



TUC PROFILE NO. 7

LEÓN, MEXICO

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LEÓN

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 León, established in León, Guanajuato, 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 United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) in collaboration with the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), the Mexico office of the World Resources Institute (WRI México) and the participants of the UL León. 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: Environmental and social recovery of a public space based on green infrastructure criteria and participatory design sessions in the Killian II neighbourhood, August 2023. © WRI México

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AUTHORS

United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS)

Andrea Ramírez-Agudelo
Sabrina González Barbosa
Flávia Guerra
Alejandra Ramos-Galvez
Simone Sandholz

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)

Michael Roll

World Resources Institute (WRI)

WRI México

Mariana Campos-Sánchez
Ana Iris Enríquez-Alcaraz
Andrea Villasís-Escobedo
Óscar Jair Pozos-Espinosa

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Adrián Gómez González, *Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Ordenamiento Territorial de Guanajuato (SMAOT)*

Alejandra Mirelles Villasana, *United States-Mexico Chamber of Commerce (USMCOC)*

Alex Caldera-Ortega, *Universidad de Guanajuato*

Alma Cantú Sánchez, *Instituto Municipal de Planeación de León (IMPLAN)*

Ana del Socorro, *Comité Colonos Barrio Arriba*

Areli Vásquez Juárez, *Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores (ENES) León*

Arlette Ramírez, *Colonos Valle Antigua*

Axel Sandoval Lozano, *ENES León*

Bruno Cervantes, *Adro Fine Shoemakers México*

Cecilia Rodríguez, *Comité Colonos Barrio Arriba*

Claudia García, *URBE León*

Daniel Betancourt, *Dirección General de Medio Ambiente de León (DGMA)*

Daniel Tagle Zamora, *Universidad de Guanajuato*

Dulce Ruíz, *Dirección General de Economía de León*

Edgar Jiménez Navarro, *Dirección General de Desarrollo Urbano de León (DGDU)*

Enrique Kato, *EKM Consultores*

Ernesto Kuri Ramírez, *Sistema de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado de León (SAPAL)*

Ernesto Ramírez García, *URBE León*

Esteban Guerra, *Dirección General de Movilidad de León (DGM)*

Eugenia Méndez, *Cámara Nacional de Comercio, Servicios y Turismo de León*

Fabio Sandoval, *DGM*

Fernando Herrera, *Gnosis XXI*

Francisco Flores Correa, *FAB City León*

Frida Reyes Velázquez, *Mujeres en Bici*

Guadalupe López, *DGMA*

Hadid Guerrero Juárez, *URBE León*

Jaime Samperio, *DGMA*

Jairo Reyes Plata, *ENES León*

Jorge Cordero Duran, *Instituto Mexicano del Transporte*

Jorge Miranda, *Urbe consultores*

José García Peña, *IMPLAN*

José Martínez, *SMAOT*

Juan García, *Sistema Integral de Aseo Público (SIAP)*

Juan Pablo Alvarado, *DGDU*

Juan Morales, *IMPLAN*

Juan Antonio Ruelas, *SMAOT*

Leonardo Sánchez, *Observatorio Ciudadano León (OCL)*

Lourdes Refugio Martínez, *Comité Colonos Barrio Arriba*

Luis Gutiérrez, *Freelance*

Luis Oseguera Toledo, *SAPAL*

Pablo Tapia, *ENES León*

Paola Fernández Gómez, *IMPLAN*

Rafael Pérez Hernández, *IMPLAN*

Rebeca Monroy Torres, *Universidad de Guanajuato*

Ricardo Ibelles, *Fundación Rescate Arbóreo (FURA)*

Sergio Domínguez, *SMAOT*

Sergio Ponce, *USMCOC*

Susana López, *IMPLAN*

Verónica Rico, *ECOBAG*



Improving pedestrian spaces between Blvd. Adolfo López Mateos, Blvd. Vasco de Quiroga and Calzada de los Héroes, July 2023. © WRI México

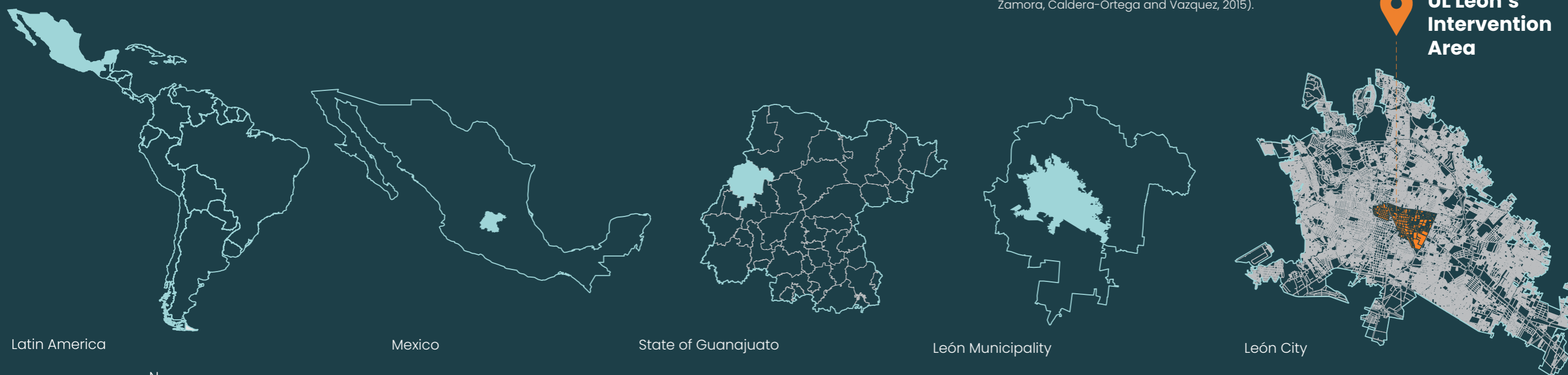
The Urban Lab: León

UL context

A TUC Urban Lab (UL) was established in León, Mexico, with support from both municipal and state governments (**Figure 1**). Situated in the state of Guanajuato, León stands out as the most populated municipality within the state and the third most populous in the country, boasting over 1.7 million inhabitants (INEGI, 2020). The city of León de los Aldama, hereafter León, exhibits high urbanization and economic dynamism, primarily related to its leather tanning and shoemaking industry, which supplies the *Zona Piel* (leather zone) commercial area in the city centre. León is renowned for its status as both a tourist destination and a commercial hub.

The origins of the leather tanning and shoemaking industry can be traced back to Barrio Arriba, located within the historic centre of the city, where the tanneries were once concentrated. However, the relocation of these tanneries, along with the closure of key businesses and institutions in the area, led to the decline of *Barrio Arriba* (Guerra et al. 2022; Tagle Zamora, Caldera-Ortega and Vazquez, 2015).

León's economic dynamism has been associated with various challenges, including drought and decreasing water quality and availability. In addition, a heavy reliance on motorized mobility, mainly individual car use, is responsible for high congestion, accidents, noise, emissions and air pollution (Gobierno de México, 2022; 2024). Nevertheless, León has advanced in the promotion of active mobility, for example by establishing the *Ruta León* (León Route), a recreational cycling route that traverses the city centre on Sundays and starts in the Explora Science Park in *Distrito León*. Moreover, different local organizations promoting safe cycling have gained visibility in the city in recent years, with links to youth and gender groups (Guerra et al. 2022).



Latin America

Mexico

State of Guanajuato

León Municipality

León City



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

The city is increasingly affected by extreme weather events, particularly heatwaves and droughts. The media frequently highlights these pressing issues, emphasizing the strain on water reservoirs and the imposition of strict usage limits. All Guanajuato municipalities, including León, have been affected by drought in the last two decades (Gobierno de México, 2024).

Despite the existence of various participatory governance mechanisms such as the participatory budget introduced by the municipal government in 2022, León faces significant challenges in fostering collaboration to address these climate and social challenges. Although many governmental and non-governmental organizations are making efforts to work on these

issues, efforts have remained isolated as there has been limited collaboration between involved actors. Therefore, the UL León aimed to establish a diverse coalition of stakeholders to co-create a shared vision for 2030 as well as an action plan to transform a specific intervention area (Roll et al. 2024). The UL intervention area is a strategically significant area in the city centre, encompassing some of the main urban facilities in León, including the bus terminal, the *Zona Piel* and the *Distrito León* recreational and cultural complex. It also includes the *Killian II* neighbourhood, a residential area close to *Zona Piel*, and *Barrio Arriba*.

Facilitated by WRI México, TUC's implementing partner in Mexico, the UL has been in operation since early 2022 (Figure 2).



Temporary extension of the León Route in Adolfo Lopez Mateos Boulevard, September 2023. © WRI México



Environmental and social recovery of a public space based on green infrastructure criteria and participatory design sessions in the Killian II neighbourhood, August 2023. © WRI México

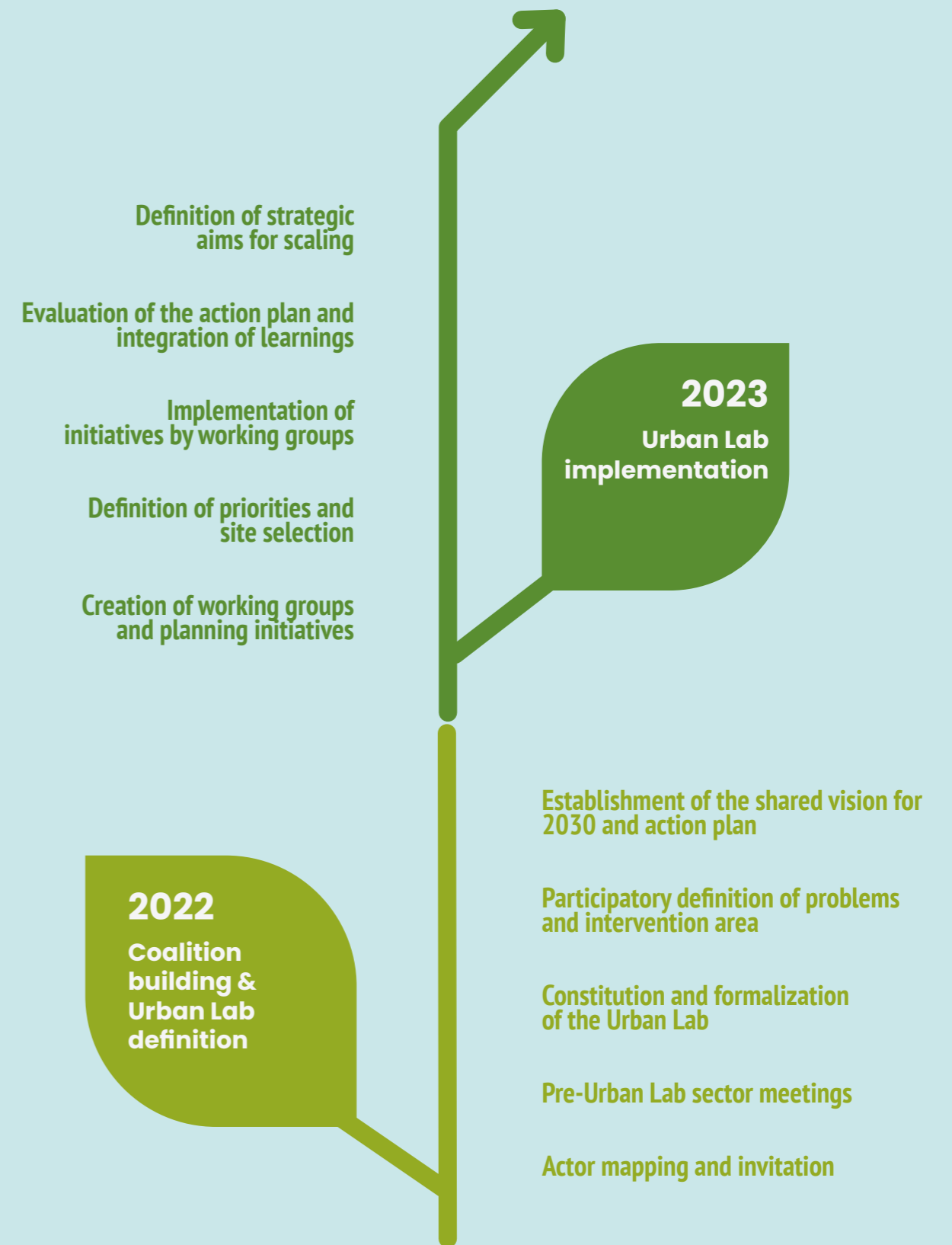


FIGURE 2: URBAN LAB TIMELINE, INCLUDING KEY UL PHASES AND ACTIVITIES

Operation of the UL

The UL León sought to integrate different sectors, including public authorities as well as civil society organizations, academia and the private sector. The first UL meetings aimed to collectively define the intervention area, identify the main problems and opportunities for transformation within this area, and create a shared vision of what it could look like in 2030. This vision aimed to transform the inhabitants' quality of life by reducing emissions while considering social justice.

The UL León operates with different engagement types. The centrepiece has been monthly UL meetings of all UL members. Between the start of TUC in May 2022 and December 2023, 12 UL meetings and several parallel sessions and activities were held in León. Monthly UL meetings usually took place on Tuesday afternoons, as per participants' availability, and lasted for four hours. These in-person meetings were held in a hotel, offering a central and neutral location within the intervention area. This facilitated the logistics of the sessions as well as the accessibility, attendance and interest of participants. In addition, the UL operation also encompassed sectoral meetings between specific UL member organizations and WRI México, alongside the implementation of UL initiatives and associated meetings held by working groups.

Across the 12 UL meetings, the average attendance comprised 29 participants, with men making up about 70 per cent of attending UL members. This trend is attributed to a higher representation of men in public authorities and other organizations participating in the UL. However, a notable shift has occurred in the gender composition since mid-2023. Following increased engagement with female community leaders while carrying out UL initiatives, there was a significant increase in female participation, resulting in a more balanced gender distribution in UL meetings since then.

The monthly UL meetings were planned and facilitated by WRI México using different tools to allow for dynamic in-person exchanges. Tools such as icebreakers, voting, role-playing and design workshops were used to promote trust-building and constructive dialogue. For communication outside of meetings, e-mail, a shared online folder and a WhatsApp group were

used. WRI México designed, adapted and provided all these tools along with the meetings' agendas to keep UL members engaged and informed about the process. UL members recognized these efforts, highlighting the benefits of these routines for increasing the transparency and accountability of UL processes.

The work of the UL in 2022 was mainly focused on collaborative diagnosis and participatory planning to build a shared 2030 vision with an action plan for the intervention area in León. Then, 2023 was dedicated to the implementation of UL initiatives, which were prioritized and selected in the action plan. These initiatives were designed as temporary, short-term, affordable and easy-to-implement actions in the UL intervention area that allow for experimentation and learning. Interventions also showed impacts to UL members and others, helping to generate further commitment and attract new UL members. Implemented initiatives were evaluated by the UL to reflect and, if needed, modify solutions and draw lessons for future activities. Implementing UL initiatives allowed for developing skills and competences through this process.

UL members formed a total of four working groups for the various UL initiatives (see **Figure 3**, page 10-11). Most UL work thereafter unfolded within these smaller working groups' sessions which relied heavily on online meetings. The introduction of working groups for implementing UL initiatives not only changed the format and timing of UL meetings, but also altered the dynamics of UL participation. On the one hand, online meetings allowed more UL members to join in planning activities. Additionally, the implementation of UL initiatives in the territory, typically taking place during the weekends, resulted in stronger leadership of women, mainly community leaders. Notably, the representation of the local community spiked with the start of the implementation of UL initiatives. On the other hand, some individuals involved in the UL in a professional capacity, including representatives from public authorities, were sometimes unable to participate on implementation days. However, they supported the UL initiatives in other ways through material contributions, administrative permits, and the facilitation of information for decision-making.



- Physical transformation
- Awareness-raising
- Data generation
- Advocacy



FIGURE 3: MAP OF UL INITIATIVES IN LEÓN, GUANAJUATO, MEXICO. © WRI MÉXICO AND UNU-EHS.

	Initiatives	Lead implementing organizations*
WG Solid Waste Management	1 Participatory socio-environmental diagnosis	Universidad de Guanajuato; EKM consultor; SMAOT; Cámara de comercio y turismo de León; DGMA; Fab City León; EcoBag; IMPLAN; Merchant; Cámara de comercio México-EU, capítulo Guanajuato; Colonos Valle Antigua
	2 Workshops on waste management, vermicomposting and home gardening	
	3 Socio-environmental evaluation of the intervention	
WG Pedestrian Crosswalks	4 Socio-spatial diagnosis	ENES León; Urbe; DGM; SMAOT; IMPLAN; Private consultants
	5 Improvement of intersection between main streets through tactical urbanism interventions and incorporation of vegetation and urban furniture	
	6 Socio-environmental evaluation of the tactical urbanism intervention	
	7 Positioning of active mobility and pedestrian safety topics within the municipal agenda	
WG León Route	4 Socio-spatial diagnosis	DGM; SMAOT; DGDU; Urbe; Mujeres en bici
	5 Extension of the recreational bicycle route	
	6 Socio-environmental evaluation of the intervention	
WG Green Spaces	8 Collaborative design and installation of urban furniture, vegetation, trees and new soil, and renovation of sport courts and playgrounds	SAPAL; DGMA; CROTALUS; ENES León; IMPLAN; FURA
	9 Socio-environmental evaluation of the intervention	
All WGs	10 Air quality assessment	WRI México

*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.

BOX 1

Barrio Arriba and women's leadership

In Latin American societies like León, women often balance roles as caretakers of their homes and as economic providers. Ana, Cecilia, Gabriela and Lula from the Neighbours' Committee of *Barrio Arriba* (*Comité de Colonos Barrio Arriba*) are prime examples. For them, 'home' extends beyond the walls of their own houses to the care and improvement of their neighbourhood. These leaders have confronted both neighbourly apathy and the limitations of local authorities. Nevertheless, they have fought to restore green areas in their neighbourhood, promoted health and fitness campaigns, and sought solutions to economic and environmental issues. Their influence continues growing, with more women joining them and bringing their children to the Committee's activities, where they discuss topics such as climate change and proper waste management.

Ana, Cecilia, Gabriela and Lula joined the UL through activities conducted by the UL in Barrio Arriba. Their critical and determined voices stand out in this space, even among men in public offices. The workshops promoted by the UL – ranging from compost manufacturing and waste revaluation to the impacts of poor air quality on health – have enriched their discourse and ability to drive significant changes in their community.

The perseverance of these leaders, combined with newly acquired skills, has turned them into crucial agents of change. Today, they are more than defenders of the Barrio Arriba; they are pioneers in a movement towards a sustainable and conscious life. This story underscores the importance of giving women a voice in the fight for climate action and social justice. It demonstrates how training can amplify their impact. Women's empowerment can transform individuals and entire communities, planting the seeds of change for future generations.

Written by **Andrea Villasís Escobedo**
WRI México



Building a community garden with vermicomposting workshops and other circular economy actions, October 2023. © WRI México

UL initiatives

Rooted in the action plan, the UL initiatives directly addressed identified priorities and opportunities within the intervention area. As a result, four temporary (short-term) interventions were selected to be executed in 2023 by working groups (WGs), covering solid waste management, pedestrian crosswalks, the extension of the León Route, and green spaces (**Figure 3**, page 10-11). Each of the initiatives were preceded by a participatory diagnosis with the community. After the implementation, an evaluation of their socio-environmental effects followed.

The **WG Solid Waste Management** focused on the implementation of awareness-raising activities related to solid waste management in *Barrio Arriba*. The goal was to test more sustainable practices to manage the waste generated in this neighbourhood and the local food market. Participation of local businesses and private consultants played a key role in this initiative, through donations of materials, time and know-how.

Six workshops were held in 2023, including vermicomposting, soap production from recycled oil, waste separation and home gardening. The active participation of the residents, who were engaged through the Neighbours' Committee of *Barrio Arriba* (*Comité Colonos Barrio Arriba*) was remarkable. The dedication of these leaders, most of whom were women, was evident during the workshops (see **Box 1**). Over 30 community members have been trained in composting, vermicomposting and home gardening. Following these activities, more than 20 community members reported that they have improved their waste disposal habits, with some actively working on composting.

Motivated by the success of the place-based intervention and armed with new skills, female leaders were inspired to establish an urban garden for the benefit of the entire neighbourhood while promoting a zero-waste community in *Barrio Arriba*. However, availability of public space and ownership of land plots posed challenges for permanent implementation of such an initiative. The intervention enhanced the technical knowledge of the participants and brought together community engagement and commitment with climate action.

The **WG Pedestrian Crosswalks** aimed to enhance pedestrian safety at intersections of primary roads within the intervention area, namely *Blvd. Adolfo López Mateos*, *Blvd. Vasco de Quiroga* and *Calzada de los Héroes*. Implemented during July 2023, this tactical urbanism initiative helped to reduce crossing distances, followed standards and technical criteria that prioritized pedestrian and cyclist safety, improved the urban image of the area and addressed urban heat discomfort. The initiative included creating rest areas with adequate urban furniture, such as benches and umbrellas, as well as with vegetation to provide shade and increase thermal comfort. Simultaneously, temporary adjustments of road geometry and traffic flows improved car mobility and reduced the likelihood of accidents.

Through this initiative, the UL delivered a precedent for collaboration. Involving cycling collectives, government representatives, academia and the private sector, the diverse WG overcame challenges in aligning mobility priorities. Despite potential ideological differences, the initiative showcased effective coordination among UL members. The non-governmental representatives conducted studies, developed urban indicators and engaged final users through surveys, leading to positive acceptance of the interventions. Local authorities and other government agencies supported through material contributions, operational municipal staff support, administrative permits and the facilitation of information for decision-making. As a result, some adjustments became permanent due to positive social data outcomes. This decision reflects the desire of urban dwellers for the intervention's sustainability and replication in other city areas.

The **WG León Route** conducted a tactical urbanism intervention in September 2023, entailing the extension of the recreational cycling route, León Route, along *Blvd. Adolfo López Mateos*. The initiative involved the temporary closure of the southbound lane of one of the main roads in the city, the *Blvd. Adolfo López Mateos*, from *Malecón to Francisco Villa*, and on *Francisco Villa* from *Balmaceda to Explora*. This extension followed standards and technical criteria that prioritized pedestrian and cyclist safety, using vibrant colors to signal the cycling path on the road for visibility. Despite challenges in coordination between cycling collectives and local authorities, the intervention showcased joint decision-making and innovative problem-solving.

BOX 2

The **WG Green Spaces** aimed to enhance a local park in the *Killian II* neighbourhood, known for its high level of marginalization, insecurity and limited water access. According to León's Municipal Security Programme, *Parque Killian II* has had an increased incidence of crime and violence since 2018 (Gobierno Municipal de León, 2021). Executed in August 2023, the initiative involved planting trees and flowers, adding urban furniture and other landscaping measures to improve the park's image and encourage community use. Two workshops were conducted to foster the participatory design of these initiatives with the community. The involvement of individuals from academia, particularly women, was crucial for triggering and maintaining community interest and engagement in these exercises.

The municipality donated trees and plants during the intervention and provided a municipal

reforestation crew. Another UL member, a local environmental NGO, also donated trees. Community members, along with their children, contributed to painting, planting and cleaning the park. However, the plants deteriorated after the intervention, partly due to the lack of a community maintenance plan and the cost of water pipes. Vandalism also occurred due to non-recreational activities in the park at night.

In addition to workshops organized by the WGs, UL León members also engaged in other capacity development courses. These covered both technical topics such as indicators for socio-environmental monitoring and urban nature-based solutions, as well as soft skills like photography for awareness-raising and narrative building. Some of these trainings were provided by other TUC partners, while others were developed by and for the UL León (**Box 2**).

The role of capacity development in the UL León

Capacity development plays a crucial role in supporting the UL to work towards their ambitious environmental and social objectives. Through training and development programmes, participants – including representatives from state and municipal authorities, civil society, academia and the private sector (entrepreneurs) – have been equipped with new tools and knowledge to effectively address today's complex urban challenges. As a result, they have improved their ability to implement sustainable solutions and have strengthened interdisciplinary collaboration among UL members.

First, capacity development has enabled participants to better understand the interconnectedness between the environmental and social aspects of existing urban challenges. In addition, it has served to gain a deeper understanding of how decisions in urban design, land-use planning and infrastructure can have lasting effects on the population's quality of life and the urban environment's health. This shared awareness has catalysed the adoption of integrated approaches to address issues such as pollution in its various forms, waste management and urban biodiversity.

Second, capacity development has fostered collaboration and knowledge-sharing among the various UL members, and the diversity of perspectives and experiences has enriched the decision-making process and led to innovative solutions with relevant impacts. Creating a network of professionals trained in various disciplines has strengthened the UL's resilience in the face of emerging challenges, allowing for agile adaptation as urban circumstances evolve.

Finally, capacity development has driven the effective implementation of demonstration activities, by helping participants gain specific skills and lead the execution of initiatives – from rescuing and improving multifunctional green spaces to promoting sustainable environmental practices.

Overall, capacity development is an important element not just for the ongoing work of the UL in León but also, perhaps more importantly, to ensure the long-term sustainability, scalability and transferability of its achievements.

Written by Ernesto Kuri Ramirez
Sistema de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado de León / UL León



Improving pedestrian spaces between Blvd. Adolfo López Mateos, Blvd. Vasco de Quiroga and Calzada de los Héroes, July 2023. © WRI México



Building a community garden with vermicomposting workshops and other circular economy actions , October 2023. © WRI México

Challenges and Key Achievements from the UL León

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

1. ESTABLISHING THE UL AS A NEUTRAL SPACE FOR DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION

In general, the UL León is regarded as a relevant and neutral space for constructive discussions among different local actors and sectors. This is illustrated by the shared vision and a 2030 action plan developed for the UL intervention area. However, maintaining the neutrality of the UL still requires external facilitation by WRI México. Yet, the continued facilitation and managerial role played by WRI México could be a challenge for sustaining the UL beyond the project duration. Hence, first efforts are underway to develop a strategy that fosters local ownership and autonomous UL coordination. Additional efforts are needed to identify and promote new local leaderships, preferably among UL members, for sustaining, institutionalizing and scaling UL processes and outcomes beyond the experimental phase.

UL initiatives are directly aligned with the shared vision, specific problems identified within the intervention area, and UL members' interests and capabilities. The planning and design of the initiatives were tailored to each location to reach different goals and beneficiaries by making residents active participants in the solutions. Yet, these UL initiatives were approached as temporary, affordable and easy-to-implement activities. As a result, they were executed as pilots for testing and learning rather than as community-owned long-term processes. Despite the benefits and lessons that they delivered, the maintenance and replication of UL initiatives in León still face obstacles related to ensuring sufficient support (for the

active mobility initiatives, for example), safety (as witnessed in the green space in *Killian II*) and adequate spaces for permanent implementation (e.g. the community garden in *Barrio Arriba*).

The UL delivered a precedent for articulation of differing interests and perspectives for collaboration, notably through the pedestrian crosswalks' initiative. Despite potential ideological differences, the initiative built consensus and effective coordination among UL members regarding mobility priorities. By involving cycling collectives, government representatives, academia and the private sector, all WGs overcame challenges in aligning agendas. Thus, exploring innovative methods for achieving consensus in intervention planning, implementation and maintenance has been particularly effective in the context of León.

LESSON: The UL León has become a space for constructive discussions, gradually involving multiple stakeholders and fostering collaboration, despite differing interests. However, further steps are necessary to identify and empower new leaderships for sustaining, institutionalizing and scaling UL processes and outcomes. Enhancing community ownership, not just over implementation but also over planning and maintenance of solutions, could maximize the impact of the UL.



2. FOSTERING URBAN CHANGE THROUGH PARTICIPATION AND NEW LEADERSHIPS

The UL meetings, workshops and initiatives engaged and opened communication channels across different actors, fostering buy-in for participatory urban change. Having public institutions, civil society associations, academics and the private sector come together regularly and consistently to discuss León's key challenges has cultivated an understanding of the connections between environmental, climate and social issues. Furthermore, thanks to the engagement of various government representatives, the UL improved the coordination between agencies and departments.

The UL has particularly enabled new communication and exchange dynamics between civil society and local authorities. Public officials have improved access to municipal information for other UL members. When the implementation of the UL initiatives started, community representatives of the chosen intervention areas swiftly joined the UL, and the private sector played a significant role during the implementation of UL initiatives. Members of the UL León have disseminated the approach and achievements in other contexts, including by participating in regional forums and events such as the International Habitat Summit for Latin America and the Caribbean in 2023.

Traditionally, in León, there is a significantly higher presence of men in spaces dedicated to urban planning and strategic decision-making. However, the UL supported the emergence of more gender-diverse and collaborative partnerships while fostering new leadership for urban change. For example, women's leadership proved essential to executing UL initiatives while involving the local community. During the UL operation, their leadership also allowed new community members, such as children and students, to engage. Thus, the UL León demonstrated that active participation may shift taken-for-granted representativeness on who promotes urban change and how.

In this sense, the UL has led to increased community participation in and ownership over urban decisions and projects, stretching the boundaries of dominant top-down urban planning and management. For example, UL meetings have been pivotal in shaping and understanding climate actions and their connection to addressing social needs. As a result, a bottom-up approach to climate action has been initiated in the UL, establishing a solid foundation and a comprehensive methodology that allows for new ways of decision-making and collaborative efforts.

It remains difficult to integrate and prioritize climate and environmental goals within León's municipal agenda, particularly its economic and social development objectives. Enhanced partnerships with civil society, the private sector and communication-related actors are vital for this purpose and for accelerating the city's transformation. There is a need for translating the achievements and lessons from UL initiatives into climate policies, programmatic documents and structures of the municipal government as well as upcoming investments and projects by the private sector and civil society. Still, identified advances can be seen in the integration of UL members representing different interests, sectoral agendas and municipal departments.

LESSON: The diversity of interests and agendas represented in the UL León fostered experimentation at the intersection of environmental, climate and social challenges. While UL initiatives promoted community leadership, especially mobilizing female leaders, more strategic engagement is needed to foster meaningful citizen participation in urban change dynamics, including climate-related policy and investment decisions.



Environmental and social recovery of a public space based on green infrastructure criteria and participatory design sessions in the Killian II neighbourhood, August 2023. © WRI México



Building a community garden with vermicomposting workshops and other circular economy actions, October 2023.
© WRI México

3. DEVELOPING CAPACITIES AND SYNERGIES FOR CLIMATE ACTION

The coordinated efforts within the UL have enhanced members' capacity for shared visioning and for developing adequate solutions to local challenges, evidencing the benefits of multi-actor dynamics. Throughout the UL process, participants expressed a proactive interest in learning about opportunities for urban sustainability transformations. Characterized by high educational levels, UL members want to receive training but have also been enthusiastic about delivering courses on climate change topics to their peers and the broader community. For example, UL members from academia have invited experts to give talks and contribute to their initiatives with actionable knowledge. Consequently, the UL León is a recognized learning space, bringing together individuals from diverse local organizations and sectors to contribute with their expertise, exchange views, build mutual trust and work together innovatively (see **Box 3**, page 22).

UL members have played a crucial role in ensuring the successful implementation of initiatives. Acting as local partners for capacity development, a few UL members provided specific training aligned with their expertise to the wider group. This included technical skills related to nature-based solutions, which were integrated into the design of public green spaces in *Killian II* and solid waste management workshops in *Barrio Arriba*. Additionally, UL members learned about urban indicators for impact assessments, which were applied in the diagnosis and evaluation of interventions like the pedestrian crosswalks initiative and the extension of the León Route. Hence, the UL has become an active learning space strengthened by citizen participation and vice versa.

UL members have generally been open to learning and changing, increasing confidence in and collective capacity for innovative participatory approaches for urban change. These efforts were complemented by training sessions on 'softer' competencies, including communication skills, which have enabled UL

members to document community concerns in different ways, such as through photography and drone imagery. Despite fluctuating participation, the commitment of UL members has also been instrumental for executing initiatives and testing solutions to local challenges. For example, local authorities played a crucial role in fostering transversal synergies for urban management, i.e., physical maintenance and implementing preventive measures to enhance nighttime security perceptions. However, the security issues and related negative perceptions seem to be conflicting aspects that can discourage the active participation of other actors and the uptake of these solutions.

Along the UL process, capacity development has motivated engagement and allowed for raising awareness of the benefits and challenges of these experimental initiatives and their management. Thus, capacity development can also be an entry point for mainstreaming climate action across institutional efforts and acknowledging how these urban changes are intertwined with social justice concerns. In this sense, identifying tensions around security can also lead to potential synergies to address climate change and social justice concerns, increasing responsiveness to interventions as well as changes in lifestyles and behaviours. Consequently, future capacity development aimed at enhancing and applying communication skills, as well as more creative approaches, can assist in handling contested perceptions in the context of UL initiatives.

LESSON: Capacity development can enhance UL impact through skills that motivate community ownership and changes in lifestyles and behaviours. In particular, a transformative communication skill set can reinforce social changes as a means for facilitating the identification of synergies and cross-fertilization between the climate and social justice agendas.





Temporary extension of the León Route in Adolfo Lopez Mateos Boulevard, September 2023. © WRI México

BOX 3

Lessons from the UL León: A member's perspective on citizen participation and sustainable development

The UL León initiated a participatory process where different actors from the government, civil organizations and academia address some of the key urban challenges in León, namely inequality, water and green spaces. A shared vision for León was developed throughout two years of participatory exercises and four demonstration activities, or UL initiatives, have been collaboratively designed and implemented. I want to highlight three main lessons and implementation points.

First, women's essential and majority participation in the UL initiatives was remarkable in the logistics teams, neighbourhood organizations, and volunteers. This observation leads us to reflect that we must incorporate a higher percentage of women in all planning tables and at all levels of participation. In this way, we will break the inequality structures that prevent us from finding better approaches to urban problems since there is an asymmetry in the participation in the spaces for planning and implementation. This gender focus is validated across several studies on poverty alleviation. We must especially ask women about their needs.

Second, the communication spaces provided by the UL between public institutions, civil society organizations and academia allow us to address the challenges from different perspectives. The resulting dialogue has been enriching for all actors.

Third, the UL initiatives align with important and current urban projects, driven by both strategic urban planning and strong citizen motivation for transformative experiences. In particular, the pedestrian crosswalks intersect with the so-called *Distrito León*, while the solid waste management (and urban garden) initiative was implemented in *Barrio Arriba*, a vital cultural rescue area for León.

Written by Areli Vázquez Juárez
*Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores,
 Unidad León / UL León*



Improving pedestrian spaces between Blvd. Adolfo López Mateos, Blvd. Vasco de Quiroga and Calzada de los Héroes, July 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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