



Nature's integration in cities'
hydrologies, ecologies and societies

Quality Assurance and Risk Management Plan Deliverable 6.2

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1 Executive Summary

This Quality Assurance and Risk Management Plan (Deliverable 6.2) summarises the main procedures within the project for quality assurance of deliverables and risk management. The Plan aims to foster the efficient, effective and high-quality delivery of NICHES outputs and the appropriate management of overarching and WP-specific risks. Risk management and contingency planning will be carried out throughout the project to ensure that the project strategy, tasks, deliverables, and budget are met.

The Quality Assurance and Risk Management Plan is therefore intended to be an internal guiding document for use by NICHES partners to successfully mitigate the negative impact of (potential) risks in the project and follow streamlined procedures to ensure high quality deliverables. The document is not legally binding and leaves room for adaptation where deemed appropriate, in discussion with the project coordinator. As a living document, information can be updated in more detail as the project progresses and in case any unforeseen changes occur.

2 Quality management

The overall approach to quality management in NICHEs is based on the timely completion and creation of high-quality documents and products. Therefore, a multi-scale review process will be established.

2.1 Quality standards for deliverables

The timely delivery of all documents will be part of regular status updates among the members of the project consortium. The Project Coordinator will provide an overview of timelines and deliverables in the online project management tool as well as in the monthly extended consortium meetings, with a special focus on deliverables with approaching deadlines. This will ensure that every WP Leader is aware of upcoming deadlines and plans sufficient time to produce the foreseen products. The WP Leader of the respective deliverable(s) will, in turn, oversee the timely completion of the deliverables being produced in their WPs across all tasks and communicate said deadlines to any deliverable leads who are not able to attend the consortium meetings.

The quality management process in the NICHEs project will focus on the following aspects to ensure a high quality of the final deliverables:

- **Clarity of thought and presentation:** Is the document logically structured, clearly written and easy-to-read? Is there a suitable balance of text and illustrations, where relevant? Is the document designed and formatted in line with the NICHEs templates? Are the arguments and information presented in the document logical and, where appropriate, consistent with other NICHEs deliverables and findings? Are the sources of illustrations, tables, citations, interviews, etc. provided and properly referenced? Where appropriate, is clear guidance provided for the user on how to best utilise the deliverable (e.g. in the case of guidelines, tools, etc.)?
- **Internal validity:** Is the text and the data in the document plausible? Are the text and data consistent? Are there any contradictions within the document?
- **Contribution and conformity:** Does the deliverable contribute to the aim of the task as set out in the NICHEs proposal? Is the deliverable well suited to the foreseen target group? Are there any deviations of the deliverable and its outline from the project proposal, both in terms of content and form?
- **Ethical considerations:** Have the code and practices for the conduct of ethical research been followed? Has the Data Management Plan (including secure storage of data, protection of personal information) and FAIR data policy been followed?

A deliverable template is provided to ensure that quality standards (in terms of form, revision, approval, electronic filing, etc.) are fulfilled.

2.2 Revision procedure

The revision procedure consists of an internal peer-review of NICHEs's public and non-public deliverables to ensure a high quality of project outputs. Before a deliverable is submitted, it will undergo an internal peer-review process by selected consortium members. This process is the last stage before a deliverable is submitted and will take place (at least) two weeks before the submission date. The two parallel steps in the internal peer-review process are:

1. **Task lead review:** Each deliverable will be reviewed by a member of the institution leading the respective task. The reviewer will work with the author(s) of deliverables to ensure that drafts are of sufficient quality and in line with the WP and project as a whole, to the extent that this is relevant.

2. **Quality review:** Each lead author nominates 1 an additional quality reviewer from within the NICHES consortium who has not themselves been involved in the development/writing of the deliverable, but who can offer thematic expertise or are working on related processes within NICHES. These individuals should be informed/asked if they have capacities for review around ca. 1 month before the deliverable is due to ensure that they block time for the week of the review. The Project Coordinator will review the proposal in parallel and other consortium members may likewise provide feedback if desired. The feedback will be provided to the deliverable's lead partner within 1 week.

A sufficient time buffer for the review will be integrated into planning by the WP Leaders. The reviewers will provide written comments to the partner leading the respective deliverable. The Lead Partner will then coordinate the process of addressing the comments received amongst all authors, as relevant, in the final period before submission. They will then send the final version of the deliverable to the Project Coordinator by the deadline. If approved, the coordinator will then confirm the approval of the deliverable and send to Pensoft to upload to the project website (if public) and the internal NICHES repository.

The following **guidelines** should be considered to guarantee an effective peer-review process:

- The lead partner is responsible for ensuring an adequate quality of writing (spelling, grammar), while peer-review partners should comment on the internal consistency of the text and structure of the deliverable.
- It is at the Lead Partner's discretion whether to accept and incorporate the comments provided by the peer-review partner and/or other consortium members into the final draft. If major comments are rejected, this is supported with a justification for the rejection.
- Peer-review partners are responsible to check whether the quality criteria outlined under 2.1 are fulfilled or not.
- The Lead Partner is responsible for sending the final version of the deliverable to the Project Coordinator by the official due date; all deliverables have to be approved by the coordinator before being considered finalized.
- The final version of a public deliverable is referenced and uploaded to the NICHES website.
- In case of expected changes in timing and content of a deliverable, the responsible deliverable lead is to inform the Project Coordinator at least 2 months before the date of submissions and provide the reasons for these changes. The Project Coordinator will discuss the changes with the respective partner and inform Biodiversa/WaterJPI and relevant national funders, if needed.

3 Risk management

The complexity and scope of NICHES' workplan as well as the geographical scope across its five case study cities requires that potential risks are considered in order to keep the project activities on time and within budget. Mitigating these risks are the organisational and scientific strength of the consortium partners, bringing extensive knowledge and experience from working on many international collaborative research projects. Regular and open communication as well as clear leadership and management procedures can serve to mitigate the majority of identified risks. The management of the identified risks will lie with the Project Coordinator (Ecologic Institute).

The following table lists all critical risks that have been identified to date, which could arise during the project implementation. Each point is supplemented with corresponding risk-mitigation measures to be taken by the project team.

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The Project Coordinator and Project Deputy will monitor these risks. Any needs for adjusting the contingency plan and/or potential new risks to be addressed will be raised in the Steering Group meetings to avoid any delays or negative impacts on the project activities and outcomes.

Any additional risks that might be identified during the project will be discussed in regular or - in the case of severe risks - in exceptional consortium meetings. During these meetings, the project consortium will discuss possible strategies to mitigate those risks and will decide how to most appropriately address them.

Table 1: Critical risks and proposed mitigation actions

Description of risk	WP(s)	Level of risk/ impact	Contingency plan
Negative impacts (e.g. on stakeholder participation) and delays due to unexpected global events such as COVID-19 Pandemic	all	Low / Medium	Partners have extensive experience in organizing digital stakeholder events to gather necessary inputs and in maximizing the participatory nature of such events, even if online. The necessity of in-person events and benefits will be weighed against potential risks and - when held - participation will be limited and safety measures will be taken to minimize COVID-19 risks. Efforts to reach target stakeholders without access to robust internet will be made, such as opening remote phone participation opportunities - but potential biases towards tech-savvy individuals should be considered.
Failing to create and maintain a cooperative and transparent culture of communication	all	Low/ Medium	The project coordinator is experienced in running projects and setting up adequate structures for the internal communication in international consortia. Partners jointly agreed on means for internal communication to ensure cooperative and transparent communication in the project. An open feedback culture will support any further changes needed in an agile manner.
Ineffective management of consortium partners across time-zones	all	Low / High	All meetings including Boston/Northeastern University will be held in the afternoon (CET) to enable participation; the communication tool Slack will be utilised for easier fluid communication on a day-to-day basis.
Lacking interconnection of work activities and integration of research findings to produce integrated outcomes reflecting the transdisciplinary research approach	all	Medium / Medium	A clear workflow with milestones and deliverables has been agreed upon by all partners. Each WP involves those partners with the requisite expertise to produce high quality work. A devolved management structure, with WP Leaders, WP co-leads and task leaders ensures that the work is coordinated rather than disjointed. Regular WP and SG meetings will review progress and discuss interim findings, results and challenges for each WP and task. The project coordinator will regularly monitor progress and provide updates to the consortium through email and virtual meetings, where appropriate.
Major modifications of the work plan	all	Low/ Medium	A special Steering Group consisting of the Project Coordinator, all WP leaders and representatives of each partner institution will be established to ensure smooth implementation and adjustments, as needed, in a timely and agreed manner.
Lack of resources beyond staff time	all	Medium / High	WPs and Tasks have been designed with available capacities in mind. The project management structures allow for differing degrees of participation on the basis of current project activities, e.g. no requiring inactive WP leads to attend all weekly stand-up meetings. SMART management and communication will also foster efficient use of available resources.

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Change in staff or extended absence of partners (particularly WP/task leads)	all	Medium / Low	A deputy WP-lead will be kept informed of project activities throughout NICHES and be able to seamlessly take over WP responsibilities, if needed. The same holds true for the Deputy Project Coordinator.
Insularity /silo-approaches, too broad of focus, and a lack of coordination between tasks	all	Medium / Medium	Short weekly stand-up meetings and longer monthly meetings will be held to ensure that parts of the project do not advance without the other partners being informed and having the opportunity to pose questions and receive feedback. An internal repository and slack channels will facilitate the further sharing of news, data and content-related developments across the consortium. Regular exchanges will aim to keep the project focused on the targeted topics and avoid too broad of an approach, which could jeopardise the uniqueness and added value of project outputs.
Data availability / accessibility and continuity /comparability across and within case studies	all	Low / High	Partners have a good overview of existing data (based on screening and previous/ongoing research) and strong existing networks in the case studies. Extensive collaborations with the three core case study cities have been established and essentially guarantee access to existing data. Strong overlaps with existing projects will further support data access.
Limited engagement of stakeholders, stakeholder burnout or challenges in participant recruitment, stakeholders' perceived lack of need for NICHES research	WP1, WP2, WP3, WP4, WP5	Medium / Medium	The Stakeholder Engagement Strategy (WP5) will support an adaptable and effective approach in the NICHES case studies, ensuring that the most effective communication, channels and narratives are used for relevant stakeholder groups in appropriate local contexts. The local scientific partners also have extensive experience in working with and engaging stakeholders in their city and will tailored NICHES' engagement approach. Communication and outreach will be championed by all project members, using their networks, and tailored to each city's needs, supported by diverse ideas, templates and methodological guidelines to fit respective task needs around co-creation and broader stakeholder engagement (developed in T5.1). A central overview of contacted stakeholders will be set up to coordinate between tasks and activities to avoid multiple contacts.
Generalisation and upscaling difficult due to heterogeneity	WP2, WP3, WP4, WP5	Low / Medium	The proposal outlines which methodologies are intended to foster cross-case comparability vs spotlight specific contexts. Critical reflection will take place periodically to reassess this intent and identify further potentials for tailoring products to better enable long-term impact via an upscaling of results. This is particularly true for e.g. hydrological and ecological impact data (WP2), social and economic impacts of NBS (WP3), policy assessments (T4.2), and stakeholder lists and dissemination and communication activities (WP5).
Inadequate accounting for ethics and informed consent and cultural sensitivities	WP5	Low / Low	NICHES recognizes the need for sensitivity to varied perceptions and preferences, cultural traditions, gender roles, access to power, and societal and political structures across the case study areas and is committed to achieving an inclusive participation within the multiple levels of collaboration and co-production. Stakeholders will be required to fill out one consent form filled

			at the start of the project, which applies to all NICHES activities. The project's ethical guidelines will also be considered across all project activities.
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<http://niches-project.eu/>

Project partners



NICHES is made possible with the support of:

