

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Episode Information | 2 |
| Transcript..... | 2 |
| Episode Introduction (0:011 – 2:14)..... | 2 |
| Case Studies of NBS (2:15 – 4:46)..... | 3 |
| Issues with NBS (4:47 – 16:56)..... | 4 |
| NBS and Neoliberalism (16:57 – 23:41)..... | 7 |
| Post-Interview Discussion (23:42 – 31:39)..... | 9 |
| Disclaimer..... | 12 |

Episode Information

Topic: Nature-Based Solutions (NBS)

Hosts: Ian M. Cook and Kate McGinn

Guest: Panagiota Kostila, BCNUEJ

Publishing date: 04.23.2020

Link to Podcast: <https://podcasts.ceu.edu/content/nature-based-solutions>

Transcript

[Music]

Episode Introduction (0:011 – 2:14)

Ian: Kate, do you hear the birds singing, the grass rustling in the wind?

Kate: Yes, but only because you asked me to add some sounds of birds singing and grass rustling in the wind.

Ian: And you hear that sound now Kate? That's the sound of the fourth wall being destroyed for our listeners. But anyway, as for the other sounds, the ones of birds and grass, well, I asked for those in part for our well-being so we can believe, even for a moment, that we're sitting together in a park in Budapest, making this podcast intro and are not, in fact, in different countries happily, yeah definitely happily trapped with our families waiting for the global pandemic to end.

Kate: That's very nice of you.

Ian: I'm a very nice person. But I also did this so that listeners can imagine that today's podcast interview took place not in a hotel room a few months back, but maybe in an urban park in Barcelona in an imaginary future when we're allowed to sit in parks and have conversations with people.

Kate: You mean the conversation you had with Panagiota Kostila, the political ecologist who works at the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability?

Ian: The very one, the one you spoke to about the article: "Nature based solutions as discursive tools and contested practises in urban nature's neoliberalisation processes" that she co-wrote with Isabelle Anguelovski, Francesc Baró, Johannes Langemeyer, Filka Sekulova, James JT Connolly for the journal Environmental and Planning?

Ian: Yes, I bet you wish you didn't have quite that many co-authors when you had to read out that line. But anyway, now that I think about it, you might even say that the sounds of birds chirping and grass rustling in the wind is maybe our sonic nature-based solution for this show, Urban Arena; a podcast about sustainable and just cities, a nature-based solution that we need now that you're in the USA and I'm in Budapest.

Kate: And do you hear that? that is the sound of tumbleweed. Let's listen to what Panagiota has to say about nature-based solutions.

[Music]

Case Studies of NBS (2:15 – 4:46)

Ian: So we're here today. I'm speaking with Panagiota because I want to know what a nature based solution is, so what is one?

Panagiota: So basically, nature-based solution is a concept that uses nature as an answer to challenges of sustainability, let's say.

Ian: Hmm. Mm hmm.

Panagiota: Some of the things that have been identified as nature-based solutions in the urban context, let's say, are, um, as different as greenways and green corridors or trees on the street that provide some services, to green roofs, urban gardens, or even in the more periurban um context, you can see nature providing some services like cleaning water or protecting from floods.

Ian: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. And the reason why we're talking is because you recently published a co-authored article and you did, as well as quite an in-depth literature review on the term and around the, around the sort of adjacent concept, you also looked at two particular cases in Barcelona. So before we start talking a bit more conceptually about what issues there may be with nature based solutions, can you tell me, first of all, about these two particular nature-based solutions in Barcelona?

Panagiota: Yeah. So in Barcelona, we looked at a green corridor, which was a renovation of something like a promenade that used to be there, but grey and and left, a degraded, let's say, in degrading area of of of Barcelona, of that neighbourhood, and they turned it into a green corridor that also has a social function because it provides areas for kids to play, people to walk, restaurants to put their chairs. And it's pretty biodiverse in comparison to other streets, which usually will only have one type of tree along- along the- along the way.

And the other case that we studied was an urban garden, which was part of a wider policy in Barcelona of taking advantage of empty, empty lots, places that are temporarily out of use. And that garden also had a lot of other functions apart from growing vegetables. It included a space for meeting, for communities to to gather, for events to take place, etc. So it was like a social centre outdoors combining- combined with an urban garden.

Ian: And just for those people who may be familiar with Barcelona, what are the names of those two places?

Panagiota: Yeah. So the first one was *Passeig de Sant Joan*. And the other one was called *Espai Germanetes*, and it was- they were both- they're both located in the *L'Eixample Barrio* of Barcelona, one of the most dense, uh, dense neighbourhoods in the centre of Barcelona.

Issues with NBS (4:47 – 16:56)

Ian: So I suppose some people may see, especially people in, uh, in government and in many countries may say, ah, nature based solutions like this, this is a triple win. You know, it's a win for the economy, it's a win for local people and it's a win for the environment. So wonderful. So what's the what's the issue?

Panagiota: Yeah, no, actually, this is part of the definition of nature-based solutions that they're supposed to address environmental and social challenges. There is the implicit assumption there, especially in the EU, the way they've been seen and discussed in the EU that they will also bring economic benefits. And it's interesting because they came about right after the crisis. So I think it was a way of sparkling innovation and boosting the economy in ways that are or seem sustainable.

What's the problem with them, you say, if it's such a triple win? Well, as in all other so-called triple win solutions, there's always a- there are always trade-offs and balances. And in each case, you see how in fact, people have to prioritise certain things over others. And from the review that I've done and others, we see that usually, you know, in the end, it's the economic priorities that overtake social and environmental ones. So that's part of the problem.

Ian: And can you talk about how this problem materialise itself in the two cases that you looked at?

Panagiota: So very briefly, in the first case, when we're looking at the *Passeig de Sant Joan*, and it used to be a part of L'Eixample neighbourhood where there was a lot of wholesale shops, mostly of Chinese ownership, there was a lot of infrastructure like buildings and sidewalks and greenery that the city had that were degrading or not being taken care of, and the neighbourhood was considered economically, also not so alive, let's say, for Barcelona standards and not a lot of tourists went there, either.

So what happened there was that with this, with its renovation and transformation into a green corridor, a lot of parallel things took place, which maybe were not so visible as the greenery that arose and it's beautiful, and it's nice and people actually use it very much. But at the same time, the Chinese ownership shops disappeared, partly because there was a change in what could be done in terms of some policies that regulated what kind of vehicles could go in this in this area and whatnot, so like, you know, indirectly this affected those businesses, but also rents got very high and they couldn't didn't make sense for them to be there anymore. And at the same time, a lot of licences were given to new bars and restaurants to use that public space, which was- it wasn't, it is public space, but they were licences given for them to use it as a terrace for their bars and restaurants. So what you see now is that in most like magazines about Barcelona, if you Google *Passeig de Sant Joan*, you'll find like the best foodie district in town, and you know, there's all these new new businesses, mostly for food and drinks that were not there before.

And one might ask, And what's the problem with that? Well, the problem is not that there's new types of foods being offered, but the problem is that their prices are much higher than the previous restaurant and bar that was there. So the people that used to live there have less options of, you know, kind of accessible coffees or sandwiches. And

so it has affected a little bit, who can live there and who cannot and who can own a business there and who cannot

Ian: Mm-Hmm.

Panagiota: So that's the one case. In the other case it's a bit more complex because the trajectory of what happened since the, the city first announced that there's this empty lot and we want to somehow make use of it until now, the government has changed. So at the beginning, it was clearly, you know, it was motivated by this idea that land lying idle doesn't bring any benefit to anybody, so let's give it to people to do something with it. It was a win-win for a movement of people who have already started occupying places to make gardens, but also for the city government, which would seem like, okay, you know, we're doing something nice here and we are preventing it, being degraded, preventing, you know, crime taking place there and so on.

So this *Espai Germanetes*, this is only a small part of a greater plot of land that was not being developed during the time of crisis because there wasn't enough money to develop it. But the plan was that there, there was going to be a house for the elderly, a new school for the neighbourhood, which was also very much needed. But this was all in pause because there was no money to do it.

That on the one side, on the other side, the neighbours of Eixampla have been for a long time claiming that we need green space, you know, we are- we're drowning in concrete, our kids have nowhere to play, we want a new park and we want a place where we can meet. So there was a huge demand to occupy that place and actually make a big park that is governed by the people of the neighbourhood, by the different associations. And throughout the years they've tried to do that, and that failed, because in the end, the school was constructed and all the great developments took place.

However, because of that garden, which was *Espai Germanetes*, which I was talking about in the beginning because this became a very symbolic place for the neighbourhood, but for the whole of Barcelona as well, and because the government changed and became more progressive and supported, like, initiatives of commoning- of urban commons and so on, they decided to protect it. It is still there, although a lot of changes has- hav- have happen to it, to who is part of it now, who is in charge of it now, etc. So this case is a bit more complex to say, you know, who's the winner, who's the loser of or what of those three wins have been won. Uh, the three of them have been completed in different ways for different people.

Ian: So I suppose you could say that in each- maybe now talk a bit more conceptually again, that in any sort of need to be solution in these cases, in these two cases in Barcelona or more general, you have to always ask a question about, I suppose, what nature is doing or how is it being mobilised or whom is it be mobilised for? And is this something like general we can say about this? Is this something like, I don't know, by throwing in the word nature-based solution, it sounds almost, I don't know, apolitical or, you know, somehow declassified like, you know, that there shouldn't be any class interest there or so on. I mean, is this what you found from doing the review? That in general, nature-based solutions do not ask the questions about how and for whom nature is being mobilised and in what form?

Panagiota: So there's two issues here. One is the term itself. You know, first of all, is very prescriptive. So you're saying this is a solution, and so whoever says it has the power to define it, and not only you're defining the solution, then you're also kind of defining the problem. So by saying that this is the solution, say to a lack of biodiversity, then you're assuming a certain understanding of, of, of- of the problem of the lack of biodiversity.

So what I'm saying is that one problem with, with the term is that is very prescriptive and that is very top-down. So it's, it always will be problematic if somebody outside of the context defines something as a solution, right, that the solution should come from the people who are experiencing the problem. So that's one part of the problem.

The other part of the problem is that the part of nature in the nature-based solutions, so how do we understand nature? How do we think that we can control it or operationalise it? Or, you know, what kind of things do we see as coming out of nature as benefits? And then who is to try to grab them, as you say, you know, it can be an issue of, of class of distribution, of justice, but it could also, you know, go deeper into what our- what is our relationship with nature? How do we understand nature because we might understand different things with it? In the examples that we looked at, you know, in the green corridor nature are the trees. In the example of the urban garden, nature is much more than the biophysical aspect of it, the kind of services they offer, you know, going back to the other literature on ecosystem services or green infrastructure and so on, we see that there's this kind of mentality that nature is out there and we can use it for our benefit.

And I think there's something truly wrong about this, because it kind of seems to erase historical connections with nature and- and the- that society and nature are inseparable in that there's always power relationships kind of mediating a relationship with nature and that cannot be erased. So if we're if we're thinking of nature as something outside of our society, then we're turning a blind eye to, to the power relations that are involved in there. If, if I'm clear.

Ian: You are, you are. And this is interesting. I'm just trying to think as well as because we, we're operating here, I guess, on a on a couple of different levels. So one is okay, there may be, let's say, for instance, there's a community garden which is set up somewhere almost, you know, on a local scale, and nobody's really talking about it. And then somebody, maybe yourself, maybe the local government, maybe an EU funding scheme that maps these things, says this is a nature-based solution. And so- and suddenly, by naming something as a nature-based solution, lots of things happen.

So first of all, it may suddenly become a trendier thing. It may even actually, may actually, even by naming something, by bringing it to light, it gets put in, you know, some whatever, some you know, Ryanair in-flight magazines, and the next time someone's in town, they go and check it out and it leads to, you know, gentrification, displacement in the area. So I'm wondering how much of power do- is going on when we start to name these things as certain things, both for yourself as a researcher, but also for funding mechanisms and city governments and so on? Because those people might never have thought of anything as a nature-based solution. They simply thought of it as somewhere they can grow some tomatoes not so far from their house.

Panagiota: Yeah. So, community gardens are especially interesting in this regard because we've seen in many places that they have actually been the reason for gentrification

taking place because they become so trendy that people want to live around them and so on. But the problem in the particular case, for example, that we saw is that not any community garden would be named nature-based solution. An urban garden can be many different things. It can be a plot of land cut into 10 pieces, and each family has one piece and cultivates and never interacts with each other.

It can be a garden that is cultivated in common, so a lot of people having to negotiate and necessarily meet and discuss so therefore kind of bring a more political fragmentation as well to the thing. Or it can be something that the city, you know, and it could be something that the city controls or that people control themselves. So if it's, uh, a garden that has been created by some groups that have no institutional like, form institutional standing, and if that garden was made on, on the basis of occupying land, it wouldn't be a nature-based solution because there would be no economic benefit from it.

So the particular garden was a nature-based solution was identified by us researchers who are basing our research on certain definitions, which are, you know, put together by some other researchers. Or, you know, I don't know, think tanks. We selected that garden because it was addressing an economic problem or a problem of policy, which was that land that is lying empty is not good for a city. It doesn't contribute to its brand. And it can also be dangerous, right? Or other stuff might happen. Okay. But the key aspect of this nature-based resolution was that it was only for a short amount of time that this was given to, to people, to community groups to, yeah, to cultivate or to use for, for whatever activities they did there. So it was short lived.

NBS and Neoliberalism (16:57 – 23:41)

Ian: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. So one of the interesting things that I found in your paper was you were you were talking about the relationship between nature based solutions and, um, neoliberalism. And neoliberalism as what many people now are using to describe a form of governance, which is seeing a changing role of the state vis-a-vis people who, who live within a certain country or within a certain city and sort of like, you know, adding, you know, a bigger role for, for private capital and a diminishing role for the state in certain areas and almost like sort of the state laying, laying the groundwork for capital to come in and people to, to make money out of things previously where we didn't allow certain money to be made. So what's the link between something like *that* and a nature based solution?

Panagiota: So what we're trying to say in the paper is that nature-based solution as a concept can be a tool towards nature's neo-liberalisation, which means that it's a very vague term still. Everybody can interpret it the way that it fits them. So what we're seeing is that living in the neoliberal climate, nature based solution is a concept that can easily be used towards, uh, towards these kind of goals. And by neo-liberalisation, we mean two things: both the, let's say, the retraction of the state, so you know where the state was providing some things they no longer provide them, including greening or taking care of that greening, etc., but also roll out neoliberalism so the state providing spaces for people to get involved and to take responsibility of something that before was- was of the of the state's. So in- the individualisation of responsibility as well as the privatisation of, of certain sectors.

And yeah, so I think what we see now is happening is that it has helped it become a tool of neo-liberalisation, but also the way it is defined in most of the of the policy papers that you find so far is that, you know, it's always like it always assumes that everything that happens in cities or otherwise has to be for sustainability and growth. There's nowhere, you know, you can never find in any of these papers that a solution would be a solution that doesn't include growth. Economic growth, I mean.

Ian: Mm hmm. There's interesting; because thinking about that, I mean, what's the specificity of nature there? I don't know. Maybe, maybe there is one. Maybe there isn't. Let's say we were today not talking on the Urban Arenas podcast, but I don't know, urban arts and culture podcast. And you just written in the paper that talked about how, you know, governments were using, I don't know, the establishment of cultural houses as a way of, you know, rolling out neoliberalism in certain parts of the city. And you could say, okay and that we know that happens right where, you know, they go into an area, okay, we've made a cultural house. And then afterwards- so what's there- is there something specifically about nature as opposed to any other tool with which the state, erm, sort of opens up areas for capital accumulation?

Panagiota: Yeah, I mean, it's very trendy nowadays, isn't it, to talk about climate change and nature and how we have to address the multiple, you know, challenges that we're facing with regards to environmental destruction. So as I say, you know, our article begins with the fact that even people like Greta and George Monbiot also talk about nature-based solutions or climate- natural climate solutions, there are various terms that go out there; thinking, you know, we- our objective is to fight climate change and we can use nature to do this. So this is an idea that most people would feel very comfortable with even the most conservative, even, even in the extreme right people will kind of feel comfortable with the idea that we have to take care of our environment.

But once you start digging more into the mechanics of how this would work, you find a lot of contradictions. So I think nature there is being used as a capture-all term in terms of- in terms of ideology or in terms of politics, because there is the agreement apart from some, you know, climate denialists or whatever, but there is a general agreement that the environment is something that we need to protect and that we've so far not done so well. So I think it's this, yeah, it's like sustainability that nobody will tell you sustainability is a bad thing, but look where we are now and since Rio 1992.

Ian: Mm-Hmm. So then it's linked- leads me to the last question. Firstly, I wi- one day I hope to become so famous I don't need a last name like Greta, but it is a great...[repeats] I said one day, I hope I'm so famous people just say Ian. But, but no, my, my serious last question is so, so- so then can something like a nature-based solution, and we've recognise and you talked about how in the case of the community garden in Barcelona, there are positive, you know, things- things going on there. So can an- can nature-based solutions, however we understand these, can they escape the ideology of neoliberalism? Or are they basically always doomed to be subsumed under this sort of, you know, the current Form of governance, which is prevalent in Europe?

Panagiota: I mean, I think there's great potential in the idea that integrating ecosystems in nature in cities and generally using the functions that nature itself has. And- that this can generate very innovative ways of either adapting to climate change or mitigating it or generally providing, you know, a better environment, a more healthy environment to live

in. But we always have to ask the question with whom are we making this? like with whom and for whom?

So the concept of nature-based solutions is not necessarily, you know, a bad concept, despite everything that I have said before. But I think it needs to be brought down to- to the people who actually face the problems in the cities. And I think that we, as researchers have a role to play in this. So, you know, how do we use concepts in- in research that sometimes funding agencies dictate, you know, how we write our proposals or our papers or- or how we shape our teaching, we still have to be very critical of those concepts and try to re-imagine ways to use them with and for the communities that we are studying.

Ian: Thank you so much for coming on the Urban Arenas podcast.

Panagiota: Thank you. Thank you.

[Music]

Post-Interview Discussion (23:42 – 31:39)

Ian: All right, Kate. So what did you think, how was how was the conversation with Panagiota? What do you think about nature-based solutions and the issues with them?

Kate: Well, it's, it's a hopeful. It's a hopeful topic for sure. I think one of the things that she mentioned, which is so interesting to me, is the idea of sustainability as this very bipartisan issue as in, you know, conservatives agree, liberals agree it's all a problem, climate change needs to be addressed. But then when you get down to it, I think a lot of people, you know, like to talk about it as being important, but then don't actually put money behind it to solve issues.

Ian: Yeah, I guess it's, I guess is what's hidden when everyone seems to agree because I guess it's like, it's not even maybe necessarily about putting money behind stuff. You might find individual cases where people can all come into agreement about that money should be put into a particular nature-based solution or any sort of green initiative. But it's about, I suppose, initiatives or ideas or programmes that actually challenge the fundamental structures of the economy. And once you have any sort of, sort of greening initiative there, then I guess the the, the general support for something might fall away.

Yeah, I don't know. Like what do you recon do you think it's like, do you think it's something worth keeping then this sort of idea or concept of nature-based solution? I mean, is it I mean, it's super trendy now. I mean, I've seen courses on it everywhere. I mean, what's your sort of general feeling about the idea of something that's called a nature-based solution?

Kate: Well, I think it's the future. That's the only- that's the only possible way forward if we're actually going to solve these big climate change issues that we're seeing. And I think it's all a matter of making these nature-based solutions more able to, kind of, push people in the right direction. So Panagiota was talking about the community garden. Currently, I think the way it stands, that just could never compete with something that is in our capitalist model. So I think one way to address that problem is to make community

gardens more economically efficient or more economically viable so that they can compete with today's landscape. I really think that's the only solution.

Ian: Yeah so it's funny, I mean, I guess everybody everywhere now is- is probably not thinking about the sort of issues we're discussing in our podcast, but rather about the global pandemic that we're all in. And I, and I didn't want to talk about it. But then I'm just now, maybe because it's on my mind and it's on all of our minds, it just comes there naturally, is that we had such- that nobody really had I'd say food security before like I mean we had it on a level of European Union, I don't know whether or not you had it in America, where you could just produce all the food that you eat. But we got very used to having very sort of wide supply chains and- or very long supply, supply chains rather, and then I guess like within cities, the idea of growing your own food like a- or- or you know, having some sort of community allotment food growing might seem, a few months ago to be like sort of a nice addition to an area. But now it might even seem more fundamental than it's ever seen before because, okay, like, you know, a nature-based solution like having a patch of land turned into a community garden that can grow its own food, a few months ago might seem like, okay, that's nice for the environment, and it's nice to give people something to do. But maybe now it seems more vital than before.

Kate: Absolutely. And you can see a lot of these community farms, you know, where people sell directly to the consumer, you know, their sales have increased dramatically because people aren't necessarily wanting to go to grocery stores. The grocery stores are experiencing supply chain problems. And so these kind of, you know, quote unquote "elite" farms that used to just cater to a certain type of population are now expanding their, their customer base. So I do think that is, that's really interesting. I think what worries me is that even though this pandemic could be a real source for change in many ways and how we do things, how we interact with the climate, with other people, my fear is that people's just general stress levels are too high to be able to think of, of new way of doing things and then actually keeping to that. So I think this might also get us back to our old ways of doing things, which is not a nature based solution.

Ian: Yeah, yeah, and I- and I wonder then how much of it is about naming. So we're calling it a nature based solution. I mean, in America, you're talking a lot about it. We talk a little bit about it in the UK, copying basically your lead, which is the Green New Deal. I don't want to talk about that, sort of very particular political movement right now, but I'm just wondering, something- it is something like how to name an initiative, in this case, a solution, that sort of wins over people who are not naturally drawn towards something with nature in the title maybe? But might- something like a Green New Deal when it sounds about, you know, employment and about building and about growth, but I'm wondering whether like something then that's called like a nature-based solution, is it, you know, inherently off-putting for people who aren't already drawn towards environmentalism?

Kate: Hmm that's a good question. But I really- I sometimes think we tend to focus too much on, you know, how to name things, what kind of effect naming has, instead of just like doing the work, I think naming something makes it more, you know, maybe brings more money to a certain issue, brings more attention to a certain issue. It also has problems, as Panagiota mentioned, you know, with, with gentrification, for example, in cities. But to a certain degree, sometimes people get too hung up on the idea of naming

something and then we get away from the real important issue, which is actually doing the work and looking to solve problems.

Ian: Well, maybe that's the problem with academics. We just like to name things or come up with new names for things which already have perfectly good names. I mean, this is actually interesting, I was talking with Panagiota before or after the interview, when she was talking about some of the issues when the article went through peer review is in, like, what do you call a nature-based solution? Because some of the things they were looking at that were called nature-based solutions were not called nature-based solutions by the people who did them, but they've been like called nature-based solutions afterwards by other people.

And then now their article was critiquing nature-based solutions, so there's a little bit of a, you know, an issue they're going around, but this is now everything is getting called a nature-based solution because it's one of these vague terms that's suddenly in vogue. But I guess this is maybe a problem of academic production in the sense that, like academics are constantly forced to produce things and so they constantly have to come up with new names for things. When they come up with new names of things, then somebody else has to come along and critique those new names. So I guess this sort of naming game is a- is a yeah, one of these sort of academic games that isn't particularly useful when, when it comes to real world interventions. And I think actually in Panagiota's article, this issue comes out as well.

Kate: But I- but I mean to give- to give academics credit, I think once you name something, you can talk about it, you can bring these things up in government, in business conversations, and so, you know, naming something is pretty powerful.

Ian: Yeah, yeah. It's true. I don't hate academics. I sort of pretend to be one sometimes as well myself, but I don't know about you Kate, well, actually, I do know about you that you're under a blanket in your parents' closet, and I'm under a blanket in our bedroom and I'm getting really hot. So maybe it's time to end this pretend studio situation and also end our podcast. Could you remind people of how they can get in touch if they want to get in touch?

Kate: Yes, we do want to hear from you! You can shoot us an email through the contact form found at our website Urbana-Arena.EU or reach us at UrbanA@ceu.edu. And you can also find us on various social media accounts Twitter or Instagram at the handle @arena_urban.

Ian: All right, Kate, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure, as always speaking with you. Hopefully, we'll get to do a podcast face to face in the same room sometime in the future.

Kate: Yeah, I would like to stop recording in a closet pretty soon, hopefully.

Ian: Let's hope. All right. Thanks, everyone for listening by.

[Music]

Disclaimer

This podcast is part of the three-year project UrbanA – Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities. It was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme.

[Music]