Leveraging co-creation for city-level climate action and health co-benefits: Policy lessons from citiES 2030

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Contents

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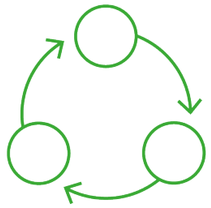
Key insights

Evidence-informed co-creation helps bridge the gap between research and city-level climate action.



Long-term collaborative platforms such as citiES 2030 create the conditions for trust, experimentation, and shared learning.

Structured co-creation can produce practical outputs, from indicators to decision-support tools, that are more relevant, usable, and likely to be adopted by cities.

Embedding co-creation into policy, research, and city governance can strengthen the implementation and long-term impact of urban climate action.

Why this matters: The role of co-creation in climate action

Cities are at the forefront of addressing interconnected challenges - including climate change, public health, economic pressures, social inequalities, and demographic change - as they are places where these challenges converge and where many solutions can be implemented[1]. These challenges cannot be effectively tackled through traditional top-down decision-making or technical capacity alone.

At the same time, persistent gaps remain between scientific evidence, policy design, implementation, and evaluation. As highlighted by the Lancet Pathfinder Commission report[2], while evidence on the health co-benefits of climate mitigation is growing rapidly, considerably less is known about how to translate this evidence into effective action and evaluate its impacts in real-world settings.

Although cities increasingly have access to data and research, translating knowledge into actionable, context-specific policies remains a major challenge, often constrained by limited resources, competing priorities, and governance complexity.

Evidence-informed co-creation - the collaborative process of jointly designing solutions based on scientific evidence and interest-holders' knowledge - helps bridge these gaps by bringing together policymakers, researchers, communities, and other interest-holders to develop and integrate scientific knowledge with local experience and priorities. Evidence-informed co-creation supports effective, legitimate, and implementable climate action at the city level[3]. In this context, we define "interest-holders" as groups with legitimate interests in the climate-health issue under consideration[4].

The Pathfinder Initiative (2020–2026)[2,5] - a Wellcome Trust-funded international collaboration focused on integrating health into urban climate mitigation - used the citiES 2030 platform[6] as a case study to explore how evidence-informed co-creation can support urban climate governance.

Drawing on this experience, this policy brief identifies practical lessons on designing and implementing co-creation processes and highlights policy recommendations for strengthening collaboration between cities, researchers, policymakers, and other interest-holders.

Madrid, Spain
(Image credit: istock.com/ Apostolos Giontzis)

The citiES 2030 approach

The citiES 2030 platform is the national platform of Spanish cities for the EU Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities[7]. citiES 2030 was established in 2021 to support the implementation of EU mission-oriented urban climate action through structured collaboration between cities, researchers, policymakers, and local interest-holders in Spain. The platform brings together 19 cities, 8 academic institutions, 24 private sector organisations, and 9 civil society organisations across Spain, coordinated through a collaborative governance structure led by partner institutions[6]. The collaboration underpinning citiES 2030 predates the formal launch of the EU Mission, providing an established foundation of trust and cooperation on which the platform could build. Similar National Mission Platforms have been established in several European countries, including Portugal, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Finland, Romania, Austria, and Sweden[8,9].

The citiES 2030 approach to the co-creation of city climate action is rooted in the principles of mission-oriented governance, which emphasise collaboration across sectors and levels of government, active citizen participation, experimentation, and continuous learning towards an agreed upon long-term objective[10]. To support these processes, the platform uses a range of participatory methodologies, including workshops, interest-holder dialogues, peer-learning activities, and iterative engagement processes. These create opportunities for different actors to share perspectives, identify common priorities, and jointly develop solutions tailored to local contexts.

The citiES 2030 experience demonstrates the value of creating stable multi-actor platforms that foster trust, shared learning, and collective action. It also produces practical outputs such as knowledge exchange activities and policy-relevant resources. By strengthening collaboration and enabling experimentation, such platforms can help cities navigate uncertainty, accelerate innovation, and advance ambitious climate and health goals.

Although the work presented in this policy brief focuses on health co-benefits of climate mitigation actions, reflecting the scope of the Pathfinder Initiative and the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, mitigation and adaptation should be considered together wherever possible. The methodological approach presented here can therefore support integrated climate strategies that combine both when appropriate. For brevity, we use “climate action” as an umbrella term throughout the policy brief, encompassing both mitigation and adaptation, while referring specifically to mitigation where this reflects the scope of the Pathfinder Initiative and the EU Mission.

Co-creation of health co-benefit indicators and decision-support approaches with citiES 2030

Health co-benefit indicators help make visible the health gains associated with climate action, strengthen the evidence base for decision-making, and support the prioritisation of interventions that deliver multiple societal benefits. Developing indicators that are scientifically robust and useful for city decision-making requires more than technical expertise alone.

To advance the Pathfinder Initiative’s overarching objective of integrating health into urban climate mitigation, the Initiative identified health co-benefit indicators as a practical entry point for embedding health considerations into city climate action and supporting evidence-informed decision-making.

In collaboration with the citiES 2030 platform, the Pathfinder Initiative adopted a co-creation approach that combined scientific evidence with cities’ experience and priorities. The following case illustrates how evidence-informed co-creation can generate practical, decision-oriented solutions by building trust, integrating scientific and local knowledge, and supporting implementation. It explains why the citiES 2030 ecosystem was chosen, how the process unfolded, and what it achieved.

Why citiES 2030 was selected

The citiES 2030 trusted ecosystem enabled open dialogue, knowledge exchange, and the joint exploration of challenges and opportunities related to urban climate action. In addition, citiES 2030 brought together a network of ambitious cities and key interest-holders committed to advancing climate neutrality and sustainability goals. The diversity of expertise and perspectives within the platform created an ideal environment for identifying shared priorities, testing ideas, and co-developing practical solutions. Building on this ecosystem, the Pathfinder Initiative was able to engage cities in a collaborative process to assess indicators that are scientifically robust, policy-relevant, and responsive to local needs.

How the co-creation process was implemented

The co-creation process built on several methodological principles that are critical for developing effective and actionable climate solutions: early interest-holders engagement, mutual learning, iterative feedback, and shared ownership of outcomes. Rather than consulting cities at the end of the process, city representatives were involved from the outset to help shape priorities, identify needs, and guide the direction of the work (Figure 1).

Relationship building

A first phase in Spring 2025 focused on relationship-building and contextual understanding. Working closely with the citiES 2030 coordination team helped establish trust among participating organisations, align expectations on the scope and objectives of the collaboration, and identify key interest-holders within the network. This foundation was essential for creating an open environment where participants could discuss challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from their own cities.

Scoping calls

The process then moved to a series of scoping calls with frontrunner cities - defined as cities more advanced in the use and/or promotion of co-benefit indicators - including Barcelona, Viladecans, and Zaragoza. These semi-structured conversations with the frontrunner cities served two complementary purposes: gathering contextual knowledge and strengthening engagement. Rather than seeking immediate solutions to climate change, the discussions explored local priorities, governance realities, existing practices, and areas where cities felt additional support or collective learning would be most valuable.

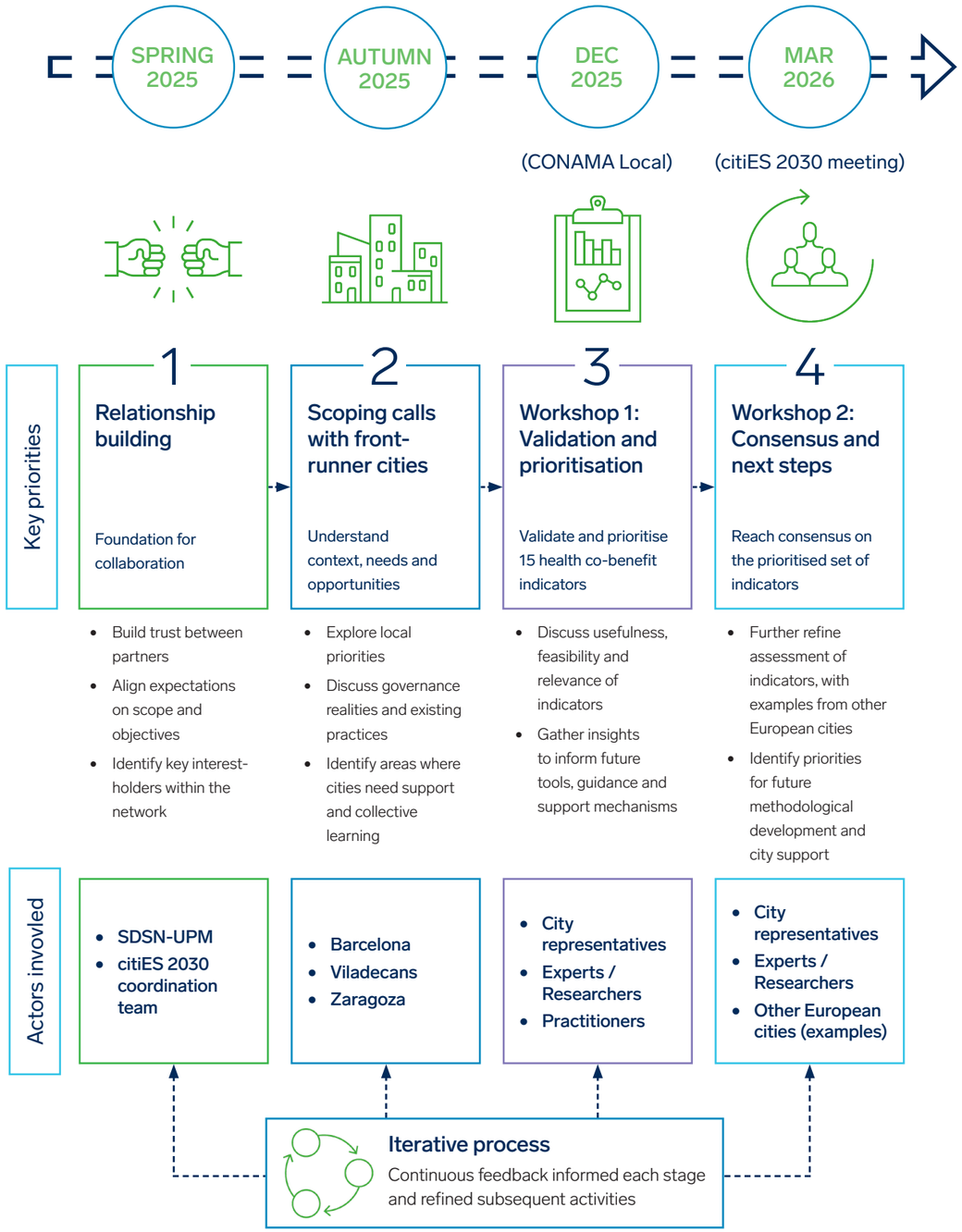
Participatory workshops

Insights from the scoping phase informed the design of two participatory workshops. The first, held during CONAMA Local, a biennial meeting with local sustainability practitioners, in December 2025[11], brought together city representatives and experts. The workshop aimed to validate and prioritise a preliminary set of health co-benefit indicators by discussing their usefulness, feasibility, and relevance. It also sought to gather participants' insights to inform the future development of practical tools, methodological guidance, and support mechanisms for cities. Building on this initial validation exercise, the second workshop, organised during a citiES 2030 meeting in March 2026, focused on reaching consensus on the prioritised set of health co-benefit indicators. Participants further refined the assessment of the proposed indicators, drawing on examples from other European cities where relevant, and identified priorities for future methodological development and city support.

Iterative process

A key feature of the co-creation approach was its iterative nature. Findings from one stage informed the next, while continuous feedback from participants allowed ideas to be tested, challenged, and refined. This process helped ensure that outcomes reflected both scientific evidence and practical experience, increasing their relevance, legitimacy, and potential for implementation.

Figure 1. Visual representation of how the co-creation process was implemented



What the co-creation process achieved

The citiES 2030 experience working on health co-benefits from climate action demonstrates that co-creation can generate tangible outcomes while strengthening trust, ownership, and collaboration among interest-holders. Beyond producing technical outputs, the process helped build a shared understanding of how health can support and accelerate urban climate action.

One tangible outcome of the collaboration between the Pathfinder Initiative and citiES 2030 was the inclusion of a dedicated health paragraph in the commitments section of the Spanish Mission cities Climate City Contracts (CCCs) - strategic documents developed by EU Mission Cities to outline their commitments and pathways towards climate neutrality[12]. The paragraph explicitly frames climate mitigation as an opportunity to improve public health, highlighting the potential health benefits of measures such as reducing air pollution and environmental noise, promoting active mobility, expanding green infrastructure, and reducing exposure to extreme heat. It further positions climate action as a health policy grounded in scientific evidence and social justice, with reference to organisations such as WHO Europe and its Pan-European Commission on Climate and Health[13]. This is particularly significant because it moves beyond framing health as a potential co-benefit of climate action and explicitly recognises climate action as a health policy, strengthening the integration of public health and wellbeing into urban climate policy frameworks.

A second outcome was the co-development and prioritisation of a set of health co-benefit indicators for urban climate action as the result of the participatory workshops. Fifteen indicators were initially proposed and discussed with cities through workshops and consultations, structured around four key domains identified by the Pathfinder Initiative: air pollution, active travel, healthy and sustainable diets, and nature-based solutions. Cities helped assess their relevance and feasibility, resulting in the identification of five indicators ready for immediate use, six requiring further methodological development and harmonisation, and four considered less suitable or to be reconsidered.

The decision to focus on a limited and practical set of indicators emerged from previous experience within the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), as well as feedback from the scoping calls indicating that cities prioritise simplicity and usability over extensive indicator lists. The resulting framework combines scientific evidence with cities' practical needs, increasing its relevance, usability, and potential uptake. Further details on the indicator framework are presented in the companion policy brief Measuring what matters: A practical framework to integrate health into urban climate action.

Participating cities expressed a strong interest in continuing to collaborate on the development, testing, and exchange of methodologies for monitoring climate and health outcomes. This willingness to engage beyond the project demonstrates the value of long-term multi-interest-holder platforms in fostering communities of practice, accelerating learning, and supporting continuous improvement.

Overall, the experience shows that co-creation can go beyond the production of individual outputs. By creating spaces for dialogue, peer learning, and joint problem-solving, platforms such as citiES 2030 help cities develop solutions that are more credible, usable, and widely supported, while laying the foundations for sustained collaboration beyond the lifetime of individual projects.

Health paragraph included in the commitments section of the Climate City Contract of all Spanish Mission Cities:

"The commitment to climate neutrality not only responds to an environmental obligation but also addresses an urgent need to improve public health. Climate change mitigation policies represent an unprecedented opportunity to reduce the burden of disease associated with air pollution, environmental noise, extreme heat, and sedentary lifestyles. Acting now means preventing respiratory, cardiovascular, neurodegenerative, and metabolic diseases, reducing premature mortality, improving mental health, and increasing the overall wellbeing of the population. Accelerating the energy transition, promoting active mobility, expanding green infrastructure, and reducing exposure to air pollutants are life-saving measures, especially for the most vulnerable groups. In this context, climate action is also a health policy, grounded in scientific evidence and social justice principles, as highlighted by organisations such as WHO Europe and its Pan-European Commission on Climate and Health."

Zaragoza, Spain
(Image credit: istock.com / Dani Leon)

Policy implications and recommendations

The experience of citiES 2030 shows that effective climate action depends not only on technical solutions, but also on governance processes that foster collaboration, shared ownership, learning, and accountability across sectors and actors.

Co-creation also strengthens public-sector capacity. In many contexts, outsourcing and resource constraints have limited the ability of public institutions to develop and retain strategic and analytical capabilities. Platforms such as citiES 2030 help reverse this trend by enabling long-term collaboration between cities, universities, and other interest-holders, strengthening local expertise and building institutional memory beyond individual projects or consultancy cycles.

The Pathfinder Initiative also demonstrates that effective co-creation depends on how collaborative processes are designed and sustained over time. Early interest-holder engagement, relationship-building, iterative feedback, mutual learning, and shared ownership of outcomes were essential for developing solutions that were both scientifically robust and relevant to city needs. Rather than relying on one-off consultation, co-creation should be approached as a continuous process of dialogue and joint learning.

Translating these lessons into practice requires coordinated action from policymakers and relevant institutions, cities, and researchers, each of whom has a distinct but complementary role. The recommendations below build directly on the Pathfinder Initiative experience and identify priority actions for each group.

Table 1. Recommendations for policymakers and relevant institutions, cities, and researchers

For policymakers and relevant institutions	For cities	For researchers
Institutionalise co-creation across the policy cycle, from design to implementation and evaluation.	Strengthen internal coordination and cross-departmental collaboration.	Develop policy-relevant research through co-creation processes with cities and interest-holders.
Invest in long-term collaborative platforms that sustain dialogue between cities, researchers, and civil society.	Engage interest-holders early and create spaces for continuous dialogue throughout policy development and implementation.	Facilitate co-creation as an iterative learning process that combines scientific evidence with cities' practical knowledge.
Promote integrated approaches linking climate, health, urban planning, mobility, and equity.	Improve the strategic use of data for decision-making and evaluation.	Design practical tools and evaluation frameworks aligned with real decision-making needs.
Support harmonised and comparable methodological frameworks for urban monitoring and evaluation.	Prioritise a limited set of actionable, policy-relevant indicators.	Advance attribution and contribution methods for assessing policy impact.
Support collaborative processes that build trust, shared ownership, and long-term partnerships, rather than one-off consultation exercises.	Engage continuously with external knowledge partners through structured collaboration.	Ensure equity and transferability are embedded in research design.

Conclusions

Evidence-informed co-creation is not simply a participatory approach or a one-off consultation exercise; it is a governance strategy that enables cities to translate scientific evidence into more effective, equitable, and implementable climate action.

The citiES 2030 platform illustrates how cities, researchers, and interest-holders can jointly produce knowledge and solutions that bridge the gap between evidence and policy.

While no single co-creation model can be universally applied, the principles of collaboration, learning, and shared ownership are transferable across governance contexts and can help cities accelerate climate transitions in ways that are both ambitious and socially grounded.

Viladecans, Spain
(Image credit: istock.com/ World Photo)

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Pathfinder Initiative

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