

Stories from both sides

towards a collective narrative and
vision for the Neiva River mouth

Final Report

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ESPOSENDE



Co-funded by the
European Union



Introduction

Welcome to the “Stories from both sides” project final report.

With this document we intend to present its goals, activities and results.

Most importantly, we aim to convey the main lessons learned and what we believe to be useful recommendations.

December 2021



Introduction

As a response to the “*Cross-KIC New European Bauhaus - Call for Cities: Capitalising on existing citizen engagement activities in re-designing the public realm*”, this project intended to push forward new ways to foster climate action through the engagement of the local community.

This was achieved by looking at local stories that are intrinsically related to the natural context, also as a way to explore the New European Bauhaus policy ambition to triangulate its key dimensions of sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics.



Introduction

It is about and for a local community, understanding that climate action and biodiversity protection deeply relies on their mobilization.

It is also a recognition that sustainable development as a goal and ambition is a complex challenge, requiring the long-term intervention of multiple stakeholders and experts.

At the end, this project is a contribution to the build-up of a collective response, fostering new conversations grounded in the Neiva river mouth social, cultural, and environmental fabrics.



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1. About

“Stories from both sides” aimed to build-up a collective narrative and vision for the Neiva River mouth, in the Northern littoral coast of Portugal, for the re-design of the local population interaction with the natural surrounding protected areas.

The bottom-line was to promote an awareness increase on the fragile ecosystems in each side of the river, towards their valorization and protection.

Between September and December 2021.

1. About

The project focused on the Neiva River mouth area as the divisive line between two municipalities / cities, Esposende and Viana do Castelo, and two protected areas, Northern Littoral Natural Park and Littoral GeoPark.

The premise was about looking beyond these visible and invisible barriers, and how the existing and similar environmental, cultural, social, and economic values and dynamics should ground this goal.



1. About

The project departed from known natural ecosystem fragilities in this area, such as increased human and urban construction pressure, invasive species which dominate the existing landscape, or climate change effects, including increased water levels and flooding which are expected to directly impact the area by 2050.

In parallel, a set of public supported projects by local authorities are planned aiming for the river rehabilitation and conservation. On top of all of this, an important gap has been identified related to the need of engaging the local community towards the valorisation and protection of this area.

1. About

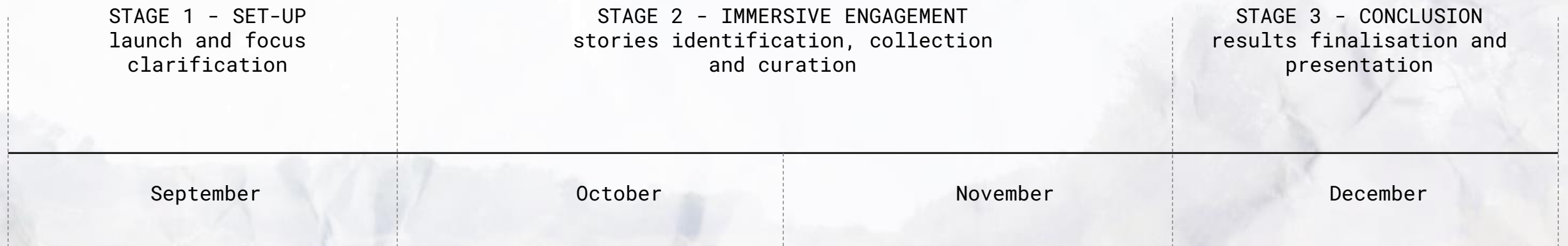
The methodology employed ethnographic, design and media based approaches, for engaging with the local community of each side, by collecting and sharing stories, photos, and film, towards its convergence for a collective and common (re-)interpretation of the local territory.

This resulted in three main outputs:

- Outdoor Photo Exhibition
- Narrative and Photo Book
- Video Documentary

1. About

The project 4 months duration was divided in three stages. This was helpful to maintain a continuous focus, without losing sight of its ambition.



1. About

Implemented by three partners, led by Rio Neiva – Environmental NGO, together with 2 municipalities as partners, from each side of the river, Municipality of Esposende and Municipality of Viana do Castelo. This structure aimed to establish a direct relationship between civil society and public authorities.

RIO NEIVA
ENVIRONMENTAL NGO

PROMOTOR

MUNICIPALITY OF
ESPOSENDE

PARTNER

MUNICIPALITY OF
VIANA DO CASTELO

PARTNER

2. Activities

During the project 4 months the following activities were implemented that supported the development of the previously referenced outputs:

- Identification and interviews of local community members;
- Engagement of students from local schools;
- Complementary collection of photos and film;
- Launch and closure events;
- Dissemination and communication.

The upcoming pages document these processes.

2. Activities

INTERVIEWS

The project team defined three strategic keywords to help identify community members whose stories would fall within the project remit: to have a strong relation with the river, with the ocean, and/or with the land.



2. Activities

INTERVIEWS

A total of 21 persons were interviewed (with video and audio recording). This allowed to have a good diversity of experiences and profiles, such as:

Seaweed 'catcher', Fisherwomen, Canoeing athletes, Local traditional singing women's group, Former (river) water miller, Local baker, Ethnographic and folkloric local association president, Former parish council president, Historian, etc.*.

*Full list of participants presented at the end.

2. Activities

LOCAL SCHOOLS ENGAGEMENT

School students (13-15 years old) and teachers from both sides of the river were engaged, with all arrangements put together so that each school students would visit the 'other side' protected area, guided by the respective local municipal expert. A total of 4 on-site visits were conducted.



2. Activities

LOCAL SCHOOLS ENGAGEMENT

Students were provided analogic photo cameras to capture their visual perspective of the territory. All of these photos were handed over to the schools (digital and printed) to build their own exhibition, and a selection of these were used for the outdoor exhibition.



2. Activities

COMPLEMENTARY COLLECTION OF PHOTOS AND FILM

In order to substantiate and complement the diversity of collected stories (i.e. references to specific locations, etc.), the team visited and covered several locations of the territory for video and photo recording.



2. Activities

COMPLEMENTARY COLLECTION OF PHOTOS AND FILM

Throughout the interview processes, a set of personal photo archives of the territory emerged, resulting in an opportunity to feed the visual narrative and were used for the video documentary. Most of these photos are from the first half of the XX century.



2. Activities

LAUNCH AND CLOSURE EVENTS

Two 'communication' events were implemented, the first one to launch the project, engage the local community and initiate momentum (9th October), and a final event to present the results and close the project (11th December).

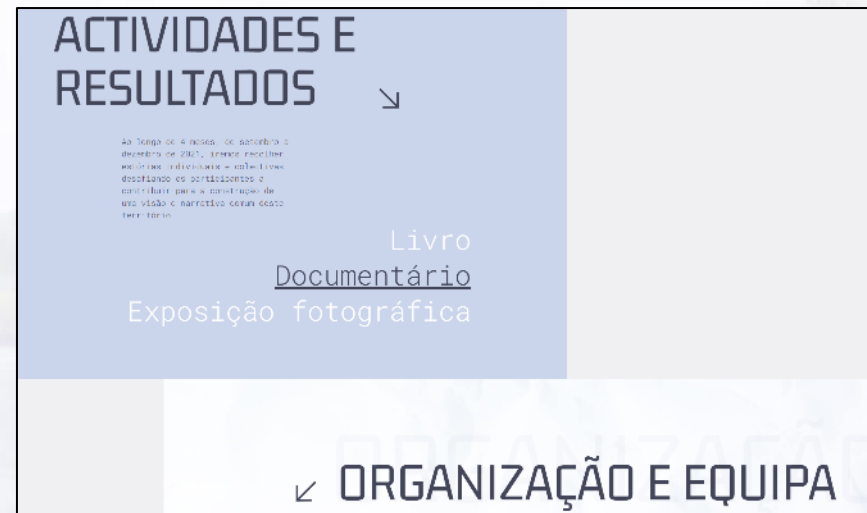


2. Activities

DISSEMINATION AND COMMUNICATION

A dedicated identity and mini-website were developed to easily communicate the project and to become a long-term repository of the main outputs (all contents in Portuguese).

www.rioneiva.com/estorias



2. Activities

DISSEMINATION AND COMMUNICATION

The project was disseminated and communicated through the partners own networks and channels, namely social media, mailing lists and also through local news outlets.



Stories from both sides: towards a collective narrative and vision for the Neiva River mouth

3. Results

The project results are essentially substantiated by three main outputs, as previously mentioned:

- Outdoor Photo Exhibition
- Narrative and Photo Book
- Video Documentary

All of these outputs are available at the project [website](#). All outputs are licensed with a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International to ensure they can be freely and openly distributed.

3. Results

OUTDOOR PHOTO EXHIBITION

This exhibition is a collection of photos of all those that participated in the interviews, providing them a respectful visibility, interlaced with photos from different territory locations, and photos from the analogic cameras by local students. The exhibition is physically available between December 2021 and March 2022.



3. Results

NARRATIVE AND PHOTO BOOK

The narrative and photo book documents the interviews, providing direct quotes relevant to the project scope. Moreover, this output narrates, written by the team, the main findings according to a past, present, and future storyline. Two participants also provided their own authored poems for the book, one specifically written for the project.



3. Results

VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

The video documentary is based on all conducted interviews, curated bearing in mind the project goal and ensuring a narrative which cover the diversity of perspectives touching climate and environmental sensibilities grounded in the territory reality.



3. Results

KEY INDICATORS

21 persons interviewed

68 students for on-site visits

361 total students engaged

158 local inhabitants engaged

4 on-site guided visits

12 team members

> 650 photos taken

> 30 hours recorded video

2 press releases

1 project website

2 project posters / mupies

5 published news articles on local
media outlets

2 events

> 5000 communication reach

4. Lessons and Recommendations

Throughout the project duration we had the opportunity to listen, to observe and to learn from a diversity of experiences.

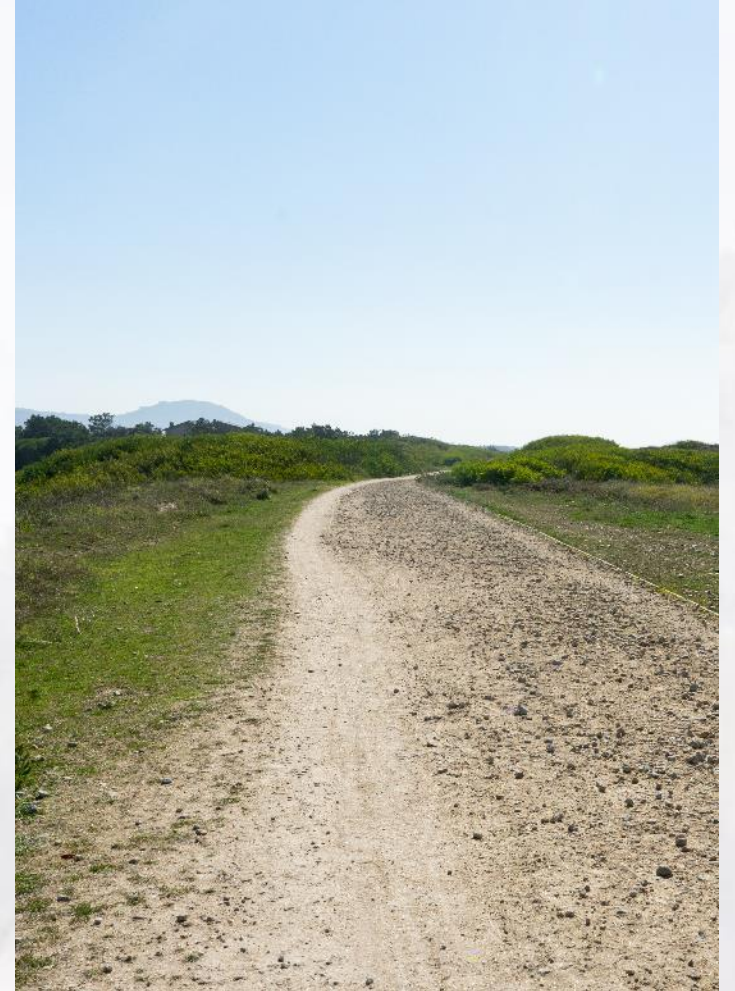
This section intends to summarize the main project lessons, recommendations, impact, achievements, and conclusions. These are also meant to be used as working guidelines for possible replication and/or upscaling.

4. Lessons and Recommendations

STORIES DO MATTER

Perhaps a redundant point or perhaps the importance of stating what is visible at plain sight: 'stories do matter' and are an important entry point to how local communities relate to their natural surroundings and how individuals are open to share their reflections and aspirations.

We were able to unveil diverse layers by reaching out directly to key community members and providing them a friendly context and time to share their perspectives and experiences.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

LEARNING ABOUT THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Early on we decided that interviews should follow a structure allowing us to collect insights from the past, present and future. This approach was then converted and permeates all project outputs, providing them further coherency.

This was beneficial both as a trigger to the conversations and to ground the project scope not just in terms of a geographical location, but also within the time frame of participants life's and experiences in the local territory.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

ASKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

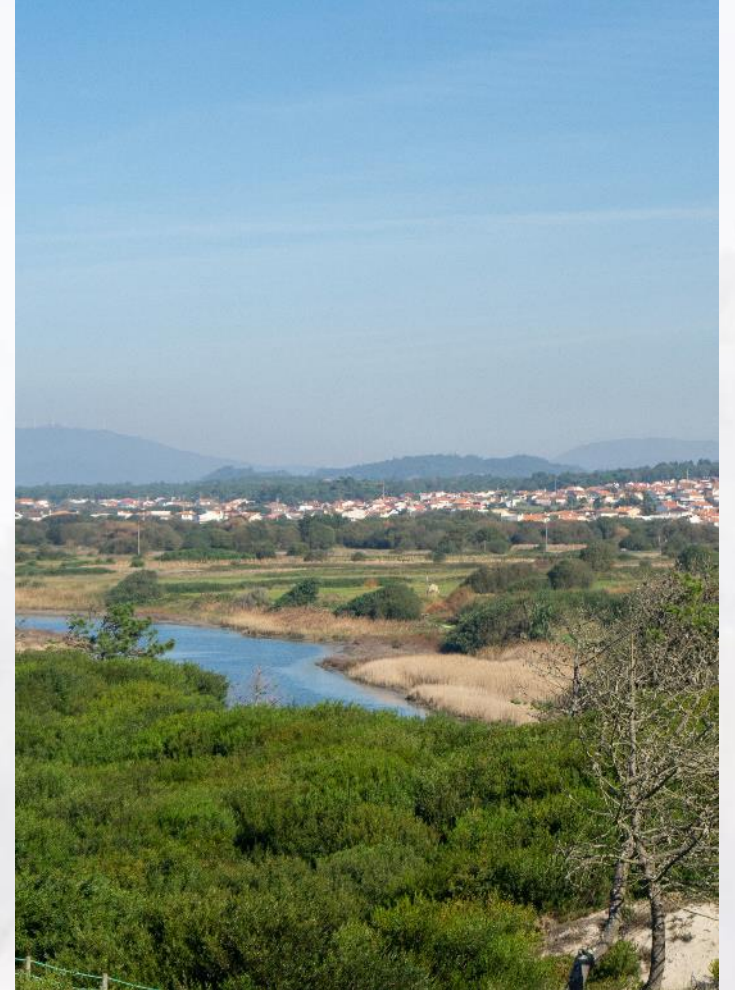
This same past, present and future storyline was helpful to conduct the project in a way that allowed us to question on suggestions for the future of this territory. Initially, we were not fully sure on what kind of answers we would receive. In the end, all responses were very concrete and grounded in the territory reality. For example: 1) specific riverfront areas that require cleaning, 2) new trekking walkway routes, or 3) the rehabilitation of an old watermill for a cultural centre focusing on the river and related economic activities. We also observed how all of these suggestions are the result of carefully processed reflections done throughout the years.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITY MEMBER PROFILES

With a population of around 5.150 inhabitants in the Neiva river mouth area, it would be a difficult job to select the community members that could provide relevant inputs if there was no criteria for defining a robust sample. This was achieved by crossing over between key concepts that ground the project to its context (relation with river, ocean and land) and thematic concepts (i.e. local celebrations, gastronomy, craftwork, fables, music, local personalities, biodiversity, etc.). It was also useful to interview, as a starting point, the presidents of the local parish councils from each side, given their wide connections and knowledge about the community.

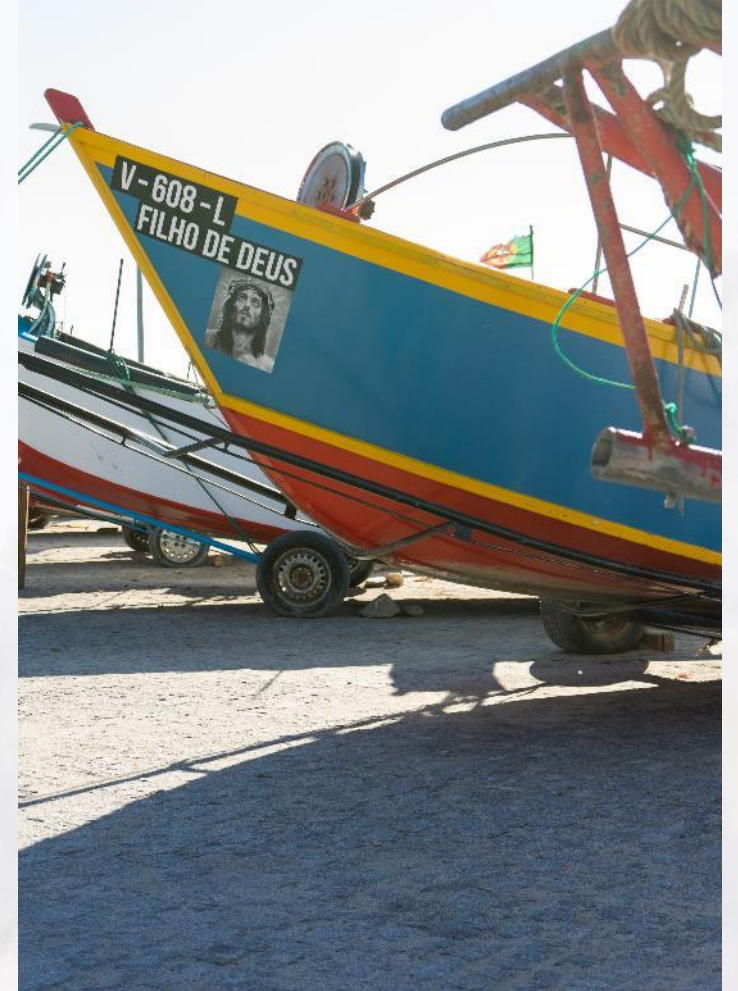


4. Lessons and Recommendations

EXISTING CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Related with the selection of a robust and diverse sample of community members, was the importance to engage existing structures through the interviews process. This included the local Fishermen Association, the Women Singers Group of the Neiva Valley Association, or the Seaweed Museum.

Each of these are strongly rooted in the local economic, cultural and social traditions and strongly relate to the natural context and to the territory sustainable development. This process also allowed to open doors through direct contact points, now available for other possible future endeavours.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

From the beginning it was planned to engage both adult community members and youth community members, the later through schools in each side of the river. This was effectively implemented, but with a slight modification. Indeed, the launch event allowed us to observe how most participants were 45 years and older, and were very interested in sharing their memories and stories. Consequently, the 4 on-site planned visits, initially 2 for adults and 2 for youth, were changed to be fully dedicated to the local youth.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

WOMEN PARTICIPATION

We also observed how women's role and participation has evolved throughout the years. For example, we interviewed the first woman president of the local Fishermen Association. And we have also reached out to the Women Singers Group of the Neiva Valley, from whom we learned about their song repertoire, which is the result of their own ethnographic work in search of traditional local songs. Songs which this Group values for their use decades ago as one of the few opportunities women had to make themselves visible and heard during their long hours farming work in local agricultural fields. Nowadays, this women's group intends to ensure this heritage is recovered and preserved.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

PERSONAL PHOTO ARCHIVES

As previously mentioned, we had the opportunity to look and analyse the personal photo archives openly shared by three community members that were interviewed. This has shown us how individuals strongly care about their communities and context, as their photo archives were compiled with the goal of preserving and carrying on the memories of this territory and community. Interestingly, one of these personal photo archives is the result of a door-to-door process for collecting photos that document this territory traditions and evolution.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

ESTABLISHING AN INFORMATION BASELINE OVERVIEW

During the launch event we handed over a short survey to further help us strengthen the subsequent on-the-ground work, asking three questions aiming to elicit visual memories and aspirations:

- An object that illustrates the project scope?
- An emblematic/historical place/location?
- An improvement for this territory future?

As an anonymous survey, we also asked for the respondent age, gender, and postal code.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

THE RELATION BETWEEN PUBLIC AUTHORITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

As a project led by a civil society organisation in partnership with two municipalities / cities, this initiative was also helpful to strengthen this relation. From the beginning to the project end, the team members from all three organisations worked in close proximity, through regular meetings and contacts, and across all levels, from the municipalities city councillors and NGO board members, to the technical staff. Most importantly, this project further subscribes to the importance of connecting between civil society and public authorities, as ultimately both are working for the same community, even if at different levels.



4. Lessons and Recommendations

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

At the end of the project, we can safely conclude and state how all project goals have been successfully achieved. Not only in regard to its indicators and activities, but also in regard to its impact.

Within a tight schedule of 4 months, the project team had to balance between ensuring an efficient implementation of activities, and the understanding we were dealing with what has effectively been an exploratory project.

Indeed, underlying to the project stated goals, was a clear intention to push forward and test new ways to engage with the local community and how ethnographic, design and media based approaches could be used to this end.

4. Lessons and Recommendations

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

The implemented approach allowed us to uncover a diversity of layers related to climate action and biodiversity protection, which are often overlooked. This includes women's role, local traditions, or individual aspirations.

Moreover, throughout the project implementation it was increasingly clear how the project was tapping into an existing gap which was larger than initially expected: the distance between the regular daily life of this community with the existing and increasing fragilities of the natural ecosystems and protected areas.

In turn, the project was able to kickstart a conversation that brings these two closer, as it connects local and individual life stories and narratives with climate action grounded to this territory.

4. Lessons and Recommendations

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

Regarding the project main objective to “*build-up a collective narrative and vision for the Neiva River mouth*”, this was fully achieved and is substantiated by the three main outputs.

To achieve this goal, the project adopted a few strategies. These supported not only the development of the project outputs that translate the objective into a tangible understanding, but also to ensure we would be always within the project scope.

These strategies have already been referred to, but it is worth to look back at them, by breaking down the main objective into three distinct pieces:

4. Lessons and Recommendations

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

- “Collective”: which was ensured by developing a robust sample representative of local realities, through diverse and complementary community member individual profiles, engaging them to participate in this process. This also included different age profiles, by engaging adults and youngsters.
- “Narrative and vision”: which was ensured by establishing a past, present and future storyline with those engaged, thus departing from existing realities and knowledge, as to collect, share and build-up what were desired and imagined futures for the territory.
- “For the Neiva River mouth”: which was ensured by keeping the participants origins, living and storyline within the geographical proximities, and through the strategic keywords on the relation with the river, ocean, and land which define this territory.

4. Lessons and Recommendations

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

Within this context, the project impact can be summarized as follows:

- Acting upon an existing gap as it engages the local community towards the valorisation and conservation of the two protected areas;
- Testing and validating a participatory approach through local stories collection and curation;
- Testing and validating the potential of visual narratives in a local community context towards climate action; and
- Strengthen the relationship between civil society organisation, public authorities and a local community.

4. Lessons and Recommendations

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

It is also worth reflecting on the project approach and impact in light of the New European Bauhaus triangulation:

- Sustainability: by grounding a storyline to a community context and its relation with its river, ocean and land from a sustainability and climate action perspective.
- Inclusion: by engaging with a diversity of community member profiles and experiences whose voices are not usually listened nor inscribed; and
- Aesthetics: by building-up visual narratives through the use of photo and video methods for promoting and fostering local conversations.

4. Lessons and Recommendations

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPACT AND WAYS FORWARD

In conclusion, the project findings also allow us to further subscribe the importance of exploring, testing and using participatory methods with diverse means and goals, and how collecting local stories is a relevant approach.

For the future, we look at this project as opening a window of opportunity to deepen conversations with and within the community.

5. Acknowledgements

This project would not have happened without the kindness and openness of the following persons, which actively participated in the interview process:

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TITLE

'Stories from both sides - towards a collective narrative and vision for the Neiva River mouth' Final Report

ORGANISATION

Rio Neiva - Environmental NGO
Municipality of Esposende
Municipality of Viana do Castelo

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