamics affect the viability of High Nature Value farmland and the communities that sustain it. The case shows that ecological outcomes are closely tied to social conditions, and that effective biodiversity policy requires integrating social justice, linking conservation and rural livelihoods to economic resilience and inclusive development across policy areas.

6. Imagine nature-positive and just futures

Imagining alternative futures can be a very powerful strategy to gain support for transformative change. Encouraging alternative nature-positive imaginaries beyond the status quo can motivate rather than discourage people.

Recurrent stories about climate change and biodiversity decline, even when intended to inspire action, can demotivate and paralyze. Calls for transformative change can be perceived as threatening, evoking uncertainty, sense of loss, and resistance. In contrast, co-developing imaginaries of nature-positive and just societies can make such futures both desirable and feasible, and support complementary transformative efforts.

BIOTraCes case studies show how co-developing landscape imaginaries with local participants can help build community and restore relationships between people and landscape. Such imaginaries often emphasize care, community and biodiversity, embedded in the local context.

In the *Simeto Valley, Italy*, participatory processes bring together farmers, communities, and local institutions to co-create visions of a nature-positive and socially just future. Through dialogue and collective reflection in local events and occasions, participants reimagine the relationship between agriculture, biodiversity, and local development, fostering shared ownership and motivation for change. This case shows that developing positive, locally grounded imaginaries can strengthen engagement, reduce resistance, and support transformative biodiversity governance.

7. Tailor EU funding to diverse local needs

Adapting EU funding to diverse local needs supports effective and inclusive biodiversity action. Funding mechanisms that reflect Europe's geographical diversity can better enable locally grounded initiatives to thrive.

EU funding mechanisms can be designed to reflect Europe's biophysical and socio-economic diversity, enabling tailoring to specific local contexts and needs. This entails prioritising funding approaches that allow flexible, locally adapted use of resources. Existing EU and national funding schemes can be adjusted to better accommodate small-scale, place-based and community-led initiatives, including experimental and pilot projects as well as related desk research that are often inadequately supported under current structures.

This also requires simplifying administrative procedures, increasing flexibility in funding design and revisiting eligibility criteria that favour larger or sector-specific applicants. Lowering these barriers can broaden access to funding and enable a wider range of actors to contribute to biodiversity and sustainability goals in locally grounded ways.

In *Anykščiai, Lithuania*, efforts to restore river connectivity are hindered by limited funding, rigid administrative frameworks that do not account for case-specific realities, resulting in limited local support. While EU and national policies prioritise restoration, existing funding schemes are rarely implemented effectively at the local level. Funding streams are fragmented: most ignore environmental goals, and environmental funds neglect wider societal needs. Participatory approaches function as enablers, highlighting the need for flexible, accessible funding that supports locally grounded and effective engagement for biodiversity.

Further reading

- Arcidiacono et al. (eds.) Analysis case studies. BIOTraCes report D2.5, https://zenodo.org/records/17965512
- Haugen (ed.) et al. (2025) Strategies and approaches for just, transformative change. BIOTraCes report D3.2, https://zenodo.org/records/17965680
- IPBES/O'Brien et al. (eds.). (2024). Summary for Policymakers of the Thematic Assessment Report on the Underlying Causes of Biodiversity Loss and the Determinants of Transformative Change and Options for Achieving the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity. IPBES Secretariat. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11382230
- Santos, L. L. dos ., & Belizário, F. (2025). Policy Brief (D3.4 Transformative strategies, and just governance and intersectionality) (Version V1). Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17965756
- BIOTraCes Case study fact sheets, https://www.biotraces.eu/resources/#comms

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About the Project

The BIOTraCes project is based on nine case studies of locally based biodiversity initiatives and innovations across Europe, focusing on high-impact sectors for biodiversity loss.

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For more information about
the project visit our website
www.biotraces.eu

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