



BETTER
Life

E-ZINE

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Issue 3

**Bringing Excellence
to Transformative
Socially Engaged
Research
in Life Sciences
through Integrated
Digital Centers**

<https://betterlifehorizon.eu/>



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the third edition of the BETTER Life e-zine!

As the project grows stronger, so does our community of socially engaged researchers, innovators, and institutions across Europe and beyond. This edition captures the breadth and depth of that progress — from inspiring field activities to strategic policy-level dialogues.

In this issue, we shine a light on how BETTER Life is expanding its footprint — from the academic halls of Prague and Valencia to the urban planning workshops of Srinagar, India. You'll find stories that highlight the transformative potential of research when it's rooted in collaboration, engagement, and purpose.

- ◆ Discover how institutions are embedding Socially Engaged Research into their long-term strategies;
- ◆ Explore the tools developed within the Digital Centre of Excellence — including the Self-Assessment Tool and Academic Bridge Toolkit;
- ◆ Reflect on how early-career researchers are taking the lead through Summer Schools, Spring Schools and Bootcamps;
- ◆ Connect with voices from our international partners, showcasing the real-world value of participatory science.

Thank you for being part of this journey toward more inclusive, impactful, and resilient research.

— The BETTER Life Editorial Team



ACEEU LEADS THE BETTER LIFE EXPLOITABLE OUTPUTS AND POTENTIAL PATHS

One of the key ambitions of the BETTER Life project is to make sure its results live on and keeps making an impact after the project funding lifecycle.

ACEEU is taking the lead in developing a forward-looking exploitation strategy.

The heart of this task is to identify the exploitable project results, to design exploitation paths and business models.

With this being said, we aim to plan how the results can be scaled or sustained in the future.

The exploitable outputs include:

- The SER Framework: A high-level strategic guidance for embedding socially engaged research in universities.
- Digital Centre of Excellence and Toolkit: An inter-institutional digital hub designed to build the capacities of early-career researchers (ECRs) in SER, supported by a toolkit containing ten practical tools fostering SER.
- Summer School: A virtual or onsite training experience for raising awareness of SER among ECRs, including its benefits and applications.
- Bootcamps: Intensive training sessions on SER, offering ECRs and Engagement Managers (EMs) hands-on learning, networking, and peer exchange opportunities.



Exploitable outputs and potential paths



To sustain and scale these outputs, ACEEU and the project partners are mapping out the following potential exploitation paths:

- Establishing a digital offer through webinars, knowledge bases, and a landscape observatory.
- Creating a new organisation to champion SER at a systemic level.
- Pursuing funding acquisition for new projects to scaffold the BETTER Life project.
- Mentoring programme for ECRs.
- Facilitating university-industry interactions to embed SER in practice.
- Offering stand-alone or MOOC-based training to broaden access to SER skills.

By coordinating this effort, ACEEU together with the BETTER Life project partners, is helping shape the project's long-term sustainability.





BETTER LIFE GEARS UP FOR THE 2025 ACEEU FORUM IN PRAGUE

As part of ongoing efforts to support the sustainability of the BETTER Life project, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU) as the Coordinator of the project will host the 2025 ACEEU Forum, which will take place from September 10-12 in Prague.

With both ACEEU and CZU part of the project consortium, the Forum puts spotlight on the opportunity to embed the project within broader discussions on engagement, entrepreneurship, and institutional transformation in higher education.

This year's theme, "Higher Education Excellence in the 21st Century: Cultivating Synergies Between Purpose, Strategy and Culture to Drive Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Impact" will bring together university presidents, vice chancellors, deans, directors of innovation and sustainability units, academic faculty, accreditation managers, Triple E Awards finalists, and quality assurance professionals for in-depth discussions on how higher education institutions can align their practices to drive meaningful impact.



BETTER LIFE TEAM AT MLU SUPPORTS THE OPEN ACADEMY

The Open Academy, organised by science2public, brings together practical coaches, experienced advisory boards and inspiring minds to bring together research projects undergoing structural change and the science communicators of tomorrow. Purpose of it is to provide them with further training in four areas of expertise. This creates a perfect match between research projects and science communicators, resulting in a creative communication format.



The practical part of the Open Academy is based on the principle: Inspire! Enable! Engage! Early Career Researchers and students are inspired, enabled and supported with interactive methods that are fun and have a real impact.

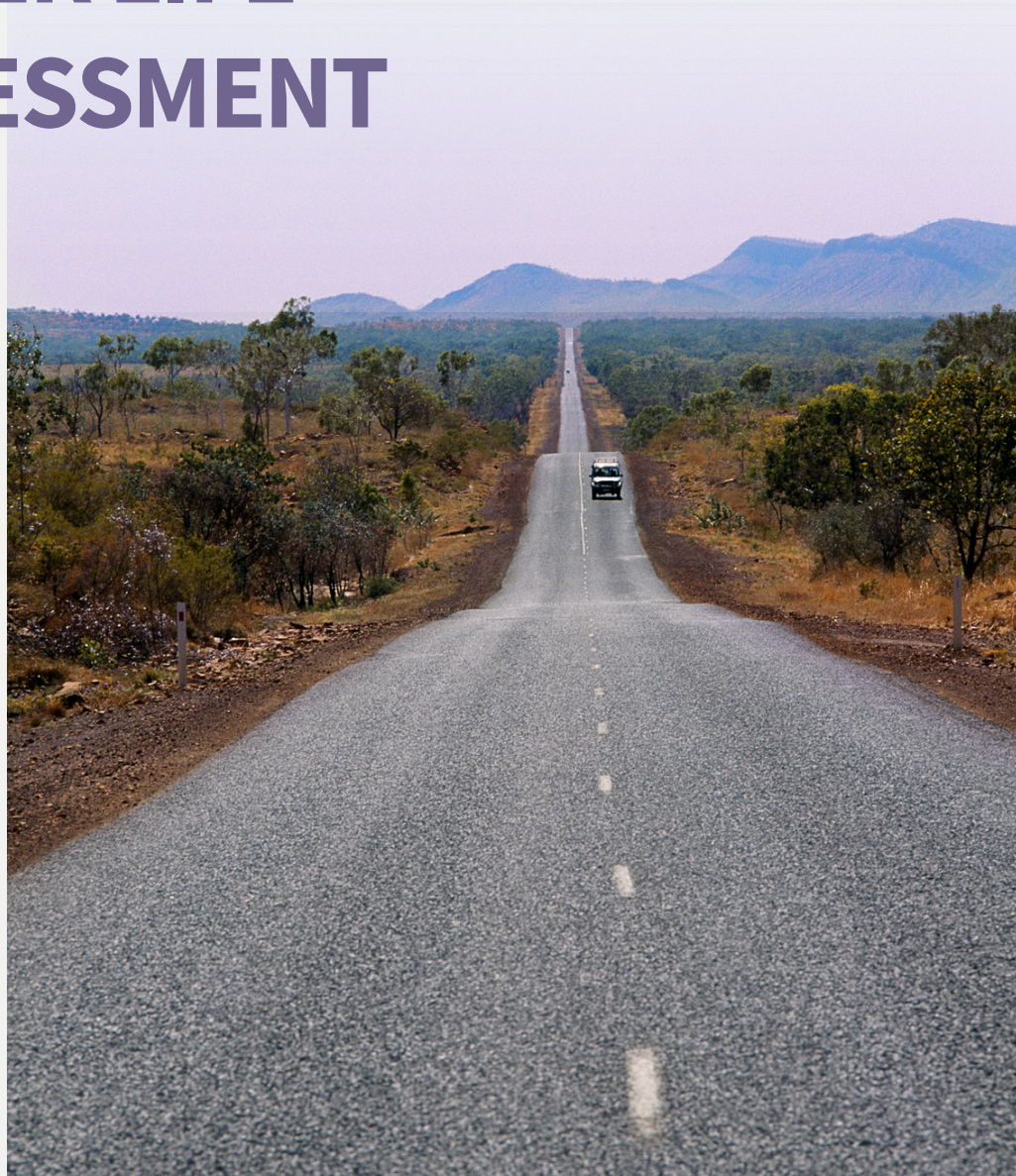
The Spring School of the Open Academy took place from April 24-27, 2025 in Halle (Saale). Matching science communicators and research partners from the field of structural change and life sciences met for the first time, formed the perfect match and developed ideas for their own science communication format! BETTER Life supports the Open Academy and coaches a match.

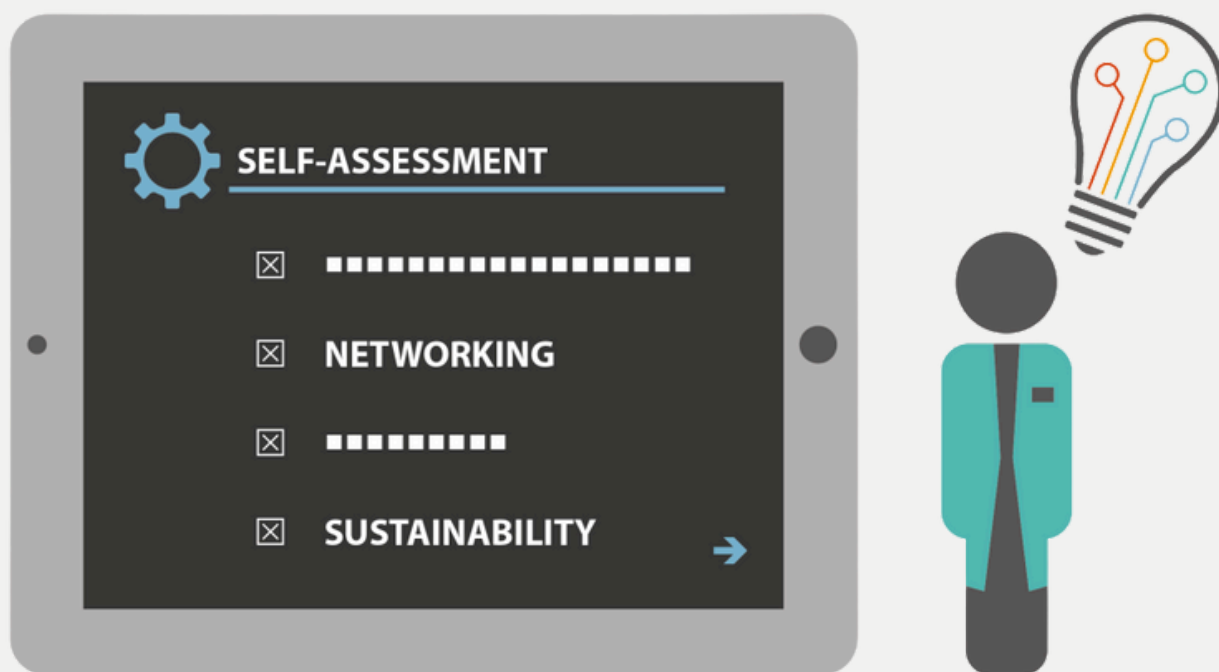
The Enable! phase has been running since May. In this co-creative phase, the projects develop exciting formats together with the science communicators and the coaches support their match.

The Open Academy format is supported by many stakeholders and is testing the reciprocal learning effects through a matching approach in this pilot round.



INTRODUCING THE BETTER LIFE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL!





We're excited to launch the BETTER Life Self-Assessment Tool - a free, innovative digital tool developed under the BETTER Life Project to support researchers in enhancing the societal relevance and engagement of their work.

What is it?

A simple yet powerful tool that helps researchers evaluate and improve how well their research aligns with principles of responsibility, social engagement, and impact.

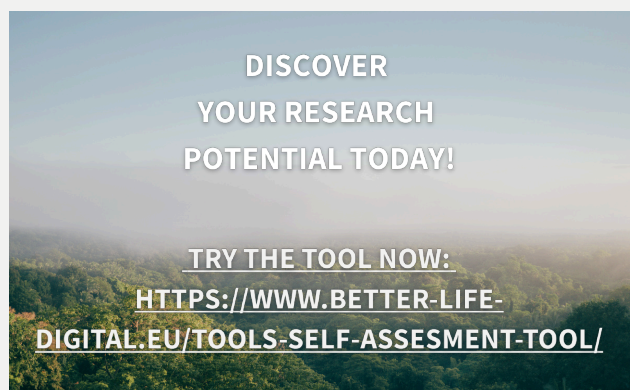
How it works:

- ✓ Upload your CV
- ✓ Complete a short self-assessment questionnaire
- ✓ Receive a personalized evaluation based on social engagement indicators
- ✓ Get tailored feedback and improvement suggestions

Why use it?

- ✓ Objective and structured insights into your social value of research
- ✓ Actionable suggestions to increase your impact
- ✓ User-friendly interface designed with researchers in mind

Whether you're advancing your academic career or aligning with EU priorities for responsible research and innovation (RRI), the BETTER Life Tool is your go-to companion for more inclusive, impactful, and community-connected research.



**BETTER LIFE PROJECT
PARTICIPATED IN THE
SCIENCE POLICY
CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY
THE E3UDRES2 ENT-R-E-
NOVATORS INITIATIVE**



Portalegre Polytechnic University, Portugal

Tuesday 13th of May 2025

SAVE THE DATE

Cooperating for excellence
and impact in research
and innovation

On May 13, 2025, the BETTER Life project took part in the Science Policy Conference, organised within the framework of the E3UDRES2 Ent-r-e-novators project.

The event was hosted by the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre, Portugal, and coordinated by the Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal (IPS), in collaboration with partners from the E3UDRES2 European University Alliance, of which IPS is a member.

The conference brought together researchers, policymakers, and innovators to explore the intersections of science, policy, and society, with a strong emphasis on international collaboration, interdisciplinary research, and regional innovation ecosystems. A central aim of the Ent-r-e-novators project is to strengthen cooperation between higher education institutions and their surrounding communities, engaging citizens and stakeholders in meaningful dialogue and development.

Representing the BETTER Life project, Patrik Toula delivered an online presentation that highlighted the project's key outcomes and practical contributions to building more resilient and future-oriented research environments.

Key highlights from the BETTER Life initiative included:

- ◆ Digital Centre of Excellence – a collaborative hub for knowledge sharing, innovation, and digital transformation;
 - ◆ Toolkits – practical resources created to support both institutions and individuals in enhancing their research and innovation capacities;
 - ◆ Capacity-Building Activities – dynamic Boot Camps and Summer Schools designed to empower early-career researchers and local actors with skills for addressing emerging societal challenges.
- Through its participation, the BETTER Life project contributed to the broader goals of E3UDRES2 by showcasing actionable models for linking research, education, and regional impact.

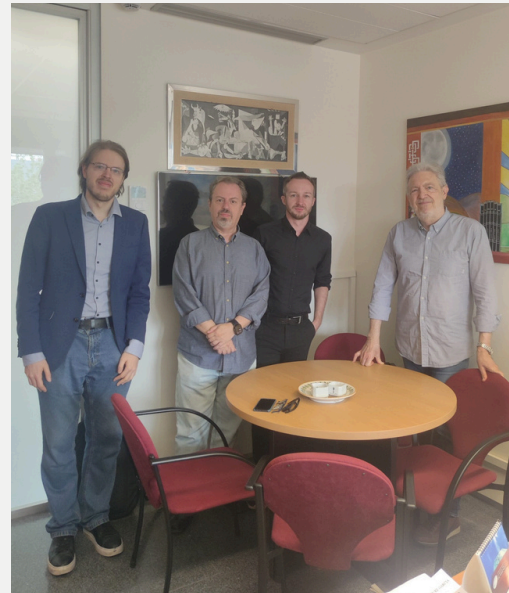
The event was held in hybrid format, allowing both on-site and online attendance. Participation was free of charge, with registration open until mid-April for on-site attendees and until the end of April for virtual participants.

[The full conference programme and additional information remain available here:](#)

Science Policy Conference – E3UDRES2 Entrepreneur-e-novators

**BETTER LIFE
RESEARCHERS VISIT
VALENCIA:
STRENGTHENING
INTERNATIONAL
COLLABORATION IN
AI RESEARCH**





Milan Školník and Michael Haman, members of the research team of the BETTER Life project, visited the Valencian Research Institute for Artificial Intelligence (VRAIN) – one of the largest and most respected AI research centers in Spain, based at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV).

The visit included meetings with leading representatives of the institute, including Professor Vicente Botti, Director of VRAIN, Professor José Sempere, Scientific Director, and Professor José Hernández-Orallo, who is also affiliated with the University of Cambridge. The researchers also engaged in insightful discussions with students and young scientists from the institute.

As part of the program, Haman and Školník were invited to attend a conference hosted by VRAIN, where recent advances in AI research were presented to representatives of Spanish companies, academic institutions, and the wider public. The event underlined the momentum of Spain's AI ecosystem and the importance of knowledge transfer between research and industry.



During the visit, they also presented Academic Bridge – a toolkit developed under the BETTER Life project that aims to support the effective connection between academic research and practical application. The toolkit includes the Academic Bridge Chatbot, which particularly captured the interest of VRAIN representatives. The chatbot, which is online and ready to help researchers, welcomes users to Academic Bridge, invites them to describe their research topics they would like to implement in municipalities, and helps them find suitable municipalities and collaboration opportunities.



The meetings further focused on exploring opportunities for collaboration on international research projects, particularly within Horizon Europe, with the goal of linking Czech and Spanish expertise in tackling common challenges through innovative AI-driven solutions.

The BETTER Life project continues to develop strategic partnerships across Europe to strengthen Czech engagement in international research and innovation.



INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION: BETTER LIFE PROJECT BRINGS ECOSYSTEM PLANNING TOOLS TO SRINAGAR, INDIA

As part of the European Union-funded project BETTER Life, Dr. Anton Shkaruba, Senior Researcher at the Chair of Environmental Protection and Landscape Management, conducted an official visit to India in spring 2025 to promote socially engaged research practices in the life sciences.



WHAT DO WE ALL WANT FROM LIFE?

A BETTER LIFE – FOR EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE.

The primary aim of the BETTER Life project is to develop transferable tools, frameworks, and policies that enhance collaboration between academia, industry, government institutions, and civil society, thereby increasing the real-world impact of scientific work. Among the project's central tools is the BETTER Life communication instrument, which facilitates stakeholder engagement through the integration of the ecosystem disservices (EDS) concept.



In cooperation with project partner Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences & Technology of Kashmir (SKUAST-K), a stakeholder workshop entitled “Integrating Ecosystem Services into Sustainable Urban Planning and Policies” was organised on 30 April 2025 in Srinagar, India.

The event brought together 34 participants, comprising professionals in the fields of urban planning, urban forestry, and landscape management, as well as academic staff, students, and active members of civil society. During the workshop, Dr. Shkaruba presented several practical case studies illustrating the application of the BETTER Life tool in stakeholder engagement and planning processes.

Following this, Professor Akhlaq Wani of SKUAST-K introduced the forthcoming Living Lab initiative in Srinagar, aimed at fostering deeper insight into citizen–nature interactions in urban contexts. The workshop programme included six breakout group sessions, in which participants identified key problem areas and proposed strategic approaches for improving the integration of ecosystem services in local planning.

Anton presented several use cases for applying the BETTER Life tool. He was then joined by SKUAST-K’s Prof. Akhlaq Wani, who introduced the Living Lab approach planned for Srinagar, aimed at enhancing the understanding of the relationship between citizens and urban nature.

The discussions held during the event also served as a preparatory phase for the establishment of the Living Lab, reflecting the project’s commitment to participatory research methodologies and the localisation of global sustainability strategies.

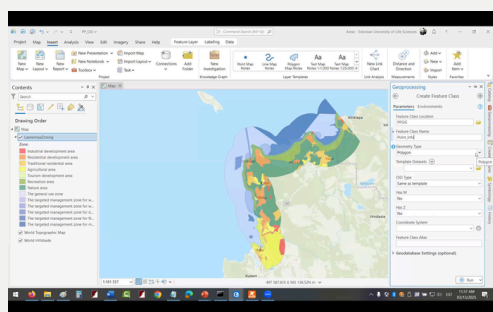




SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH IN LIFE SCIENCES: FROM STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION TO REAL-WORLD IMPACT

SPRING SCHOOL 13–14.03.2025

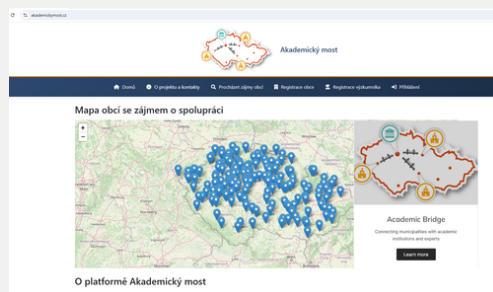
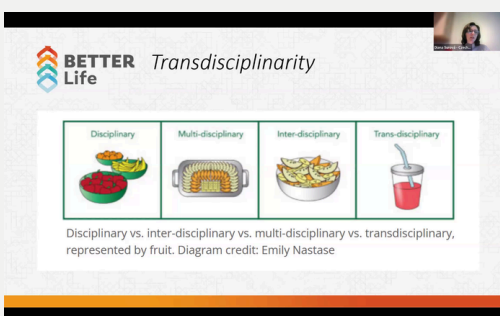
On March 13–14, 2025, early-career researchers from across Europe and beyond came together for the International Spring School for Early Career Researchers in Life Sciences, exploring the theme “Socially Engaged Research in Life Sciences: From Stakeholder Collaboration to Real-World Impact.”



This free, fully online event offered participants a unique opportunity to dive into the core principles and practical applications of socially engaged research. Through interactive sessions, participants learned how to align their scientific work with societal needs by engaging meaningfully with stakeholders and navigating real-world challenges.

A highlight of the two-day event was the hands-on exploration of two key tools from the Academic Bridge toolkit, alongside a session on the Self-evaluation tool, all of which were new to most attendees and sparked valuable discussion.

With 39 participants, the event fostered a lively exchange of ideas. The positive energy and engagement during the sessions highlighted the official positive feedback of a highly successful experience. The Spring School reinforced the critical role of early-career researchers in shaping a more inclusive, collaborative future for life sciences—where research not only advances knowledge but also delivers real-world impact.





CYBER DIPLOMACY AND SCIENTIFIC DATA PROTECTION DISCUSSED AT CZU

Experts gathered at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU) to debate key digital-age challenges, focusing on online security and the impact of the internet on society. The discussion emphasized international cooperation in cybersecurity and the protection of academic research.

A major topic was the importance of collaboration, including transdisciplinary efforts such as the “Academic Bridge” toolkit from the BETTER Life project.

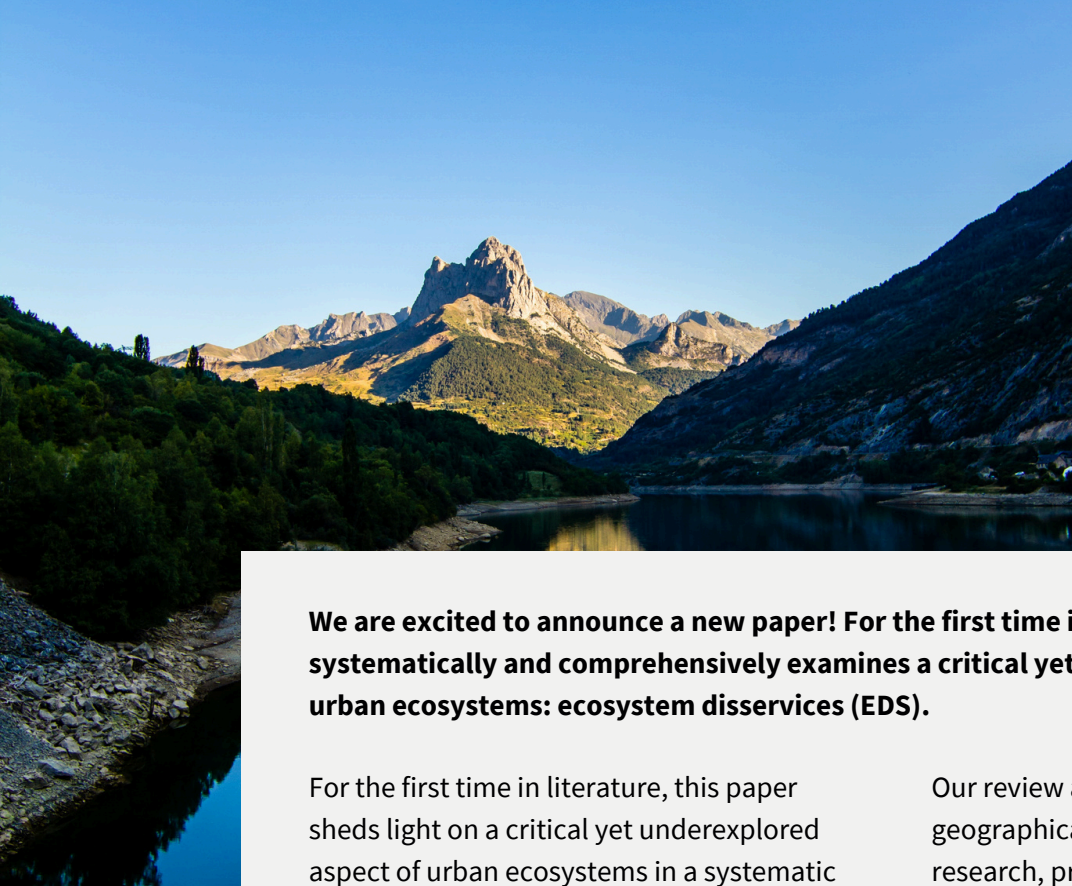


Panelists included Berta Jarošová, Cyber Attaché for the USA and Canada from the National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NÚKIB), Michal Lošťák, CZU Vice-Rector and principal investigator of BETTER Life, Matěj Nejedlý, cybersecurity journalist, Lenka Štěrbová, student representative, and Milan Školník, political scientist and member of the BETTER Life research team. The debate highlighted the need for strong partnerships to address cybersecurity threats and protect scientific data.



NEW STUDY HIGHLIGHTS THE ROLE OF ECOSYSTEM DISSERVICES IN URBAN PLANNING





We are excited to announce a new paper! For the first time in literature, this study systematically and comprehensively examines a critical yet underexplored aspect of urban ecosystems: ecosystem disservices (EDS).

For the first time in literature, this paper sheds light on a critical yet underexplored aspect of urban ecosystems in a systematic and comprehensive manner: ecosystem disservices (EDS). While much attention has been given to ecosystem services (ES) and their integration into policy, particularly with politically endorsed frameworks like MEA, TEEB and IPBES, disservices remain insufficiently studied. The ES concept alone fails to capture the socio-ecological dynamics and the complexity of the real-world, and identifying a process solely as a ‘service’ because it benefits humans, often overlooks fundamental ecological principles where interactions between species and environment produce varying outcomes across time and space. By identifying 24 different EDS types with direct policy relevance, our review pushes for a shift in urban planning strategies that accounts for both positive and negative aspects of nature.

We call for the development of standardized, evidence-based approaches to assess EDS, which would facilitate more precise, data-driven urban frameworks.

Our review also further highlights the geographical bias in current EDS research, predominantly focused on European cities, and stresses the need for a more inclusive understanding that address the unique challenges faced by rapidly growing cities in the Global South. We emphasize the role of socio-economic and geographical factors, ensuring policies are responsive to local contexts. As cities face increasing pressures from urbanization, public health, climate change and social inequalities, our paper offers a foundation for building resilient, equitable and sustainable urban environment where both humans and nature can coexist and thrive.

The EDS evaluation approach was laid down to the BETTER Life tool “Integrating Citizens’ Perceptions of Urban Environmental Quality into Inclusive City Planning Processes”, and used for constructing the participatory decision making tool.

Read more here:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indic.2025.100612>



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