
The Role of Nature-Based Approaches in Fostering Social Cohesion: Insights from Migrant and Refugee Integration Initiatives

Prof Azadeh Fatehrad, Gianluca Palombo, Davide Natalini and Hyab Yohannes

Social cohesion is a critical challenge in the UK, particularly in light of increasing tensions surrounding migration and recent targeted attacks on refugees and asylum seekers. While traditional integration strategies have focused on social and economic factors, less attention has been given to the role of nature in fostering inclusion, belonging, and well-being. This submission draws on research from the Nature-Based Integration project (2022-2024) to demonstrate how engagement with green and blue spaces can serve as a vital mechanism for promoting social cohesion in diverse communities (Rishbeth et al., 2019).

This project was funded by Nuffield Foundation and British Academy as part of the [Understanding Communities Programme](#) and explored **whether nature can facilitate integration among different communities in the UK, with a particular focus on refugees and asylum seekers**. To investigate this, the project involved three case studies: the London Borough of Haringey (urban case study), Blackburn with Darwen (peri-urban case study), and the Isle of Lewis (remote/rural case study). Our project found that nature-engaged activities and access to nature foster well-being and community cohesion, especially for migrants and new arrivals. Nature-based integration strengthens new arrivals' connection with new situations and can bridge cultural divides, with positive impacts on social cohesion.

Based on the project's findings, we highlight best practices, identify key barriers, and offer policy recommendations relevant to Wales.

More information about the project and resources/outputs is available [HERE](#). In particular, these are key outputs that may be relevant to this call for evidence:

- Main public report on which this submission is based - [Nature-based Integration: Connecting Communities with/in Nature](#)
- Toolkit for policy and practice on implementing nature-based integration - [Nature-Based Integration Policy and Practice Toolkit](#)

Biography of Prof Azadeh Fatehrad:

Prof Azadeh Fatehrad is a Professor of Art and Public Policy at Teesside University and Programme Director for Inclusive and Empowered Places at the Institute for Collective Place Leadership. As an interdisciplinary scholar in the fields of migrant homemaking and the politics of integration, Prof Fatehrad combines research, artistic, and curatorial practices to explore these dynamic areas. Her extensive participatory research, developed in collaboration with diverse communities across the UK, Sweden, and Denmark, delves into the complexities of societal integration. Prof Fatehrad co-leads the Nature-Based Integration project, funded by The British Academy and The Nuffield Foundation, demonstrating her commitment to academic excellence and societal impact. Additionally, she contributes her expertise as an executive board member of the European Artistic Research Network. For further insights into her work, visit www.azadehfatehrad.com.

Biography of Gianluca Palombo:

Gianluca is a researcher, policy consultant and evaluation manager who currently works freelance for the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry and JustRight Scotland, a national legal justice charity. Gianluca's work is focused on researching, evaluating and developing policy related to integration at community and national level, migrant justice and other equalities issues. In recent years, this has involved work with organisations such as Migration Policy Scotland and Rocket Science. Previous to working freelance and in academia for Queen Margaret University and Anglia Ruskin University, Gianluca led a national job training programme for the charity CodeYourFuture and helped coordinate human rights campaigns, including the successful campaign to grant refugee people the right to vote in Scottish parliamentary elections.

Biography of Dr Davide Natalini:

Dr Davide Natalini is a Senior Research Fellow at the Global Sustainability Institute based at Anglia Ruskin University. An interdisciplinary environmental social scientist, he studies complex social-ecological systems where human and natural elements interact in diverse ways. His work focuses on community development and systemic risk, with a particular emphasis on environmental conflict. He co-led the Nature-Based Integration project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy.

Biography of Dr Hyab Johannes:

Dr [Hyab Yohannes](#) is a Lecturer in Forced Migration and Decolonial Education with the UNESCO Chair RIELA at the University of Glasgow. He conducts research and synthesises findings to address theoretical, methodological, and policy-related questions. Recently, Hyab co-edited a Special Issue on [Intercultural Knowledge Production](#) for the *Journal of Language and Intercultural Communication* and a book titled [Cultures of Sustainable Peace](#) for Multilingual Matters. His forthcoming book, *The Refugee Abyss*, will be published by Routledge. Hyab's research interests include poetics, decoloniality, and political theories across physical, onto-epistemic, spatio-temporal, and juridico-political dimensions.

Evidence for the Welsh Parliament Equality and Social justice Committee's inquiry on Community Cohesion

Key Issues Impacting Social Cohesion in Wales

Several factors influence social cohesion, particularly for migrants, asylum seekers, and marginalized groups. One major issue is unequal access to parks, gardens, and other natural spaces, which creates disparities in community participation and well-being. Many migrants and refugees face cultural and logistical barriers that hinder their engagement with these environments, limiting their ability to benefit from nature's social and psychological advantages (Phillimore, 2020). Our research demonstrates that access to well-maintained nature is crucial for community cohesion, particularly as these spaces serve as vital community assets in the face of reduced public infrastructure. Both new and historic resident communities benefit from these spaces for social connection, wellbeing, and cultural expression (Jay & Schraml, 2009).

Additionally, the lack of inclusivity in the design and management of public green spaces contributes to feelings of exclusion. Natural spaces should be reflective of the diverse cultural backgrounds of local communities, yet many fail to accommodate the specific needs and traditions of minority groups (Peters, 2010). Without deliberate efforts to incorporate inclusivity, these areas may become spaces of division rather than cohesion. Our findings indicate that nature play a crucial role in helping people maintain cultural traditions while building new connections. This is particularly relevant for Wales, where landscape and heritage are deeply intertwined. Mental health and social isolation also play a critical role in

shaping social cohesion. Green spaces offer significant therapeutic benefits, particularly for asylum seekers and displaced individuals who often experience high levels of stress, trauma, and loneliness (Rishbeth & Rogaly, 2018). Nature-based programs can serve as effective interventions, fostering intergroup connections and creating opportunities for individuals to rebuild social ties within their new communities (Kloek et al., 2013).

Best Practices and Interventions Supporting Social Cohesion

Research into nature-based integration initiatives across the UK highlights how engagement with natural environments fosters meaningful social ties and a sense of belonging. In urban settings like Haringey, shared parks and green spaces function as informal meeting points, where migrants and host communities engage in social interactions that transcend cultural barriers (Peters, 2010). These spaces facilitate spontaneous exchanges, reinforcing a sense of collective identity and mutual understanding. Similarly, in Blackburn with Darwen, community-led gardening and conservation initiatives have been instrumental in fostering intergenerational and interethnic relationships. These initiatives create opportunities for collaboration, skill-sharing, and cross-cultural learning, strengthening local networks and community resilience. Meanwhile, the Isle of Lewis case study underscores how rural landscapes serve as sites of cultural continuity for migrant communities. By engaging in land-based activities such as crofting, foraging, and communal gardening, individuals establish connections between their cultural heritage and their new environment (Kabisch & Haase, 2014).

Our research identified several successful approaches that could be implemented in Wales. Nature-based community programs, including community gardening initiatives, group walking programs, and creative workshops in natural settings, have been shown to foster meaningful social interactions across different community groups. Additionally, aesthetic and cultural initiatives—such as artistic and cultural activities in nature—are particularly effective in building cross-cultural understanding, creating shared experiences, helping newcomers develop place attachment, and preserving and sharing cultural heritage. These findings collectively demonstrate that nature serves as a powerful catalyst for social cohesion, fostering relationships that are both locally embedded and culturally inclusive.

Despite their potential, nature-based initiatives face several challenges. Funding limitations pose a significant barrier, as many successful initiatives rely on third-sector organizations that often struggle with financial sustainability. Greater investment in community-led projects is necessary to ensure their long-term viability (Phillimore, 2022). Additionally, the role of nature in integration is frequently overlooked in mainstream social cohesion strategies. A more holistic approach that incorporates both ecological and social dimensions is essential to fostering a truly inclusive society (Favell, 2022). Accessibility barriers also persist, with transportation limitations, cultural unfamiliarity, and safety concerns preventing some communities from utilizing natural spaces. Addressing these issues through inclusive urban planning and well-connected green infrastructure is critical to ensuring equitable access for all (Jay & Schraml, 2009).

Policy Recommendations for the Welsh Government

To enhance social cohesion through nature-based strategies, policies should integrate green and blue spaces into broader social cohesion frameworks, recognizing their role in fostering social interaction and belonging. Nature-based approaches should be systematically embedded into integration programs, ensuring that local councils and third-sector organizations receive the necessary support to develop and expand community-led initiatives. Cross-sector collaboration between local government, environmental organizations, and migrant support groups should be encouraged to enhance accessibility and engagement with natural spaces. Additionally, piloting and evaluating nature-based

cohesion projects in Wales would allow policymakers to assess their effectiveness and adapt strategies to diverse urban and rural contexts. Specific support should include dedicated funding for nature-based integration initiatives, improvements in access to natural spaces, and resources for creative and cultural programs that utilize natural environments.

To address existing barriers, policies should prioritize improving physical accessibility to green spaces, providing multilingual information about natural areas, supporting transportation solutions for marginalized communities, and funding community organizations to facilitate nature-based activities. Given the challenges posed by targeted attacks on refugee and asylum-seeking communities in 2023, nature-based integration strategies offer a means of creating safe, shared spaces for positive intercultural engagement and fostering a sense of collective environmental stewardship. While some aspects of community cohesion fall under UK Government jurisdiction, the Welsh Government has significant scope to support nature-based integration through environmental policy, cultural heritage programs, public health initiatives, and education and community learning strategies.

Nature-based approaches present a valuable yet underutilized strategy for fostering social cohesion, particularly among migrants and marginalized communities. Our research demonstrates that investing in nature-based integration approaches can contribute significantly to community cohesion while supporting multiple policy objectives around health, wellbeing, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation. By integrating ecological considerations into social policy, Wales has the opportunity to pioneer inclusive, sustainable, and community-driven integration models. The evidence presented in this submission underscores the effectiveness of such interventions and highlights the necessity of embedding them within existing social cohesion frameworks. Future initiatives should prioritize accessibility, cultural inclusivity, and long-term sustainability to ensure the meaningful integration of diverse communities into shared environmental and social spaces. This submission invites further engagement and collaboration to refine and implement nature-based solutions in Wales, ensuring that integration strategies are both equitable and reflective of the lived experiences of migrant communities.

References

- Fatehrad, A., Natalini, D., Yohannes, H. and Palombo, G. (2025) 'Diaspora space and nature-based integration', in *Displaced Urbanism*. Routledge, April. Available at: [<https://www.routledge.com/Displaced-Urbanism/Karunaratne/p/book/9781032748283>].
- Fatehrad, A. and Natalini, D. (2025, expected) 'Nature-based integration: unpacking community experiences across the UK', in Aldegheri, E., Fisher, D. and Phipps, A. (eds.) *Handbook of Integration with Refugees*. Multilingual Matters.
- Fatehrad, A., Natalini, D., Yohannes, H. and Palombo, G. (2024) *The role of nature: policy brief*. Available at: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Role-of-Nature.-Policy-Brief.pdf> (Accessed: 10 February 2025).
- Fatehrad, A., Natalini, D., Yohannes, H. and Palombo, G. (2024) *Nature-based integration policy and practice toolkit*. Available at: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/NBI-Policy-Toolkit.pdf> (Accessed: 10 February 2025).
- Favell, A. (2022). *Immigration, Integration and Mobility: New Agendas in Migration Studies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kabisch, N., & Haase, D. (2014). *Green justice or just green? Provision of urban green spaces in Berlin, Germany*. Landscape and Urban Planning, 122, 129-139.
- Latour, B. (2018). *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Polity Press.
- Phillimore, J. (2020). *Integration and the infrastructure of everyday life*. Migration Studies, 8(3), 334-352.
- Rishbeth, C., Rogaly, B. (2018). *New migrants and belonging: Habitat, memory and urban futures*. Routledge.