

NEWS

PROJECT

UFIL - Urban Forest
Innovation Lab

📍 Cuenca, Spain

TOPIC

Jobs and skills in the
local economy

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UFIL Final Journal

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website



This is the fourth and last journal of the Urban Forest Innovation Lab project (2018-2022).

Executive Summary

Almost one year after the completion of the project, UFIL is still operating under the same name and brand developed for UIA. For the continuation of UFIL, the Municipality of Cuenca and its partners opted for the most institutional option: UFIL is currently run by a partnership of public entities and is funded through public money. In the near future, this partnership hopes to enlarge to include other entities, such as previous partners of the project. In October 2023, UFIL will launch its first post-project training course. In terms of objectives, this course resembles the courses run during the project lifetime. However, it is much shorter and mostly delivered in a remote format.

The innovation lab is only one of the actions the partnership is planning to implement. UFIL prepared among its last deliverables an 'urban-rural agenda of Cuenca'. The agenda paves the way for the development of a forest-based bioeconomy across the province of Cuenca up to the year 2030. Among the 13 actions envisaged in the agenda, Action 10 focuses on the continuation of UFIL with the delivery of training in the forest bioeconomy to define and prototype products and services for innovative business development.

The solution tested in the UIA project was successful in establishing and equipping the innovation lab, running training, enhancing skills and creating some employment opportunities. Still, the development of a forest-based bioeconomy is a long and complex journey and the project could only initiate this development process over its implementation period.

The project started opening to the outside and engaging with key stakeholders in its late stages. As UFIL is continuing, the actors involved with implementing the urban-rural agenda now have the opportunity to take a more holistic approach to impact on local development.

Project's progress



Details of the equipment purchased by the project for training purposes

What has happened with the project since its end date?

After almost one year from its completion, UFIL is still very much alive. Since its closure at the end of October 2022 and using the same project name and brand developed for the UIA, UFIL has been running free workshops and seminars as well as awareness raising events on the importance of forests for local development. Examples of topics addressed in the seminars/workshops include circular economy, use of drones and LIDAR technologies for inventory and other forest management practices. In addition, companies, entrepreneurs or freelancers may request using the laboratory that was developed and equipped during the project time frame (the request form is available [online](#)).

Finally, and most importantly, UFIL still operates its training programme in forest bioeconomy. In the post-project period, the first [call for new participants](#) in the training course is now open up to 9 October 2023. The [downloadable programme of the course](#) shows some important differences compared to the course implemented during the project, the most evident being the length. The new course will only be 8 weeks long (versus the 10 months implemented during the project) and mostly based on remote learning modality. Lessons will be limited to 1.5 days every 2 weeks. These changes are expected to make participation in the course easier for those persons already committed to other jobs or studies. The course will support the development of 15 entrepreneurial projects related to forest bioeconomy. At the end of the course, the best three projects will receive a money prize (€15,000, €10,000 and €5,000, respectively).

The course is organised by a public consortium including the Municipality of Cuenca, the Cuenca Provincial Council and the University of Castilla La Mancha. The teaching and tutoring is provided by four organisations that were partners in the UFIL project, namely the University of Castilla La Mancha, the Business Confederation of Cuenca, the Forest Stewardship Council and the Polytechnic University of Madrid. Other supporting organisations include Cuenca Council Wood SA, Globalcaja and PRODESE. The latter is the Local Action Group of Serranía de Cuenca. It started collaborating with UFIL during the project time frame and reflects an attempt to better embed UFIL actions into the territory.

What is the project's plan for long-term sustainability

UFIL shaped its future and the future of a forest-based bioeconomy within the province of Cuenca in its 'Urban-rural agenda of Cuenca'. The agenda brings the ambitions of the UIA project forward, up to 2030. This project document is presented and discussed in my last web article '[Urban-rural agenda of Cuenca: the way forward to 2030](#)' published in September 2023. Within the agenda, Action 10 'Entrepreneurial hub in forest bioeconomy' is

about the consolidation of UFIL. Together with all the other actions foreseen in the agenda, the implementation of Action 10 is under the responsibility of a newly established governing body that is based on a cooperation protocol. As at August 2023, the protocol and the governing body were agreed and participated in by the City of Cuenca and the University of Castilla-La Mancha. Other actors including the other partners from the UFIL project are expected to join in the near future. In the short term, consolidation of UFIL as well as other complementing activities are financially supported through public grants. More specifically, the Municipality of Cuenca managed to mobilise €650,000 through the following arrangements:

- An agreement between the City Council of Cuenca and the University of Castilla La Mancha makes available €250,000 for the carry out of activities such as conferences, seminars and meetings, as well as for the new training course taking place over the period October-December 2023.
- Cuenca Provincial Council provides a public grant of €200,000 to carry out various support activities in the forest sector such as the promotion of associations among forest owners and the implementation of technological projects (e.g., on the traceability of wood).
- A public grant of €200,000 from the Industrial Organization School of the Ministry of Industry, under the '[Promotion of the Innovative Entrepreneurial Ecosystem](#)' programme, is used to consolidate the relationship with the investors involved in the UFIL project during the years 2021 and 2022. In particular, from September to December 2023, several meetings will be held within the framework of Cuenca Bioeconomy Business Market. Specific events with large companies are also planned to mobilize the market for ecosystem forest services and forest certification.

For the medium term (2024-2025), UFIL plans to keep on relying on public grants. In particular, Cuenca City Council, FSC, the University of Castilla La Mancha, PRODESE and the Forestry Association of Soria (ASFOSO) are expecting to shortly receive €2 million from a program supporting transformative projects for the promotion of a forest-based bioeconomy. The programme is managed by the Spanish Biodiversity Foundation and the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge. In addition, UFIL (represented by the Cuenca City Council) participates in the RECONECTA project led by the Forestry Association of Soria. RECONECTA aims to reverse the situation of abandonment of many of the private forests in the provinces of Soria, Cuenca and Teruel, by reconnecting forest owners to their properties and by promoting associated forms of sustainable forest management.

Generated Knowledge



Training classes in UFIL

Lessons learned

UFIL was an ambitious project in the category '[Jobs and skills in the local economy](#)' and a pioneer, across the Mediterranean countries of the EU, in attempting to start locally a forest-based bioeconomy beginning from the development of a forest innovation lab. Because of its challenging scope, the knowledge generated by the project is important.

- UFIL partnership was an incredible asset of the project. The presence of several institutional stakeholders (the local government, the regional government, the regional university) and the cooperation agreements made with other institutions (for example, the Cuenca Provincial Council) allowed applying a risk-sharing

approach during the project's implementation that was later renewed in the continuation of UFIL. In fact, as expected, institutional actors contribute to keep on sponsoring the activities of UFIL after its completion.

- Projects expected to impact on the local economy need to be very well embedded in their target areas. UFIL had the peculiarity to target both urban and rural settings, but its reach out and engagement capacity in rural areas was limited and tackled only in the late stages of its implementation. Some of the students attending one of the training courses run by UFIL, realised that the project was offering only one perspective towards the development of entrepreneurial ideas in the forest bioeconomy sector. '[SEMBRIA, the missing perspective](#)' presents a more inclusive approach that puts the territory at the centre of entrepreneurial development and encourages co-creation.
- Theoretical knowledge takes time to become operational. UFIL developed over the project timeline an important thematic knowledge of the forest sector across the province of Cuenca. At the beginning of the project, the consortium had probably a rather theoretical knowledge of these issues, but the operationalisation of this knowledge towards the scopes of the project (classes and entrepreneurial ideas) took time.
- A learning by doing approach provides for flexibility but affects effectiveness, efficiency and most probably also credibility if it is not supported by a monitoring system. UFIL modified the delivery mechanisms of its training courses not only to adapt to changing circumstances such as those imposed by the outbreak of COVID-19, but also to face unexpected difficulties. For example, the involvement of private companies in challenging trainees proved to be very difficult and as a consequence the number of challenges was first drastically reduced and finally deleted (i.e., participation modalities of the private sector changed). The track of these changes was lost in the regular reporting of the project.

Recommendations to other urban authorities who wish to implement similar innovative projects

- Co-management in an UIA/EUI project may have a positive impact on the urban authority. This is true as far as the municipality clearly keeps the main responsibility for the success and sustainability of the project and is recognised as the leader by the other partners. In fact, co-management may be a way to relieve the administrative burden of the public administration (related, for example, to accounting and regular reporting). This may be important especially in rather small-sized cities where the additional workload implied by the UIA project impacts substantially the public authority's staff. The presence of a private company as co-manager of UFIL supported the implementation via a diffused form of leadership among the partners and in making processes faster.
- The 3-year timeline of UIA projects requires an immediate kick-off of activities. UFIL spent a lot of time on the set up of internal procedures and on the development of a sectoral study. Very few happened in the first year of project implementation.
- Engagement of target groups takes time. Projects whose success is linked to the participation in the project's activities of specific categories of stakeholders (e.g., applicant trainees, private forest owners, or even the general public) who are external to the project (i.e., are not represented in the partnership), have to start early their awareness-raising activities on the project and its scope. A communication plan should be included among the first milestones of each EUI project. The plan should be as detailed as possible, time-framed, with the specification of the partners responsible for the implementation of each envisaged activity and subject to regular updates.
- Flexibility to change delivery methods along the way is a strength, not a weakness, but it needs to be based on monitoring mechanisms. For the sake of transparency, effectiveness and efficiency, changes in project implementation need to be guided by a robust monitoring system. Thus, the monitoring system should not only include results and impact indicators, but also performance indicators assessing the quality of processes.
- A strong partnership for the local development of a forest-based bioeconomy shall be based on at least a triple-helix grouping. This means that the public sector (preferably representing multi-levels of governance) is accompanied by the industry and by research & development organisations that actively input the ecosystem not only with teaching activities but also with innovation capacity (e.g., innovative technologies, services, products). Ideally, the engagement of civil society in the innovation process would lead to a quadruple-helix approach where co-creation is at the basis of the innovation process. Civil society

participation would ensure that the project is embedded in the territory.

- Triggering locally a forest-based bioeconomy needs the development of an ecosystem of actors. All these actors are unlikely to exist at the local scale, thus it is necessary to widen the territorial scope of the project to the provincial or even to the regional level. The mapping of existing actors who are necessary for the functioning of the ecosystem (for example, big wood processing industries, or innovation centres) as well as the ways to involve/engage them should be made clear at the stage of project proposal.
- Among the lessons learnt individually identified by the project's partners and presented in my [August 2022 Zoom-in #2](#), it is worth mentioning the necessity of (at least some) project partners to reorganise internally in order to contribute to a EUI project. For example, the University of Castilla-La Mancha had to find synergies among its existing working groups that were considering forest bioeconomy from different perspectives in order to coherently input the project.

Conclusion



Pine forests around Cuenca

The expert's final reflection and “evaluation” of the project

UFIL demonstrated the capacity of a local authority to identify alternative local development opportunities while complying with sustainability and greening principles. Sustainable forest management practices and innovative technologies and products make the forest sector a potential source of prosperity also in Mediterranean countries where forest ecosystems are complex and often protected for their biodiversity or landscape values.

The Municipality of Cuenca had a very proactive role in the project, leading it at both the operational and institutional level. Political will managed to engage all relevant institutional actors, including at the provincial and regional level. This group of public authorities always acted jointly and for the success of the project. Their level of commitment and their ability to team-work for the common good of the project is commendable.

The strong role played by institutional partners has facilitated the post-project sustainability of the actions started in UFIL. In the long-term, it is very likely that public funding will continue being sought by the institutional actors involved in the sponsorship and management of UFIL. UFIL got acknowledgments at the national level and the UIA project reference is used as a reputable experience when applying for public grants. As long as the political will is there, funding for the training model put forward by UFIL (short courses, primarily delivered in distance learning modality and subsidised by public funding) is secured.

The core of the project was the training laboratory and the three courses organised during the project timeline were successful in nurturing forest-related skills and even in creating and retaining locally forest-related businesses. The ‘sleeping giant’, as the mayor of Cuenca calls the huge unexploited forest resources of the city, was awakened by the ‘noise’ of the activities run by the project and by the newly established businesses.

Still, UFIL ambition to locally trigger a forest-based bioeconomy through the implementation of a city-based innovation lab was too high. In particular, UFIL had no time to create an ecosystem of key actors in the forest sectors, which is at the basis of the development of a forest-based bioeconomy. Most important missing players were innovation and research centres. The involvement of the industry was also a bit problematic. The importance of attracting and engaging these actors since the project’s very beginning was overlooked and too much time was spent in developing a knowledge baseline and a detailed understanding of key forest sector issues in the province. In fact, the UFIL urban-rural agenda published in 2022 reflects a much higher level of awareness of these issues compared to 2018, when the project began.

The solution tested in the UIA/EUI project was successful in establishing and equipping the innovation lab, in running the training and enhancing skills, and in creating locally employment opportunities. This solution has not been upscaled after the conclusion of the project. Actually, the training component has been downsized in the project’s follow-up. However, the downsizing is justified by the fact that in the follow-up to the project more emphasis is given to mindset change (for example, by encouraging students to undertake forest studies), civil society engagement (for example, by supporting the association of private forest owners) and cooperation with the industry. The post-project approach is more holistic than the one implemented in the UFIL project and appears appropriate to impact on the local economy.

The main legacy of the project

UFIL demonstrates that local action and leadership by institutional actors are able to open new business opportunities. The UIA/EUI project leaves at the community level the offering of a free training course to support skills enhancement and entrepreneurship in the forest sector. It also leaves locally an upskilled cohort of individuals (although not all the 84 trained persons remained in Cuenca) and the creation of 14 new businesses. The May 2023 web article [‘UFIL final \(internal\) evaluation and results’](#) provides an overview of all the results of UFIL.

At the policy level, UFIL leaves the design of a forward-looking strategy for the development of a forest-based bioeconomy (i.e., the urban-rural agenda) in the province of Cuenca as well as the creation of a governing body in charge of following the agenda’s implementation. This is a very important legacy of the project because it sets the basis for follow-up actions.

UFIL partners are now more knowledgeable about what is required to develop a forest-based bioeconomy. This thematic knowledge of the forest sector in the province of Cuenca, developed within the UFIL project, is clearly reflected in the urban-rural agenda. Hopefully, the agenda document will be published soon online, so as to openly share the knowledge it is based upon.

In addition, ACMSA, the public sawmill of the Municipality of Cuenca (and one of the partners in UFIL) has modernised and improved its wood processing capacity with the support of the project.

UFIL also made existing stakeholders dealing with forest issues from different perspective aware that there is the political will to support the development of a forest-based bioeconomy. Facilitated by this important message, networking is ongoing and coordination/synergies with other existing/upcoming initiatives for the creation of an ecosystem of relevant actors are sought at the local, provincial and regional level.

Finally, among the most important side-effects of the project generated by the above-mentioned networking, coordination and synergising activities, a manufacturing company (Lignum Tech) set up in Cuenca a production site that besides offering employment to some 60 people is expected to create local demand for quality wood. Also, the Forest Stewardship Council (one of the partners in UFIL) consolidated its forest certification not only at the local level but also across the region of Castilla-La Mancha (more details are included in the June 2022 web article [‘Forest certification in and around UFIL: a multi-functional driver’](#)).

Jobs and skills in the local economy

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