

NEWS

PROJECT

UFIL - Urban Forest
Innovation Lab

📍 Cuenca, Spain

TOPIC

Jobs and skills in the
local economy

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Urban-rural agenda of Cuenca: the way forward to 2030

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website



The agenda is among the last deliverables produced by the Urban Forest Innovation Lab project. The document sets the roadmap for local and regional public administrations to continue developing a forest-based bioeconomy after the completion of the project in October 2022.

The urban-rural agenda of Cuenca is only available in Spanish. This web article reviews the agenda with the double aim of discussing and disseminating its content in English, so as to share the future plans of the involved public administrations with other non-Spanish cities, provinces and regions across the EU.

Background to the agenda

UFIL aim was to develop a local economy based on the sustainable exploitation of the large forests owned by the City of Cuenca. The development of a forest-based bioeconomy is a long journey and the project could only initiate the process over its implementation period (2018-2022), primarily focusing on the running of its city-based forest innovation lab. The urban-rural agenda is the way to bring the ambitions of the project forward, up to 2030.

UFIL established and run a forest innovation lab where 84 relatively young (32 years old, on average) individuals were trained to become innovative entrepreneurs in the forest sector (see [here](#) the overview of the results of the project). Attraction of talent and improvement of local skills were primary activities of the project. UFIL also created linkages among public institutions, businesses and other entities (e.g., banks and foundations) involved in the forest sector. These interventions were meant to support the creation of a local ecosystem of actors focused on forest bioeconomy development. Importantly, UFIL stressed the need to add value to the forest sector and to make it a retention factor for young people and talent as well as a driver of socio-economic development for both the city and its rural surroundings.

Objectives and challenges on which the agenda is based

The vision underlying the urban-rural agenda of Cuenca is to make the province of Cuenca a reference case for forest bioeconomy, a territory where the rural environment is lively and nurtured by a local economy that builds on an innovative and resilient forestry sector. This vision is tackled by means of several specific objectives, some of which totally or partially recall the objectives pursued by the UFIL project.

In brief, the agenda aims to:

1. Demonstrate to the general public the importance of the forest sector for local development, and of sustainable forest management for the conservation of forests.
2. Modernise forest value chains and add value to forest products and services.
3. Promote the sustainable socio-economic development of rural areas through the forest economy.
4. Promote forestry research and knowledge-transfer as drivers of change.
5. Facilitate access to open data in the forest sector.
6. Have a governance framework in place for circular bioeconomy (i.e., a circular economy based on nature).
7. Diversify economic activities in the territory through entrepreneurship, education and training in forestry.
8. Improve competitiveness and facilitate entrepreneurship and circular bioeconomy development in rural areas.

Objectives 1, 2, 3 and 7 are very close to UFIL objectives.

Objective 4 is interesting because it introduces the need for research and knowledge-transfer activities which are at the basis of innovation development. This component was weak in UFIL.

Objective 5 introduces the need of having more and accessible data available. This is at the basis of informed decision-making at all levels. It needs to be recalled here that a lot of time was dedicated in UFIL to develop the knowledge base to be used as a starting point for training and other project activities. This objective may thus be intended as the result of a 'lesson learnt' during UFIL.

Objectives 6 and 8 introduce the concept of circular bioeconomy. Circular bioeconomy is a circular economy that is based on bio raw materials. Indeed, circular bioeconomy is a step forward with respect to bioeconomy and raises very much the level of ambition of the agenda.

Overall, the above objectives aim to address a series of challenges that do not differ too much from the challenges considered by UFIL when the City of Cuenca launched its UIA/EUI project. However, in the outline of these challenges, it is evident a higher level of awareness of forest sector issues that was not present when UFIL started back in 2018.

- Among the challenges identified in the agenda and already pursued by the UFIL project are: the lack of understanding by the general public of the opportunities offered by the forest sector, and of the importance of forest management to have healthy and productive forests; the demographic decline that undermines the socioeconomic sustainability of the territory; insufficient synergies and knowledge-exchange in the entrepreneurial ecosystem; the need for skilled workforce and training for the modernisation of the forest sector; and the low attractiveness of the forest sector, with bureaucracy still being a barrier to business-making.
- Among the challenges identified in the agenda and derived from a higher awareness of the needs of the forest sector are: the low dynamism of private forest owners; the low capacity to follow up to forest management plans by forest owners; the low level of application of technology in the forest sector; and the low profitability of existing forest-based value chains.

The agenda identifies **five areas of intervention and 13 actions** to tackle the above challenges and achieve its objectives. Each action has the timeline (short, medium and long-term) specified and clearly indicates impact and monitoring indicators. Implementing stakeholders are outlined in the narrative of the action while financial resources for implementation are not indicated.

The actions of the agenda are looked at in more detail in the following sections.

Area of intervention #1: governance and regulatory aspects

ACTION 1

COOPERATION PROTOCOL

ACTION 2

GOVERNING BODY

ACTION 3

GREEN CRITERIA FOR PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

The first two actions envisaged in the agenda define the actors that will be in charge of implementing and overseeing the development of a forest-based bioeconomy in the province of Cuenca. The finalisation of a cooperation protocol among public and private stakeholders (**Action 1**) will result into the establishment of a 'Governing Body' (**Action 2**).

The protocol is meant as a commitment made by signatories to continue the multi-level cooperation across local, provincial and regional public authorities that characterised the implementation of UFIL; to follow-up the training activities and the operation of the lab started within UFIL; and to strengthen the public-private ecosystem in the

forestry sector through the inclusion in the protocol of actors from the private sector. The Governing Body will be in charge of representing the interests at the provincial, regional and national level of all the stakeholders engaged through the protocol. Furthermore, it will be in charge of overseeing the implementation of the agenda.

The third action in this area of intervention aims at integrating green criteria in public procurement rules (**Action 3**). These voluntary criteria are expected to have positive side effects on the development of a sustainable forest-based local economy as they will give preference in public procurement to environmentally friendly products and services.

Area of intervention #2: engaged and dynamic rural areas

ACTION 4	INSTRUMENTS FOR SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT
ACTION 5	NETWORK OF PROMOTERS
ACTION 6	ASSOCIATION OF FOREST OWNERS
ACTION 7	COORDINATION OF EXISTING INITIATIVES IN RURAL AREAS

The four actions in this area of intervention aim at revitalising rural areas with activities that encourage forest management, forest use, engagement and coordination. **Action 4** promotes the preparation and implementation of sustainable forest management plans across forest properties. **Action 5** envisages the creation of a network of promoters of forest bioeconomy, whose role will also be to facilitate the sustainable use of forest resources. These promoters will be in direct contact with private forest owners, but also with the public sector with regard to the implementation of the sustainable forest management plans, and with the industry with regard to the processing of forest products. **Action 6** is about the creation of an association of (public and private) forest owners in the province of Cuenca, and **Action 7** aims at coordinating under a common umbrella existing initiatives (e.g., services and infrastructure) in rural areas in order to maximise their impact.

Area of intervention #3: innovation, entrepreneurship and competitiveness

ACTION 8	INNOVATIVE BUSINESS CLUSTER ON FOREST BIOECONOMY
ACTION 9	FOREST BIOECONOMY OBSERVATORY
ACTION 10	ENTREPRENEURIAL HUB IN FOREST BIOECONOMY (CONSOLIDATION OF UFIL)

The actions in this area of intervention aim at strengthening the ecosystem of actors who are involved in forest bioeconomy. **Action 8** wants to develop, within the upcoming Science and Technology Park for Circular Economy (a project of the Province), a cluster of industry, training centres and technology centres focusing on forest bioeconomy. **Action 9** tackles the creation of an observatory for forest bioeconomy. The observatory is intended as a repository of data and information. It should enhance transparency, data management and decision-making.

Finally, **Action 10** represents the continuation of the training programme launched by UFIL. The action is about the delivery of training in forest bioeconomy for the definition and prototyping of products and services and for innovative business development. The programme will still be hosted in the Cuenca campus of the University of Castilla-La Mancha, will take advantage of the laboratory and equipment set up during the UFIL project and will seek synergies with private companies.

Area of intervention #4: training and education

ACTION 11	PROFESSIONALISATION OF EMPLOYMENT IN THE FOREST SECTOR
ACTION 12	AWARENESS ON FOREST-BASED BIOECONOMY IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

In this area, the aim is to promote forestry as an attractive learning path for students and to make existing training

and education opportunities more tailored to the needs of a modern and dynamic forest sector. The agenda foresees the preparation of a programme aimed at the professionalisation of the human resources employed or to be employed in the forest sector (**Action 11**). Training will need to adapt existing skills and professional profiles to the demand of the industry. Informal training will also aim to facilitate the transition of students from education to employment.

Another action (**Action 12**) will disseminate the concepts of forest-based bioeconomy in schools and other educational centres. Structured workshops and talks will generate content and informative material that will be used to raise awareness among students on the opportunities offered by the forest sector so as to incentivise them to choose forest-related topics in their studies.

Area of intervention #5: awareness and communication

ACTION 13 **DISSEMINATION & COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN**

Finally, **Action 13** aims at raising awareness on the potential of forest bioeconomy as a source of sustainable products and services, including tourism attractions. The action wants to attract attention horizontally, on products (from customers) and on business-making opportunities (from investors). The brand 'Pine of Cuenca' will be developed under this action to characterise wood products from the province.

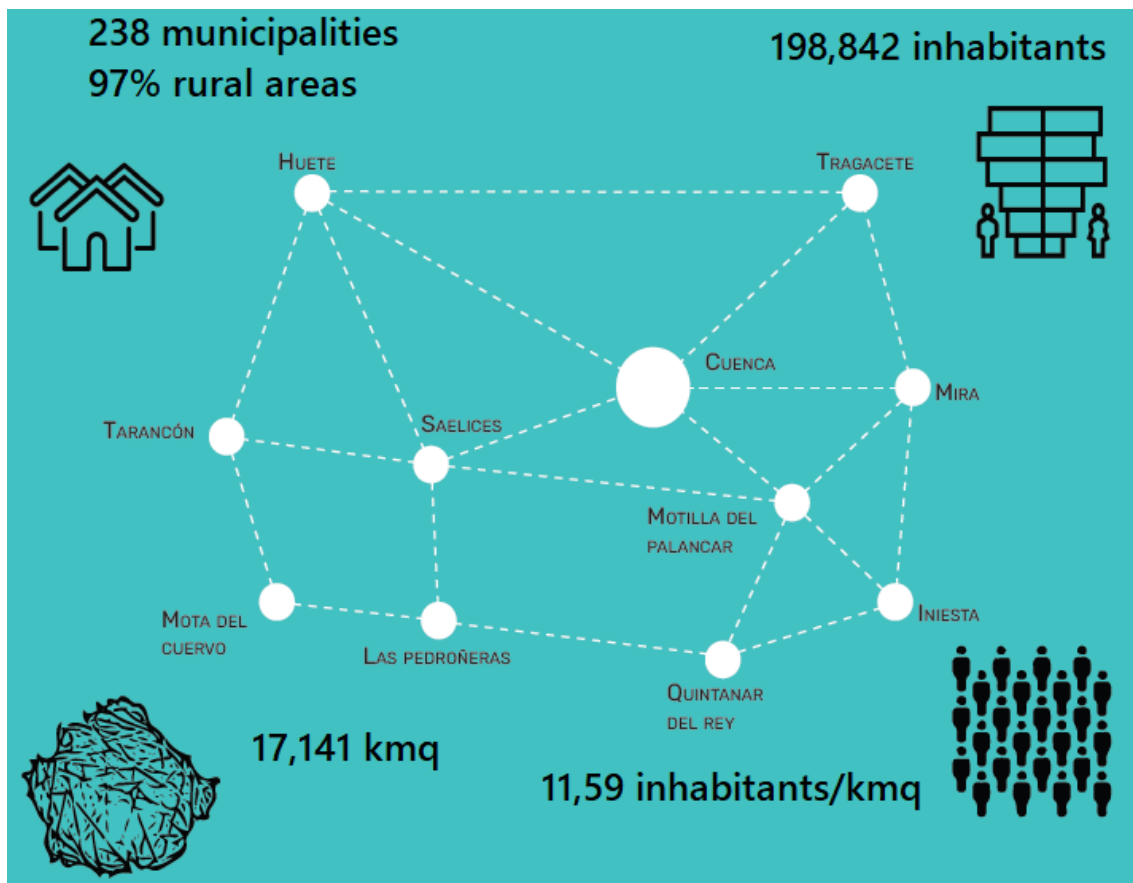
Main characteristics of the urban-rural agenda of Cuenca: a review

The agenda proposed by UFIL addresses all the elements originally foreseen in the project proposal for the preparation of a Forest Bioeconomy Action Plan, namely the involvement of institutional stakeholders at different administrative levels, collaboration and networking mechanisms among forest-related businesses and the development of a brand associated to a sustainability seal. In fact, the agenda also shapes the follow-up to UFIL (Action 10) and outlines actions related to forest management, mobilisation of forest owners and even forest data collection and management.

In my article on [Local action plans for forest bioeconomy development: a mission impossible?](#), it was highlighted the importance to include in bioeconomy development processes the active engagement of diverse actors sharing a common vision; the creation of added value that remains in the local economy; and the existence of a policy framework facilitating collaboration and innovation. All these three aspects are addressed in the urban-rural agenda of Cuenca.

In terms of main characteristics, the agenda:

- Shifts the responsibility for the development of a forest-based bioeconomy from a single entity (as it was in UFIL, i.e., the City Council of Cuenca) to a multi-level governing body (where the Cuenca Provincial Council and the Castilla-La Mancha Community Board are also expected to be involved, besides the City of Cuenca) and puts forward a new governance model that is also a proactive way to engage the private sector.
- Takes a broader approach to the territory than UFIL did. The agenda stresses the rural and territorial components of the forest bioeconomy and proposes actions across the territory rather than primarily in the city (as done in UFIL).
- Enlarges the scale of action from the municipal to the provincial level, namely from the city of Cuenca to the province of Cuenca (see below the catchment area of the agenda). In the province, other cities - besides Cuenca - are endowed with forest resources and may become poles of development for forest-based bioeconomy. The consideration of the province level is crucial to build a sufficiently large ecosystem for forest bioeconomy development.



Catchment area of the agenda.

Source: UFIL urban-rural agenda - modified to fit in the article

On the other hand, the agenda delegates the responsibility to implement its actions to an entity that needs to be created ex-novo. As at July 2023, the protocol and the governing body were agreed and participated in by only the City of Cuenca and the University of Castilla-La Mancha. In addition, even if each action has specified indicators for monitoring purposes, the responsibility for implementation is a bit unclear as a consequence of the complexity of several of the outlined actions, where the involvement of more stakeholders is envisaged.

Finally, the agenda is in my opinion over-ambitious when it introduces the objective of circular bioeconomy, even if the rationale for tackling it is clear (i.e., the alignment to the upcoming Science and Technology Park for Circular Economy). Another noted weakness of the agenda is the fact that the financial sources, or funds, for the implementation of each action are not specified. This makes the agenda more a strategic document than an implementation plan.

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