

DESIGN THINKING, NEIGHBOURHOOD LABORATORIES



'Design thinking, neighbourhood laboratories' is created by LIFE e.V. in Germany in 2025

LIFE e.V. or LIFE Bildung, Umwelt Chancengleichheit is a non-profit organization that focuses on projects and campaigns around socio-political aspects such as education, sustainability and equal opportunities and inclusion. The aim is to strengthen gender and climate justice within climate action. As NGO based in Berlin they focus mainly on local and national aspects, but they have a small team working on international issues. They are closely collaborating with gender and climate advocates from around the world to make local voices heard and are actively engaged in the UNFCCC.

This method is part of the online trainers hub, which is one of one of the key adult education tools developed in the multi-year collaboration entitled: **"Gender and Climate Justice: Knowledge for Empowerment", in brief COPGendered**. This project builds up tools and knowledge for learners to upskill themselves (in groups, individually or with a teacher) in the relationships between gender inequality and the climate crisis. This includes providing tools for adult education providers. The project which lasted for three years ended in November 2025.

The associations involved are in this project: WIDE+ (Europe), GenderCC-Women for Climate Justice/LIFE e.V in Germany, WIDE in Austria, GADIP in Sweden, KULU Women and Development in Denmark, Mundubat in Spain and CSCD in Bulgaria.

COPGENDERED PROJECT PARTNERS



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MAIN PURPOSE

This method aims to empower participants within a neighbourhood to co-create solutions to local mobility challenges, emphasizing hands-on experimentation rather than abstract discussion. It strengthens neighbourhood networks and recognizes local knowledge as a valuable resource for sustainability. In this way, it fosters commitment and self-efficacy, enabling participants to develop a practical understanding of the mobility transition.

SUMMARY

The neighbourhood lab concept is designed to guide groups through a structured, participatory process in which they learn about, develop, evaluate, and implement solutions to local mobility and transport challenges. This method is not a one-off event, but an example of a project covering multiple meetings. This kind of process allows for other kind of learning, in particular the ability to gain skills and have impact regarding gender and climate justice. It focuses on collective learning and communicating, inclusive decision making and transforming ideas into local action. Participants brainstorm and develop ideas to improve sustainable mobility in their area, collectively select one idea, and test it on a small scale. Through this structured yet open process, they experience collaborative decision-making and witness the tangible impact of their actions.

Time needed: 4-6 weeks total, with 2-3 core meetings (around 3 hours each), plus implementation and evaluation.

Number of participants: this depends on the process, as one can decide to extend the process with additional meetings.

Space needed: A meeting room in the neighbourhood for workshops and planning sessions; public space for implementation

Age: Adult learners of all ages

Material needed: Workshop materials such as flipcharts, markers, sticky notes, idea profile, templates, and evaluation forms, as well as project-specific tools for small-scale prototyping and media equipment such as a projector and screen, are needed.

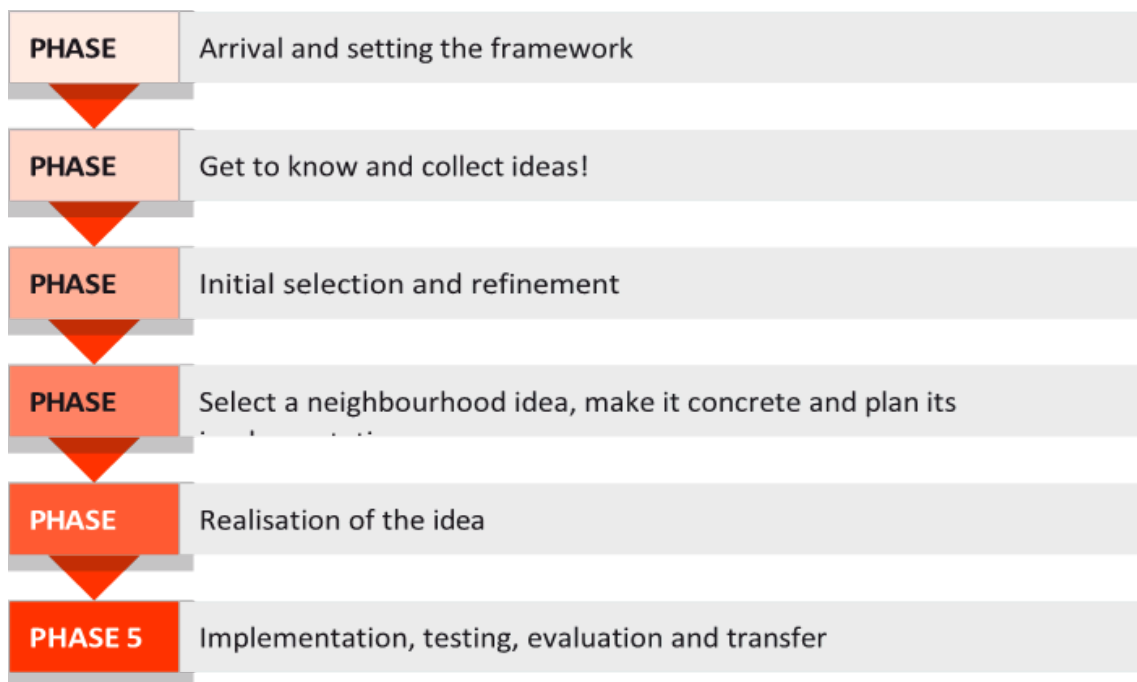
Material provided in this guide: Process phases and facilitation tips; Methods for idea generation, selection, and refinement; and Evaluation and transfer strategies.

Citation: LIFE Bildung Umwelt Chancengleichheit: Kiezlabore für die lokale Verkehrswende, <https://inlove.life-online.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/01/INLOVE-Leitfaden-Kiezlabore-2020.pdf>; Contact: gerecht.mobil@life-online.de

FACILITATION GUIDE DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The method is rooted in popular education pedagogy in which the starting point is the participant's articulation of their motivation, knowledge and through a collective process of sharing, developing and testing ideas a group learning is created, with an impact. The approach embraces a creative exploration of tools, group cohesion in building trust, ideas and maintaining expectations and ambitions.

The process can be structured in different phases that we describe here as steps. It is important to note that not every phase requires a separate meeting. Especially at the beginning (phases 0 to 3), it is a good idea to condense several phases into one meeting. In any case the first four phases or steps up to the implementation phase should be carried out relatively compactly in 2 to 3 meetings.



STEP 1: PREPARATION

The process begins with welcoming participants, introducing the facilitators, and explaining the neighbourhood lab concept. The process structure, including the different phases, the anticipated time frame, and the expectations regarding participation and collaboration are explained and presented by the facilitators.

To establish a foundation of trust and group cohesion, introductory activities and group dynamics exercises are used. Participants are invited to get to know one another through the participants' motivations and local mobility needs using personas or expectation mapping. This step helps the group to clarify the targeted achievement and to erect the participants' lived experiences. The preparation phase establishes the essential and shared framework for collaborative and meaningful engagement necessary to ensure a mutual understanding and co-creation of the neighbourhood lab's goals.

It is advised when moderating meetings, buffer times should be planned and a balance between the predefined programme and emergent group dynamics, as excessive unstructured discussion frustrates participants, while overly rigid agendas impede momentum.

STEP 2: INTRODUCTION

This step targets the collection of ideas and getting to know the participants of this neighbourhood lab concept. Thus, some inspiring examples of sustainable mobility projects implemented in other contexts are introduced to the participants. Visual materials such as pictures and videos are used to spark creativity.

As facilitator you design an informed brainstorming session. It sets out to collect and expand a wide range of ideas for improving local transport. In this regard, participants are encouraged to adopt an open-ended thinking and avoid premature judgment of ideas. By combining a creative process-development approach and open brainstorming between the participants, this stage stimulates the richness of ideas and practices innovation.



STEP 3: INITIAL SELECTION AND REFINEMENT

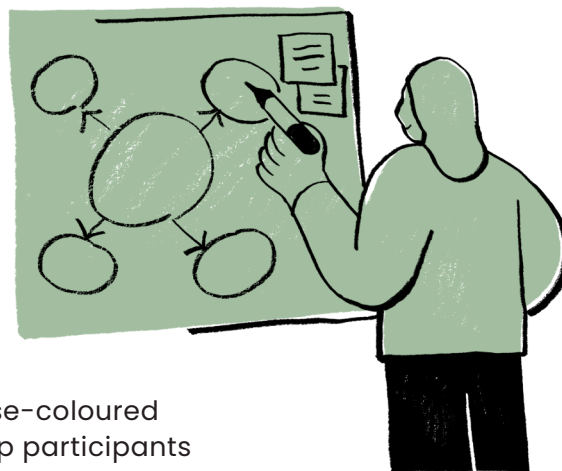
To narrow down the collected ideas, participants will use a structured method such as "effort vs. impact assessments". In other words, participants will first evaluate ideas by assessing the relationship between effort and their potential impact. A four-field mapping tool can be used in this process, which sets out the time frame, the deliverables or output, the resources needed, especially in terms of the people and their roles, and finally the standards for the deliverables. In this tool they are put down in a graphic map.

In this step, they will further refine and develop promising ideas by using templates or the "Yes, exactly, and ..." method. This procedure will enable participants to vote or award points to prioritise. The aim is to select two to four feasible and exciting ideas for further development. If needed, the facilitators can provide a feasibility check on practical, legal, and resource requirements. The rigorous selection, assessment and evaluation of ideas and their refinement process guarantees that the chosen ideas correspond to the targeted outcome and the local realities.

STEP 4: SELECTION OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD IDEA, THINK IT THROUGH AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

Before implementing the idea, participants should collectively agree on one neighbourhood initiative (or, if appropriate, two parallel initiatives) to carry out. To ensure consensus or a well-balanced compromise, facilitators should support thorough understanding and open discussion among all participants.

The selection process can take place in several small steps, such as defining common goals, identifying expected outcomes, and outlining initial actions. Participatory tools—such as the “rose-coloured glasses” and “magnifying glass” method—can help participants examine ideas from both optimistic and critical perspectives.



Once the idea has been selected, its implementation should be planned collaboratively. All participants should contribute to developing a clear implementation timeline, with responsibilities and tasks explicitly assigned. The plan may need to be adjusted to align with participants’ available resources and time commitments.

By jointly defining objectives, outcomes, responsibilities, and timelines, this stage ensures that theoretical ideas are transformed into concrete actions and a shared implementation plan.

STEP 5: REALISATION OF THE IDEA

In this step, the selected idea should be put into practice as a prototype or test project. To encourage teamwork, participants should at least hold one joint working session to maintain energy and momentum. Therefore, active communication is kept throughout regular status updates and informal check-ins. Celebrating intermediate milestones helps to recognize collective effort and sustain motivation. Finally, a fixed implementation date is maintained to prevent delays and maintain focus on achieving results. Implementing the selected ideas into a lived and local experience cultivates community cohesion, energy, accountability and sustains momentum through joint action.



STEP 6: IMPLEMENTATION, TESTING, EVALUATION AND TRANSFER

The final step of this neighbourhood lab concept is to first test the idea in real conditions, through the observation of participants and the public on how it works and gather feedback from them. The process's documentation is done by using methods such as photographs, surveys, or interviews.

The final workshop's conduct is planned to evaluate the results collectively. Participants reflect on what worked well, what did not work as expected, and what could be improved.



Then, the outcomes are transferred to the three audiences: the neighbourhood by sharing experiences directly with residents and initiatives; the decision-makers by providing feedback to local administration, politicians, or stakeholders; and the public by disseminating insights via events, local media, or online reports.

The conclusion of this lab, as a finished project, is formally done, by giving closure and open space for future initiatives. The final stage, as learning, assessing and reflecting on the implementation of the idea in real conditions, consolidates the theoretical and project's impact learning for different audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Neighbourhood laboratories are an effective design-thinking approach for local transport transition. By engaging residents directly in ideation, prototyping, and testing, they build ownership, activate local knowledge, and create visible change. The structured yet flexible process fosters commitment and helps participants experience their ability to make a difference while providing practical insights for future initiatives.

