



TUC PROFILE NO. 8

# NAUCALPAN, MEXICO

March 2024



NAUCALPAN

# About TUC Urban Lab Profiles

TUC Profiles is a series of short reports developed as part of the Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC) project. They disseminate insights into the existing challenges and opportunities to address cross-cutting urban sustainability transformation and development issues through inclusive climate action in five cities in Latin America.

The first edition, TUC City Profiles, presented each city and the contextual factors that may enable or hinder urban sustainability transformations. This second edition, TUC Urban Lab Profiles, showcases the progress achieved by project partners and members of the labs in each of these cities since 2021.

Urban Labs (ULs) are the core approach of TUC. They consist of regular gatherings of a diverse range of stakeholders who collaborate and exchange knowledge to collectively co-create innovative solutions for complex urban challenges in a way that is participatory, cross-sectoral and inclusive. While UL approaches have gained global attention, there is still limited information on their implementation. These reports aim to fill a gap in practical knowledge about living labs. The series illustrates how ULs contribute to more climate-friendly and socially just communities and cities.

The following short report was co-produced by UL members, local as well as international project staff and researchers. It provides a summary of the steps taken, challenges encountered and key achievements to date by the UL Naucalpan, established in Naucalpan, Mexico, with support of TUC. It concludes with lessons learned for catalysing transformative change towards sustainability.

This TUC Urban Lab Profile was developed by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) and the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) in collaboration with the Mexico office of the World Resources Institute (WRI México) and the participants of the UL Naucalpan. It draws on original data from ethnographic observations and interviews carried out between 2021 and 2023 as well as critical reflections on the experiences of all people involved.

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Cover image: Placement of urban furniture and vegetation in Plaza Revolución and delimitation of crosswalks, August 2023. © WRI México

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Placement of urban furniture and vegetation in Plaza Revolución and delimitation of crosswalks, August 2023. © WRI México

# The Urban Lab: Naucalpan

## UL context

A TUC Urban Lab (UL) was established in Naucalpan de Juárez, hereafter referred to as Naucalpan. The municipality has 834,434 inhabitants and is located in the state of Mexico (INEGI, 2020) (see **Figure 1**).

Naucalpan belongs to the metropolitan area of Mexico City, with a total population of more than 22 million people. Therefore, it shares the city's sustainability challenges, particularly regarding transport and pollution. The proximity to the Mexican capital provides economic opportunities but also exacerbates social and environmental problems. Additionally, it makes urban planning and management more difficult, because policy and infrastructure projects in Naucalpan usually must be coordinated with both the state of Mexico and Mexico City's administration (Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano e Infraestructura, 2023; Centro Mario Molina, 2014).

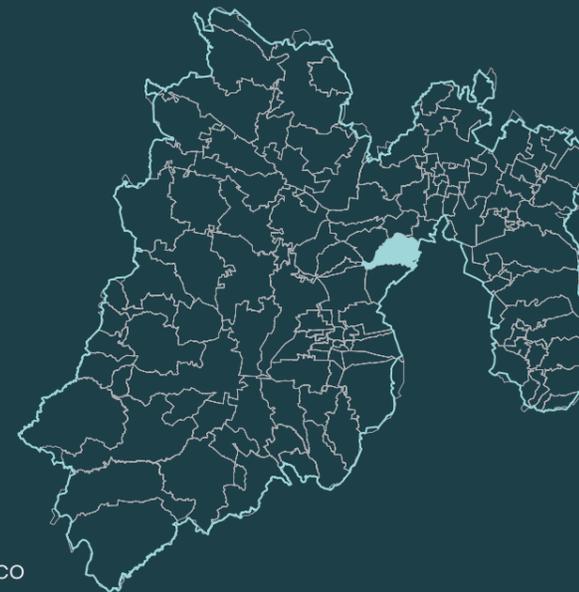
Naucalpan is strongly socio-spatially segregated: formal and informal settlements exist in direct proximity. One example is the *El Conde* neighbourhood next to an industrial area on the banks of the Hondo River in the UL intervention area. Here, approximately 100 families have been living in abandoned railway wagons for around three decades without security of tenure. While the government has mostly left them alone so far, they are at permanent risk of being evicted for environmental and urban upgrading projects such as river restoration and the construction of a light railway line, both of which have been planned for years (Centro Mario Molina, 2014).



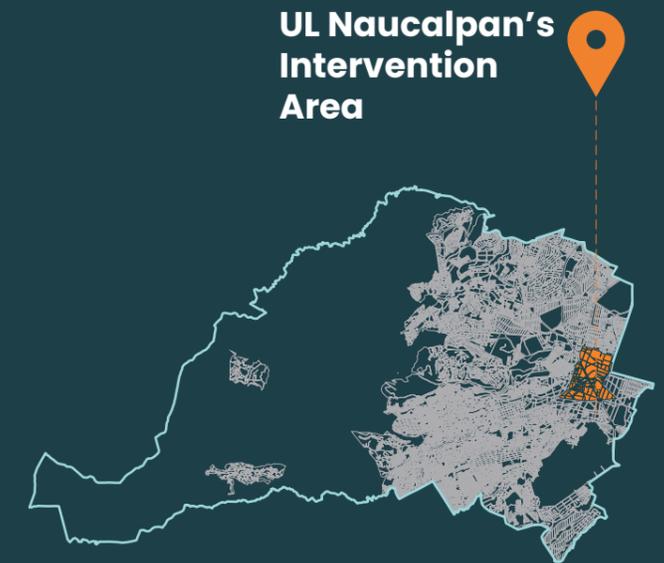
Latin America



Mexico



State of Mexico



Naucalpan

### UL Naucalpan's Intervention Area



FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF THE UL NAUCALPAN'S INTERVENTION AREA, STATE OF MEXICO, MEXICO. © WRI MÉXICO AND UNU-EHS WITH DATA FROM INEGI (INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTADÍSTICA, GEOGRAFÍA E INFORMÁTICA).



Placement of urban furniture and vegetation in Plaza Revolución and delimitation of crosswalks, August 2023. © WRI México

Since the early 2000s, Naucalpan has experienced a shift from manufacturing to a service economy, which included the informalization of a part of the economy, particularly small businesses. A lack of integrated urban planning intensifies everyday problems in the municipality, such as air and water pollution, poor waste management, insecurity, inequality and poverty (Guerra et al. 2022). Climate change is an additional stressor exacerbating impacts from climate-induced extreme weather events such as floods and heatwaves.

The goal of the UL Naucalpan was to create a meeting space for different sectors that had not previously been working together to develop and implement a shared vision for 2030. Additionally, it aimed to establish an action plan to transform a specific area in Naucalpan. Various initiatives were rolled out in an intervention area around the municipality's historic centre in the industrial zone along the Hondo River (Roll et al. 2024). Facilitated by WRI México, TUC's implementing partner in Mexico, the lab has been in operation since early 2022 (Figure 2).

Establishing the UL Naucalpan came with different contextual challenges, the first of which concerned political differences between levels of government and political instrumentalization. The municipality of Naucalpan, Mexico City and the state of Mexico are frequently governed by different political parties which can result in conflicting urban planning and governance priorities. Local leaders are often instrumentalized for political purposes which makes participatory, future-oriented urban planning more difficult. A second challenge is the high degree of judicialization of urban development in Naucalpan. Neighbourhood associations frequently use the judiciary to stop urban policy initiatives which can paralyse large-scale urban reforms of the municipal government. Given that government officials are elected for a short period of only three years, local initiatives are at the risk of not being implemented at all. Third, the municipal government is highly dependent on federal government transfers, which limits the reforms they can independently carry out. Finally, Naucalpan lacks a strong territorial identity due to its location at the fringes of Mexico City. Many residents commute to Mexico City every day. Other people work in the area but do not reside there.

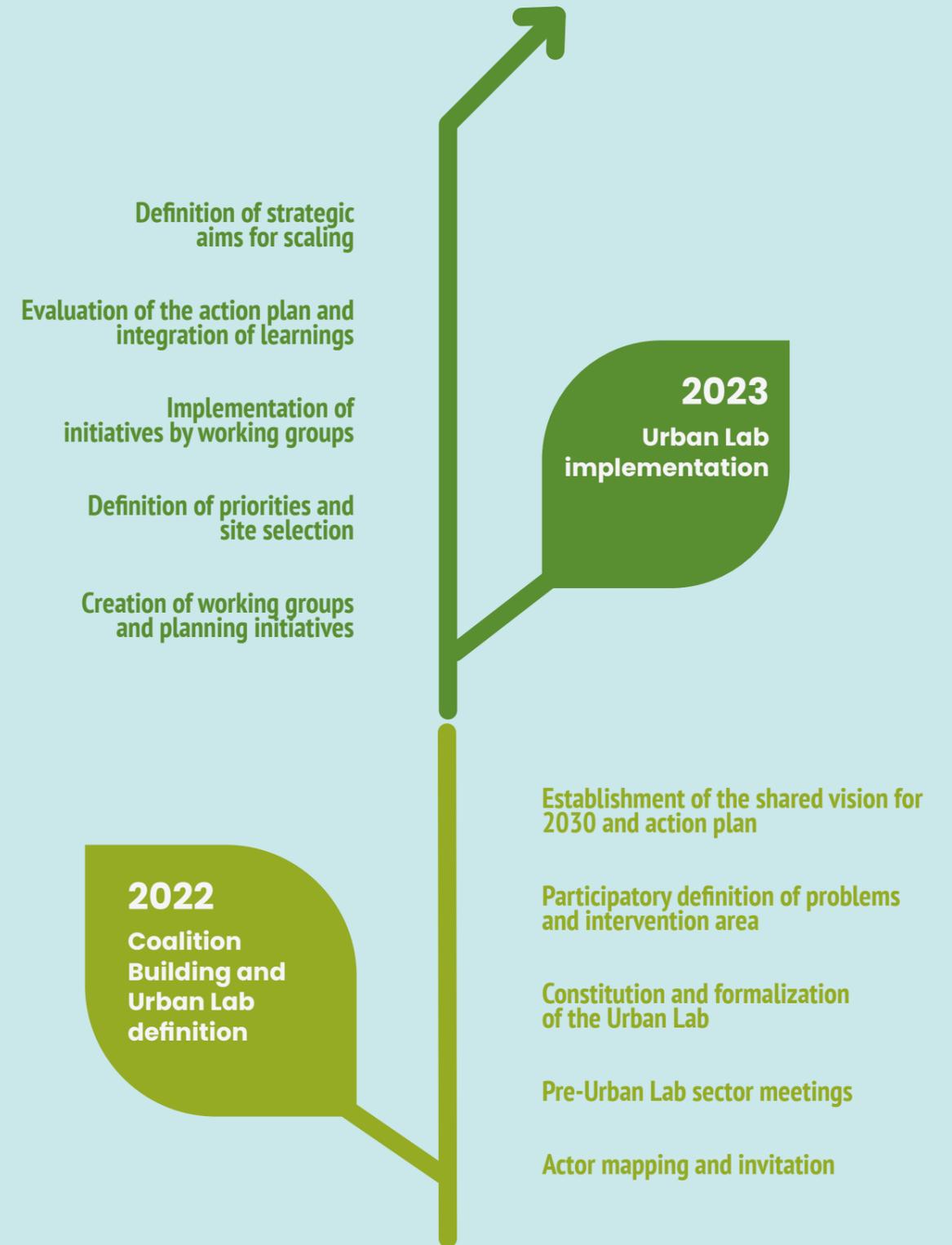


FIGURE 2: URBAN LAB TIMELINE, INCLUDING KEY UL PHASES AND ACTIVITIES

## Operation of the UL

The first UL meeting took place in April 2022 and a Memorandum of Understanding between the Mayor's Office of Naucalpan and WRI México was signed in June 2022. Until the end of 2023, twelve UL meetings were held in Naucalpan, usually once a month, with an average of approximately 30 participants. Most meetings were in-person and took place in meeting rooms of hotels within or near the area to provide for a neutral and central location. Some meetings were virtual, especially during the early stages due to COVID-19 restrictions, and during the planning of UL initiatives.

WRI México facilitated the process and prepared the launch of the UL and UL meetings. This coordination is relevant because of the politicization of the public discourse in Naucalpan and the potential of political conflict. First, they organized two sectoral meetings before the UL officially started, one with civil society and one with municipal and state public officials. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, both had to be held remotely. In these meetings, WRI México emphasized the preliminary nature of such meetings and the importance of bringing people from diverse sectors with different perspectives together. These sessions also discussed what these groups perceived as Naucalpan's main urban and climate-related problems.

The first UL meetings were therefore designed to build an atmosphere of cordiality and trust among participants. Ice-breaker activities were used to go beyond the institutional role of individuals and break up groups of people belonging to the same agency, sector and level of government, as well as to neutralize hierarchies within groups. In addition, UL members defined and agreed on ground rules for the meetings, to involve everyone in the discussion and to make them feel comfortable. Debates and discussions helped the UL group to create a shared vision for a specific area in Naucalpan, focusing on its intangible characteristics, to avoid potential conflicts about politics or policies.

Overall, the government sector represents the majority of participants in the UL Naucalpan, particularly Naucalpan's General Directorate for the Environment (*Dirección General de Medio*

*Ambiente*) and the state of Mexico's General Directorate for Urban Development (*Dirección General de Desarrollo Urbano, Gobierno del Estado de México*). The second largest group of participants represent civil society, comprising a diversity of actors ranging from experienced activists involved in local environmental issues (*Fuerza Unida Emiliano Zapata, Nace el Arcoiris, SOS Mascotas*), young urban and environmental activists and experts (*Preserva Mañán, Bicimixtles, CAEM*) and leaders from the neighbours' associations such as the Coalición y Colonos de Naucalpan and citizen participation councils (*Comités de Participación Ciudadana, COPACIS*), including *COPACI Fraccionamiento El Parque* and *COPACI San Bartolo*.

Qualitatively, there have been waves of participation, reflecting changes in the weight that certain sectors have had in agenda-setting and decision-making within the UL, irrespective of their number of participants. These have occurred with sectors like academia and expert consultants (*FES Acatlán, Ecourba, Universidad Iberoamericana*) which have been more influential in UL meetings towards the end of 2023, despite not having been the largest groups in the UL overall.

Together, the UL Naucalpan discussed and developed a shared vision for 2030 and an associated action plan for transforming the intervention area. The main themes of the shared vision were efficient buildings, sustainable urban mobility, integrated management of solid urban waste, nature-based solutions in public spaces and clean water bodies. The action plan was tailored to this vision, including key activities for the short, medium and long term and related responsibilities. Some of the short-term activities became the UL experimental initiatives that four UL working groups subsequently designed and implemented, starting in 2023 (see **UL initiatives**). Full UL meetings became less important while the working groups organized internal presentations, discussions and workshops. These involved external experts and academics, usually identified and suggested by WRI México.



Placement of urban furniture and vegetation in Plaza Revolución and delimitation of crosswalks, August 2023. © WRI México

The UL working groups still require coordination by WRI México and do not yet work independently. WhatsApp groups have become very important for internal working group communication and logistical planning. In addition to the UL meetings, several exchanges have been held in parallel with private and academia members, mainly developers or architectural firms with interests in the area. The exchanges kept these stakeholder groups informed, but have so far had little success in bringing them into the lab.

The shift from general UL discussions on a vision for a future Naucalpan to UL initiatives as experimental projects resulted in noticeable

## UL initiatives

The UL Naucalpan designed and implemented four experimental initiatives dealing with nature-based solutions, public space and safe pedestrian environments, solid waste management and public transport. They aimed to test and learn from decarbonization solutions that were short-term, affordable and easy-to-implement actions. The hands-on initiatives were complemented with awareness-raising activities and executed by different working groups (WGs) (see **Figure 3**, page 13).

The **WG Green Infrastructure** contributed to the recovery of a degraded space on the banks of the Hondo River by incorporating nature-based solutions. The aim was to contribute to environmental comfort, reduce heat, reverse soil degradation and improve the perception of public safety and the overall landscape. The intervention took place in Naucalpan's *El Conde* neighbourhood, where residents have informally lived in former railway wagons for a long time. There is a need for quality public space, as much of the area is covered with concrete and contains very few plants and trees. The WG worked with residents to create a rain garden and a muralist, invited by a local NGO, painted a large mural with community members and their children. All of this was done with support from municipal government officials, COPACIS and members of civil society. In the future, the aim is

dynamic changes. When the hands-on tasks in the working groups for the UL initiatives started, the active participation of many UL members increased, and technical experts and academics joined the UL. Women also became more involved. In 2023, 42 per cent of UL members were women, 4 per cent more than in the previous year. Therefore, starting the implementation of UL initiatives was a turning point for the UL. It validated the engagement of UL members and generated greater trust and stronger links between them. This shift also encouraged more direct participation of residents interested in tangible local improvements (see **Box 1**). In contrast, members primarily interested in exploiting the UL politically were discouraged.

to integrate this project into a broader restoration plan for the Hondo River by the municipal government.

The **WG Public Space and Safe Pedestrian Environments** focused on *Plaza Revolución*, a large, central public square made of concrete in downtown Naucalpan. The initiative aimed to improve the space's overall quality, with a focus on pedestrian safety. This involved introducing plants for shade and heat reduction, diversifying usage options and providing cultural and educational activities. For structuring the area in this manner, a design contest was organized, accompanied by surveys, interviews and participatory design workshops involving square users. As a result, in collaboration with the municipal government, the WG placed furniture like roofed benches, planted heat-resistant vegetation and created three crosswalks. People immediately started using the newly designed space with benches in the shade, even before they had been fully completed. Unfortunately, several plants and benches were stolen or destroyed shortly thereafter. Nonetheless, the remaining plants and benches are being used, including by a local newspaper seller, who tends to several plant pots, and the children's skating group and their families, who have repurposed some benches and the designated pedestrian circuits for their skating lessons.

## BOX 1

### The importance of context-specific UL initiatives

In February 2023, I joined the UL Naucalpan as a resident and architecture lecturer at the local Faculty of Higher Studies (*Facultad de Estudios Superiores Acatlán*). A distinctive feature of the UL Naucalpan's intervention area is the presence of a significant "floating" population compared to the relatively low number of permanent residents. This phenomenon is largely driven by the existing urban infrastructure and commercial activities in the area. Furthermore, vehicular mobility in the area presents challenges due to the significant influx of people commuting in and out of Naucalpan for work or other purposes, coupled with the diverse array of non-mass transit options available.

The proposed UL initiatives were designed with the needs of the local community and this floating population in mind. This was reflected in the selected projects, which were different from those of other cities where ULs were established under TUC, due to the particular demographic of the intervention area in Naucalpan.

The acceptance and success of the UL initiatives demonstrated the relevance of participatory designs and the adaptation to local needs. My experience in the UL Naucalpan underlines the importance of considering the demographic particularities and specific community needs when planning urban interventions. I hope that this approach will continue to drive future projects in the area, especially those aimed at improving sustainable mobility and quality of life for all residents, both permanent and temporary.

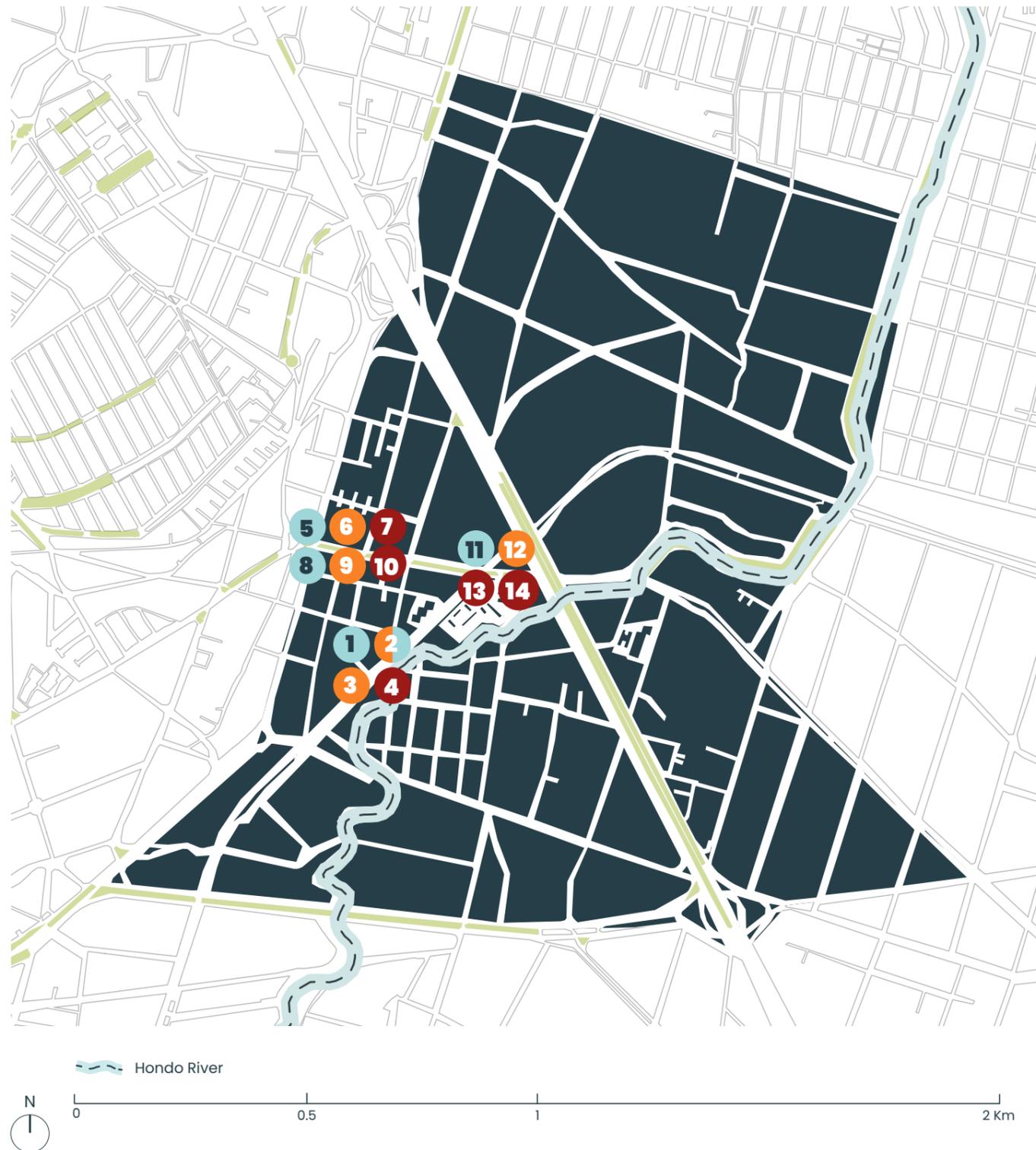
**Written by Ruth Camacho Alcocer**

*FES Acatlán, UNAM / Ecorbá / UL Naucalpan*



Both images: Waste management training, August 2023. © WRI México

- Physical transformation
- Awareness-raising
- Data generation



**Initiatives**

**Lead implementing organizations\***

WG	Initiatives	Lead implementing organizations*
<b>Green Infrastructure</b>	<b>1</b> Construction of a rain garden and incorporation of diverse vegetation such as aromatic species, along with new soil	OAPAS; Mujeres con Alma Hope; DGMA; FES Acatlán; Preserva Madín; DGSP; Residents; COPACIS representatives
	<b>2</b> Community painting of a mural on the banks of the river	
	<b>3</b> Mobilization of a local elementary school that uses a former train wagon alongside the riverbank for classes to raise awareness of and engagement to the intervention	
	<b>4</b> Socio-environmental evaluation of the intervention	
<b>Public Space and Safe Pedestrian Environments</b>	<b>5</b> Collaborative design and implementation of a tactical urbanism intervention for the creation of safer pedestrian crosswalks, as well as the installation of urban furniture, a playground, pergolas and vegetation using native species	DGMA; Colegio de Arquitectos del Estado de México; Congreso del Estado de México; DGSP; FES Acatlán; DGDU; Residents; COPACIS representatives
	<b>6</b> Student design competition	
	<b>7</b> Socio-environmental evaluation of the intervention	
<b>Solid Waste Management</b>	<b>8</b> Installation of waste collection and recycling bins	Residents; COPACIS representatives; Consejero del H. Ayuntamiento de Naucalpan; DGMA; Mascotas SOS; DGSP
	<b>9</b> Training on sustainable waste management practices and the circular economy	
	<b>10</b> Socio-environmental evaluation of the intervention	
<b>Public Transport</b>	<b>11</b> Installation of a green roof bus stop with rainwater harvesting and enhanced lighting; collaborative design and implementation of a tactical urbanism intervention for the bus stop bays; and improvement of pedestrian crosswalk safety and accessibility	EcoUrba; Damas y Solidarios de Lomas de Bellavista; DGMA; DGDU; Residents; COPACIS representatives; SEDUO; WRI México
	<b>12</b> Training on green roofs	
	<b>13</b> Pre and post-intervention evaluation of socio-environmental and mobility conditions	
	<b>14</b> Air quality assessment	

FIGURE 3: MAP OF UL INITIATIVES IN NAUCALPAN, STATE OF MEXICO, MEXICO. © WRI MEXICO AND UNU-EHS.

\*It is not the organizations themselves as a whole that are leading the initiatives, but rather UL members or other individuals who represent these organizations.



Both images: Installation of a green-roofed bus stop on the 16 de Septiembre Avenue, August 2023. © WRI México

The **WG Solid Waste Management** aimed to raise awareness for and promote sustainable waste management practices in the *Plaza Revolución* through in-situ workshops, environmental education and the introduction of covered waste containers made of recycled materials. The experimental initiative achieved two main goals. Firstly, it recognized the need for improved local waste management logistics by interconnecting local efforts. Most of the participants in this activity showed a high interest in learning more about recycling and waste management. Secondly, the initiative responded to the public interest and demand for more waste collection points. Naucalpan's General Directorate for the Environment transcended its official jurisdiction (officially, the General Directorate for Public Services is in charge of waste collection) to collect batteries, for example, after seeing the high interest that people showed and the high quantities of materials they collected.

The **WG Public Transport** installed a green-roofed bus stop on the *16 de Septiembre Avenue*, one of the busiest roads in the area. This initiative improved air quality and provided more shade and cooling. In addition, the new bus stop also features inclusive amenities like wheelchair access and a swing. The WG also helped reorganize and slow traffic in the area by reclaiming a lane from parked cars through tactical urbanism<sup>1</sup>. This involved painting artistic patterns on the road to mark pedestrian crossings and pick-up and drop-off areas for passengers. Primary goals included the reduction of risks during patient loading and unloading at a nearby clinic and the promotion of shared use of roads by pedestrians, cars and public transport. Unfortunately, traffic improvements were short-lived due to local restrictions and passers-by still have to get used to the new bus stop. However, the municipal government agreed to keep the green-roofed bus stop permanently and expressed interest in installing more in other parts of the municipality.

<sup>1</sup> Tactical urbanism refers to temporary, low-cost interventions in urban spaces aimed at improving functionality, liveability and community engagement. These initiatives typically involve citizens, activists or artists using readily available materials to transform streets, parks or other public areas. They can also serve as means of testing creative solutions to urban challenges before committing to large-scale changes.



Installation of a green-roofed bus stop on the 16 de Septiembre Avenue, August 2023. © WRI México



Placement of urban furniture and vegetation in Plaza Revolución and delimitation of crosswalks, August 2023. © WRI México

# Challenges and Key Achievements from the UL Naucalpan

After almost two years in operation, the challenges and key achievements of the UL Naucalpan provide valuable lessons for sustaining ongoing activities, accelerating broader transformations in Naucalpan and guiding similar efforts elsewhere:

## 1. RECOGNIZING THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF UL MEMBERSHIP FLUCTUATION

Attracting and retaining UL members is a challenging and time-intensive task. While the UL Naucalpan demonstrates that having a core group of permanent participants is critical, it also shows that UL participants and UL participation change over time – and that these social dynamics can be positive: new UL members with different organizational affiliations, skills and resources can make new contributions to the work of the UL.

The UL Naucalpan experienced different waves of participation. Because of the formal agreement signed with the mayor in June 2022, government officials from various state and municipal departments constituted the majority of UL members from the beginning. Civil society representatives were initially sceptical that the UL could therefore turn out to be a government-dominated space. UL

meetings required clear guidelines and strong facilitation to establish the UL as a neutral space where all members have a say and can be sure that none of the actors dominate.

Over time, some UL members stopped attending while new ones joined. Such a shift was most visible when the lab moved from general discussions and vision-development to the planning and implementation of the experimental projects in the working groups. Two of the most obvious changes were that new actors with a technical or academic background joined once the working groups were established, and that the women's participation level rose. This dynamic shows that, while certain waves of participation in ULs may appear challenging, they can have positive aspects and bring in new perspectives and capabilities that contribute to the UL's work.



Another interesting insight is that new members accepted and built on the rules of interaction and the vision that the UL had developed earlier rather than challenging them. So far, this has given the UL Naucalpan a good combination of consistency and new input.

**LESSON:** If a core group of UL members exists, changes in UL membership are to be expected and are often beneficial. Such change can already be planned for as soon as the UL enters a new phase, for example when moving from planning to implementation of concrete action. UL facilitators should support the integration of new members to maximize the benefit of their new perspectives and contributions for ongoing UL work.

## 2. ADDRESSING LIMITED REPRESENTATION OF RESIDENTS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

While UL members change, there are sectors that are not yet adequately represented in the UL. The UL Naucalpan faced this challenge concerning two specific groups: residents, particularly settlers of informal areas, and the private sector. These stakeholders are also often absent in urban labs and participatory initiatives more generally. In this specific context, there are several factors to understand this absence.

The involvement of residents often varies based on factors such as gender and socioeconomic status. It is particularly challenging to involve low-income communities, such as residents of informal settlements, for different reasons. One such group in the UL Naucalpan's intervention area is the community living in railway wagons on the banks of the Hondo River. There were different opinions among UL members about whether they should participate in the UL or not, despite living within the intervention area. Some members saw the political risk that these residents might regard their participation as an acknowledgement of their residential rights. So far, the success of attempts to include them has been limited. One of the reasons for this limited success could be the issue of insecurity. Residents and UL members said that robberies and alleged drug dealing activities in these areas are of particular concern to them. At the same time, this also is a relevant topic in the rest of Naucalpan for the implementation of UL initiatives. The next phase of the project will explore new formats to attract and facilitate the participation of typically marginalized groups in particular.

Private sector representatives have not attended UL meetings regularly either, although they have been frequently invited to participate. To address this, WRI México has organized parallel meetings with some of these representatives to talk about their interests and convince them to join. It is clear to all UL members that changes with a positive impact on the livelihoods of people in Naucalpan and the climate can only be made with the factories and businesses that characterize the area. Therefore, in the next phase of the project, new attempts will be made to engage private sector representatives by explicitly linking UL goals with private sector interests to deliver benefits that will have a positive and lasting impact on Naucalpan.

**LESSON:** Participation processes need a sound methodology and creative thinking. Even with the best of intentions and adequate facilitation, certain groups or sectors are particularly difficult to involve in the ULs. This may be because some UL members have doubts and see potential risks associated with the participation of others, or because the other actors see no benefits or are just not interested. Going forward, the UL Naucalpan will consider alternative, innovative and locally specific approaches and formats to encourage participation and meaningful engagement by these stakeholders.

Restore a degraded space along the banks of the Hondo River incorporating green infrastructure criteria, September 2023. © WRI México



## BOX 2

## Government-civil society collaboration: Exchanging perspectives and working together

The day that the UL initiative “Safer Pedestrian Environments” was implemented in *Plaza Revolución*, the activist Xiomara Trujillo Gutiérrez and local public officials – all of them UL members – teamed up to paint recycled tires and plant vegetation to make the square greener and nicer. While waiting for more materials to arrive, they started a conversation about an activist who had been very critical of the local government on social media. One of the officials expressed his opinion by saying that there was a lot of criticism from activists and the public, but that little collaborative action was taken. A younger official emphasized that that day’s UL initiative was an example of how activists and government can work together on concrete actions despite differences and criticism.

While reflecting on her work in the UL Naucalpan, Xiomara stated: “Since the establishment of the UL Naucalpan, a close collaboration between civil society and government officials has been promoted, always recognizing the importance of working together to address the challenges of climate change. This collaboration has allowed for the exchange of knowledge, experiences and proposals to identify effective measures. Despite the efforts made, I recognize that there are still significant challenges, especially a lack of consensus and a lack of coordinated actions at the municipal level. I call on all actors involved to focus our interest on concrete actions that address the main causes of the problems in order to avoid making isolated efforts. (...) The UL Naucalpan has made significant progress thanks to the collaboration between civil society and government officials. However, more commitment and coordinated action is needed to address the remaining

barriers, so we can ensure a more sustainable future for generations to come.”

Silvia Philippe Cárdenas shared the sentiment: “Naucalpan faces important challenges on its path towards sustainability. The municipality’s Climate Action Programme 2013–2023 has been the guideline for the implementation of projects to accelerate Naucalpan’s sustainability transformation. The participation of residents and the private sector will allow us to outline new policies and actions to continue on the path towards sustainability. Participation will be fundamental to achieve this; the UL Naucalpan, implemented as part of Transformative Urban Coalitions since 2022, is a great international initiative along the same lines. Naucalpan’s Directorate for the Environment has been fully committed throughout the UL process, driven by the conviction that it is a space for reflection where government, civil society organizations and citizens in general share visions, discuss alternatives and propose solutions to the socio-environmental challenges and conflicts in Naucalpan. The strategic vision for a sustainable and resilient Naucalpan in the face of climate change must be based on initiatives emanating from plural spaces, led by the government and the community in a coordinated manner and taking advantage of existing transnational links.”

**Written by Xiomara Trujillo Gutiérrez**

*SOS Mascotas y Rescate Animal / Preserva Madín / UL Naucalpan*

**and Silvia Philippe Cárdenas**

*Subdirección de Gestión Ambiental, Dirección General de Medio Ambiente, Municipio de Naucalpan / UL Naucalpan*

### 3. BUILDING ON DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES TO FOSTER NEW NETWORKS AND MUTUAL TRUST

ULs are supposed to be neutral spaces for exchange, co-design and collaboration. In the almost two years the UL Naucalpan has existed, facilitators and UL members have worked hard to translate this vision into reality. Over time, this exchange of diverse perspectives has led to new networks, common learning and increased mutual trust – particularly between civil society and municipal authorities (see Box 2). This does not imply that conflicts do not occur, but rather that conflict management – based on good facilitation and constructive discussion among UL members – can contribute to developing commonly agreed solutions. Some of the key oppositional perspectives that have emerged in the UL Naucalpan led to intense discussions, including the following dynamics: expert–non-expert, government–non-government (residents as well as civil society), upper and middle class–lower class, and young–elderly. Sometimes, opposing perspectives even existed within the same groups, such as veteran environmental activists and young climate activists, for example.

As the UL meetings and discussions progressed, participants got to know each other and learned that all UL members were able to contribute something valuable to the exchange. People began to talk to each other across sectoral or other boundaries and tried to anticipate and include each other’s perspectives in discussions. Furthermore, many UL members have proactively begun to interact and build networks with members from other sectors or levels of hierarchy. For example, government representatives used UL meetings to share information with colleagues from other departments or levels of hierarchy for inter-departmental coordination (see **Box 3**). Collaboration between officials from different

departments or agencies in small groups within the neutral space of the UL helped to break down departmental silos and fostered inter-departmental and cross-sectoral exchange. Networks also emerged between academics or people with technical expertise and civil society groups or government representatives. Even activists who were often very critical of government got to know government representatives better and discovered common grounds for action. Women tended to be the primary initiators of cross-sectoral and cross-hierarchical exchanges and networks, although this was not always the case.

Despite challenges, such as the absence of strong civil society groups focused on climate change in Naucalpan and unclear climate priorities within certain government departments, the UL Naucalpan has prioritized addressing existing challenges while forging links to climate issues. Moving forward into the next phase of the project, efforts will continue to clarify and strengthen the nexus between climate concerns, existing challenges and local solutions, building upon the foundation of trust and collaboration established within the UL.

**LESSON:** By providing a setting for the exchange and constructive discussion of diverse perspectives, knowledge, interests and opinions, the UL approach fosters the emergence of new networks as well as mutual trust and cohesion. This is particularly evident between civil society and government in an otherwise ‘low-trust in government’ environment and provides a strong basis for collective climate action.

BOX 3

## How ULs help to improve interdepartmental relations

During a meeting of the UL Naucalpan in October 2022, a group worked for almost an hour on prioritizing environmental activities in the intervention area. They exchanged information, experiences and opinions on how these activities could be carried out, who could be responsible for what, and which resources were available. After that, they took a break and started chatting informally.

One of the representatives from Naucalpan's General Directorate for the Environment talked to an official from the General Directorate for Culture and Education. They exchanged information about the municipal offices where they worked and determined if they had any acquaintances in common. After a few minutes, they started sharing information on projects managed in their respective departments that were related to what they had just discussed in their UL group. Concretely, one of them shared that they were promoting the rehabilitation of public spaces to make them safer for women. The other official responded they were not aware of the project but that their department could easily be involved because they were in charge of greening public spaces. When the break ended, the two exchanged contact information to keep in touch beyond the work in the UL Naucalpan.

This interaction illustrates how the UL Naucalpan has broken siloes and facilitated encounters among officials from different municipal departments, sometimes also from different levels of government. In doing so, the UL not only fosters the exchange of relevant information but also the integration of governmental initiatives towards sustainability.

Written by **Marisol Romero Magallán**  
Ethnographer / UL Naucalpan



Implementation of an Ecological Public Transport Stop, to improve the existing informal public transport stop, in front of the clinic of IMSS at the intersection of 16 de septiembre street and train tracks, August 2023. © WRI México

### 4. NAVIGATING THE PARTICIPATION OF AND THE DEPENDENCE ON GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES

The UL Naucalpan predominantly comprises representatives from municipal and state government authorities. Participants from various government departments provide expertise and resources for the UL's initiatives. While this involvement in and contribution to the UL's process by government actors is laudable, it is also risky. First, there is the scepticism from other members that the UL could be or turn into a government-dominated space. Second, the powerful position of government authorities from state and municipal government level could lead to political conflicts. Anticipating such UL dynamics was effective in the UL Naucalpan. The measures undertaken by WRI México as the UL facilitator, including the use of icebreakers and small group work that cut across sectors, departments and hierarchies, helped to prevent government representatives dominating the UL process or enter into conflictive political discussions. In addition, WRI México addressed these issues proactively by establishing means for UL member liaison, communication and monitoring. After each meeting, several members were contacted for bilaterally resolving doubts and concerns and for motivating them to attend the following meeting and inviting others to do so. While the intensity of these liaison activities subsided somewhat over time, by mid-2023 a large part of WRI México's work on the ULs still consisted of regularly and individually communicating with UL members via multiple channels, mostly through messaging apps, social

media and phone. These constant liaison activities to retain existing and recruit new members were essential for the UL's acceptability.

Finally, another risk of having many UL members from government authorities is that the UL could eventually become dependent on government actors. This dependence limits other UL member contributions and eventually the sustainability of the UL and its initiatives. Striking the right balance between including the government for implementation, policy change and long-term transformation and becoming too dependent on them is therefore difficult.

**LESSON:** While strong government authorities' participation and support are critical for ULs, being too dependent on them is a risk for UL neutrality, for constructive discussions and for its potential transformative impact. As an opportunity for UL operation, sustainability and the scaling of experimental projects, government participation and support therefore must be carefully balanced with that of other sectors. constructive discussions and for its potential transformative impact. As an opportunity for UL operation, sustainability and the scaling of experimental projects, government participation and support therefore must be carefully balanced with that of other sectors.



Placement of urban furniture and vegetation in Plaza Revolución and delimitation of crosswalks, August 2023. © WRI México



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## ABOUT

# Transformative Urban Coalitions

Transformative Urban Coalitions (TUC) is implemented by the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), the World Resources Institute (WRI) together with its national offices in Brazil and Mexico, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) together with IIED – América Latina in Argentina, and the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), with support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action under its International Climate Initiative (IKI).

TUC seeks to shift the sustainability trajectory of cities towards zero carbon emissions by 2050 by altering the deeper social, technological and political structures and systems that are currently reinforcing high-carbon, resource-intensive urbanization. To achieve this goal, TUC facilitates the establishment of transformative urban coalitions in five Latin American cities to develop new strategies for addressing local challenges in urban development and inequality while at the same time reducing carbon emissions.

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