



Applying the Circle of Influence to mainstream Nature-based Solutions in the North Sea Region

- Interreg Manabas Coast project-

F. A. Kannekens, F.S. Cosoveanu
HZ University of Applied Sciences

G. van der Meulen
Rijkswaterstaat

28-05-2025

Understanding and applying the Circle of Influence for mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions

Coastal zones in the North Sea Region (NSR) are facing increasingly urgent challenges due to climate change. Sea level rise, stronger storm surges, and higher temperatures are intensifying pressures on both sandy and muddy coasts. If current coastal management practices are not adapted, these zones will face growing vulnerability, including flood risks, erosion, biodiversity loss, and escalating costs of maintaining grey infrastructure (Interreg North Sea Region, 2022).

To secure a sustainable and resilient coastal future, coastal authorities in the NSR must integrate Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) with goals for biodiversity and ecosystem health. One promising strategy for doing so is through the use of Nature-based Solutions (NbS), these are interventions that work with nature to deliver climate adaptation and mitigation benefits, while also supporting biodiversity and improving social well-being (Cohen-Shacham et al., 2016; Nesshöver et al., 2017).

While NbS are widely recognized for their co-benefits, their mainstream application remains limited across the NSR. The Interreg project Building with Nature (2017–2021) was an important step forward, identifying six enabling factors for the successful implementation of NbS pilots. These enablers include aspects such as stakeholder engagement, governance structures, and long-term financing (Interreg North Sea Region, 2021).

The Manabas Coast project builds directly on this foundation. With twelve pilots spread across six countries, the project aims to test these enablers in diverse real-world contexts and bring them to a higher level of maturity. Our ambition is to develop a framework and practical strategies for mainstreaming and upscaling NbS throughout the NSR. This involves exploring how NbS function at different spatial scales and in varying ecological and socio-economic conditions (Interreg North Sea Region, 2022).

To guide our learning and development process, we apply a shared Theory of Change (ToC). This theory provides a structured approach for understanding how and why change happens, from innovative actions at the pilot level, through cross-border learning and policy feedback, toward systemic change in mainstream coastal management. It enables us to move beyond isolated solutions and focus on scaling pathways that link local success to regional transformation (Mayne, 2015; Valters, 2015).

A key tool in this ToC is the Circle of Influence (Col). This visual tool helps each pilot to identify and visualize which actors, stakeholders, or partners they can directly influence, indirectly affect, or inform. By helping our partners visualize their networks, we aim to support them in strategically planning interventions and partnerships, which will facilitate the development of our mainstreaming strategies in the next phase of the project. This approach will also help in the creation of a common language to understand leverage points for change within and across pilots. (Covey, 1989; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

This Activity Report showcases the first round of applying the Circle of Influence within the Manabas Coast project. By helping partners visualize their networks, it supports the development of targeted mainstreaming strategies in the next project phase. The report reflects how each pilot has begun mapping its stakeholder landscape. Furthermore, it provides insights into the follow-up exercise aimed at deepening stakeholder engagement that will help the partners by developing their mainstreaming strategies.

Theory framework: What is the Circle of Influence?

The Circle of Influence (Col) is a form of a stakeholder map. It is a visual tool used to identify and understand the network of stakeholders surrounding a project. By mapping out different levels of involvement, this tool helps us analyze existing relationships, pinpoint gaps in engagement, and strategize how to connect with key individuals or organizations that can help drive change.

Col is a tool we use within the Manabas Coast project to help each pilot partner to reflect on their capacity to shape change within the context of mainstreaming NbS. The tool originates from Stephen Covey's framework in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), where he distinguishes between a circle of concern, things we care about but cannot control, and a circle of influence, the things we can directly affect.

In Manabas Coast, the Col concept is adapted and visualized as a practical framework to support pilot teams in strategically identifying which stakeholders, institutions, or policy environments they can influence directly, which they can affect indirectly, and which lie outside their sphere of influence, figure 1. This

exercise visualizes of where and how pilots can act most effectively to generate impact, and where collaborations or new strategies may be needed to widen influence.

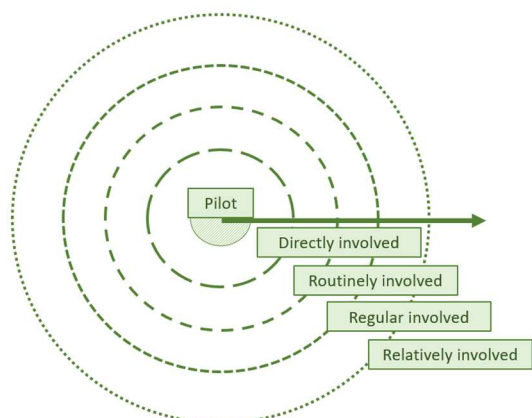


Figure 1: Circle of Influence used in Manabas Coast

As mentioned earlier, the Col exercise is not a stand-alone tool, it is deeply connected within the Theory of Change (ToC) that supports the Manabas Coast project. We use the ToC as a roadmap or road trip, that is guiding us step by step along the different pilot sites toward a shared destination: strategies for the mainstreaming of NbS along the North Sea Coast. By identifying context-specific barriers, enablers, and opportunities for leverage, the ToC helps each pilot region translate local action into broader system change.

The Col is a tool within this ToC road trip that helps us as a practical starting for this road trip by helping pilot teams to better understand their network. This Col helps pilot teams visualize their stakeholder networks and reflect on the roles, relationships, and influence of different actors in their project environments.

As was highlighted during the partner meeting in Bruges, the Col is a first attempt to think about stakeholder involvement per pilot site. It allows partners to:

- Visualize their stakeholders by level of engagement;
- Begin forming a narrative around “takers,” “end users,” and “scale”;
- Use this overview as a basis for identifying impact and communication needs.

We therefore see the Col as a dynamic exercise that can be done at multiple moments throughout the project. In the first round (autumn 2024), each pilot team completed their initial Col, offering a first (sketch) view of their stakeholder landscape. This helped partners begin identifying key actors, such as “takers” and “end users” and explore where future collaboration might support the scaling and mainstreaming of NbS. These terms were introduced by Interreg during their presentation on the “North Star” of your project, where they encouraged partners to define who will adopt, benefit from, or help scale their innovations.

By doing the Col exercise multiple times throughout the project, we can track how the networks of our pilot partners change and grow over time. This helps us see the shifts in stakeholder relationships and influence, but also where cross-border connections can be made, spotting shared partners or key organizations that several pilots need to engage with. These insights are needed for strengthening collaboration and taking our mainstreaming strategies for NbS to the next level during and after the Manabas Coast project.

Methodology: Applying the Circle of Influence in Manabas Coast?

For the partner meeting in Bruges we re-designed the Col as a simple and clear exercise to help our partners visualize their current stakeholder network at the pilot level. The goal was to provide each pilot team with a straightforward tool to identify who their key stakeholders are, or could become, and to gain clarity on their position within the broader project. Importantly, this exercise also supports the development

of effective mainstreaming strategies for Nature-based Solutions (NbS) by highlighting potential partners and relationships of pilot partners within the Manabas coast project. Additionally we hoped that the Col would help uncover possible mutual connections and overlaps between pilots' stakeholder networks relationships that may not be immediately visible, but could offer opportunities for cross-pilot collaboration.

To ensure a clear and consistent application of the Col tool across all pilots, we followed a structured process comprising several key steps:

Step 1: Introduction to the Concept

The theoretical basis of the Col was introduced during one of the online sessions in early 2024, drawing from Covey's original model (Covey, 1989) and its adaptations in systems change and policy literature (e.g., Loorbach et al., 2017; Westley et al., 2011). We highlighted that the Col could serve both as a tool for reflection, to understand current stakeholder influence but also as a strategic guide to show how stakeholders can be reached over time.

As stated before, the Col is a practical tool for stakeholder analysis, often visualized as a stakeholder map. With this exercise, we wanted project teams to understand and organize the ecosystem of stakeholders surrounding each pilot site by showing who is involved, how often, and how much influence they have concerning NbS.

With these first exercises on the Col, we tried to capture both formal and informal relationships among actors. The terms "warm" and "cold" are used to reflect the strength of existing relationships and the ease or challenge of engagement.

Why do we use it in the Manabas Coast project?

The main purpose of the Col is to support the mainstreaming of NbS by:

- Identifying key stakeholders across different domains (e.g., policy, civil society, technical fields, local communities).
- Understanding who is already engaged, who is supportive, and who is difficult to reach but may have high influence.
- Helping each pilot team think strategically about their "takers" (those who might adopt or scale their results), end users, and the potential scale of impact.

This exercise also prepares teams for the "North Star" activity, where pilots reflect on the intended long-term impact of their work.

How is the Circle of Influence structured?

The pilot team places itself at the center of the circle and maps stakeholders outward through four main rings, based on their proximity and role. Stakeholders are placed in four main rings, depending on their proximity and role, shown in figures 2 and 3:

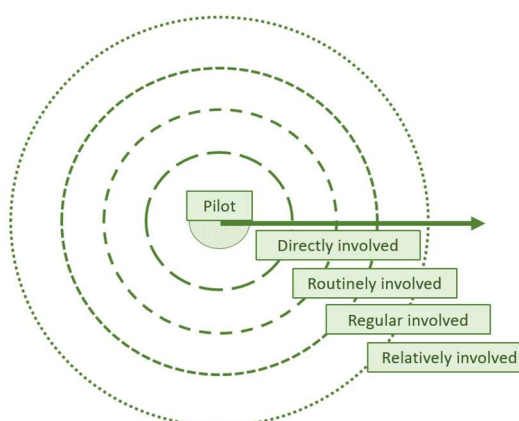


Figure 2: Circle of Influence template

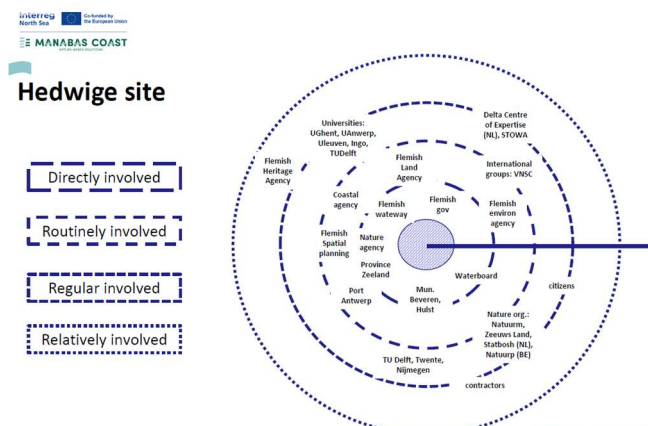


Figure 3: Circle of influence example, Hedwige pilot

Directly involved	Those stakeholders working closely with the pilot team on a daily basis
Routinely involved	Key contributors who are not present every day but play a vital role
Regularly involved	Stakeholders who stay informed and occasionally contribute
Relatively involved	Distant stakeholders with minimal impact, but potential to grow

We also encouraged each pilot to consider their level of influence in mainstreaming NbS and within their network. They reflected on which stakeholders they would need to engage to advance their developed strategies effectively.

Step 2: Template and Guidelines

We shared this exercise via email, including the Col template and an explanatory presentation. Pilot teams were asked to collaborate with their colleagues to complete the exercise, ensuring a broad and informed perspective on their stakeholder networks.

Along with the template, we provided detailed guidelines to encourage teams to reflect on:

- Who the key stakeholders are within their specific context
- The current level of engagement each stakeholder has
- What changes in influence or relationships might be needed to support mainstreaming and scaling of Nature-based Solutions (NbS)

Step 3: Plenary Exchange in Bruges

During the partner meeting in Bruges, we invited all pilot teams to present and discuss their Col maps in a plenary session. Each team briefly shared:

- Who their main stakeholders are
- What their current network looks like
- Where they see opportunities or gaps in stakeholder engagement

The goal was not only to reflect on their own stakeholder networks but also to learn from each other. Through this exchange, teams discovered overlaps in stakeholder types, shared challenges, and potential opportunities for collaboration across pilots.

This session also helped us showing cross-pilot relationships that weren't previously visible. This result can help us in the following steps of the ToC in highlighting specific actors who could support mainstreaming efforts for the mainstreaming strategies for more than one pilot.

Follow-up exercise: Deepening stakeholder engagement through reflection

After finishing the first exercise on the Col and the start of the ToC road trip to develop the mainstreaming strategies, we introduced a structured follow-up exercise. This next exercise is designed to encourage partners to focus more deeply on their key stakeholders within their pilot. With the idea of not only knowing who the key stakeholders are, but also on how to effectively engage them in the pilot activities, and additionally, in the process of mainstreaming the implementation of NbS for coastal protection within the NSR.

This follow-up exercise is meant to help partners take the next step after mapping out their stakeholders. It's a chance to think more about who's involved, how well the communication is going, and what kind of participation is happening. It also invites teams to spot any challenges in reaching key stakeholders and to explore where there might be common ground or useful connections between different interests.

Follow-up exercise

This follow-up exercise was first shared with all project partners via email. By sharing the template already with the partners, we hoped to provide the project partners with initial insights and time to prepare their reflections ahead of the scheduled discussion.

The exercise included a clear set of questions prompting partners to consider their stakeholder engagement, communication methods, and the influence of key stakeholders on mainstreaming NbS.

In the upcoming online partner meeting, we will briefly recap the original Col exercise and explain how it connects to this follow-up activity. A new template will be introduced, focusing on identifying key stakeholders, both in terms of their current involvement and their potential role in supporting the mainstreaming of NbS. This exercise also connects to the exercises on the ToC and thus the development of the mainstreaming strategies.

During the session, we will invite partners from different pilots to share how they are currently engaging with their key stakeholders. For those who haven't yet done so, this will be an opportunity to explore how they might begin building those relationships.

Partners will be asked to complete the new Col template and submit it before the following online partner meeting. The collected responses will be analyzed and used to further develop the project's ToC and mainstreaming strategies, helping us understand how stakeholder dynamics influence the successful implementation and scaling of NbS in the North Sea Region..

Key questions explored

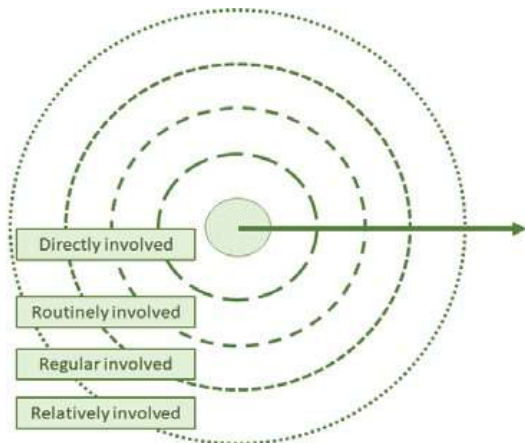
- How do you engage with your stakeholders? What type of participation do they have in your project?
- What communication strategies have you implemented to stay in touch with your stakeholders? What types of communication do you use, how often do you communicate, and do you encounter conflicts arising from different interests?
- Who are the three key stakeholders in your pilot and what is their role in your project?
- Reflecting on your Col map, which parties are involved in your pilot and what is their degree of involvement?
- How do your stakeholders influence the mainstreaming of NbS?

Conclusion and way forward

The first exercise on the Col within the Manabas Coast project has provided valuable insights into how pilot teams perceive and engage with their stakeholder landscapes. It is the first and important step toward building a shared understanding of the networks, relationships, and influence pathways necessary for mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions across the North Sea Region.

By visualizing stakeholder proximity and roles, the exercise has already shown us new insights and highlighted potential collaboration and opportunities for deeper engagement. As the project progresses, repeating this exercise will allow us to follow some changes in the pilot networks, strengthen strategic partnerships, and provide us the opportunity to refine our mainstreaming strategies. The Col will continue to serve as a practical and dynamic tool to support pilots in translating local successes into scalable, systemic impact, bringing us closer to a resilient and nature-inclusive coastal future.

Template: Circle of influence with examples

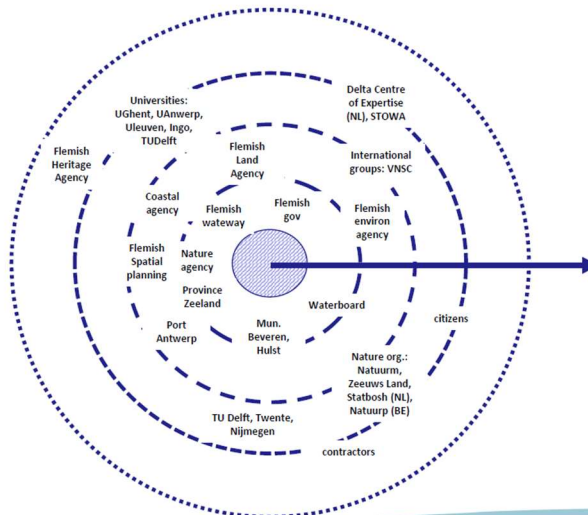
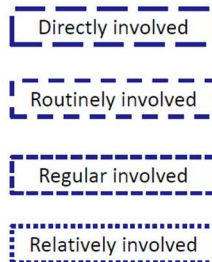


Interreg
North Sea

Co-funded by
the European Union

MANABAS COAST

Hedwige site

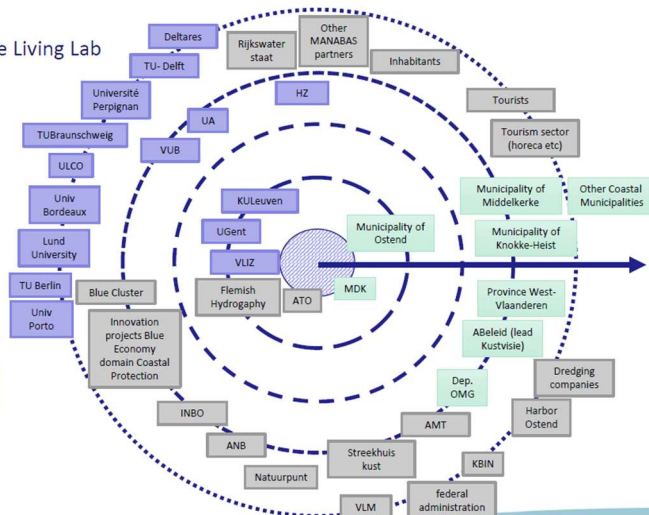


Interreg
North Sea

Co-funded by
the European Union

MANABAS COAST

MOW-Flanders-Raversijde Living Lab



Text other

Text Research

Text Management /Policy

Template: Circle of influence - Discussion

Circle of Influence – Discussion Template

Please answer the following questions based on your team's experience with the stakeholder analysis exercise.

1. Methodology / Approach

Briefly describe the methodology or approach your team used to conduct the stakeholder analysis.

Answer:

2. Key Stakeholders and Impact

Highlight some of the key stakeholders you identified and describe their potential impact on the project.

Answer:

3. Position on the Infographic

Highlight some of the key stakeholders you identified and describe their potential impact on the project.

Answer:

4. Usefulness of the Exercise

Did this short exercise help you? Please comment on the following:

- For future communication with stakeholders
- Providing an overview of the stakeholders involved
- Would you like to continue this exercise in more depth?

Answer:

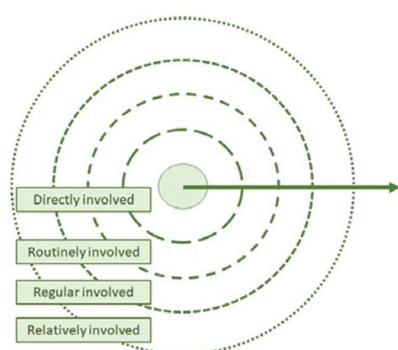
Template: Circle of Influence – Follow-up

Interreg
North Sea



Co-funded by
the European Union

MANABAS COAST
NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS



Circle of Influence follow-up questions

pilot:

organisation:

your name:

Recap - In the Circle of Influence (figure left) you have defined the parties involved in your pilot and their degree of involvement.

With the questions below you will identify and reflect upon your three key stakeholders.

If you have more, these can be discussed during the online partner meeting on May 27th.

Stakeholders - Who are the three key stakeholders in your pilot and what is their role in your project?

Engagement - How do you engage with your stakeholders? What type of participation do they have in your project?

Communication - What communication strategies have you implemented to stay in touch with your stakeholders? What types of communication do you use, how often do you communicate, and do you encounter conflicts arising from different interests?

Mainstreaming - How do your stakeholders influence mainstreaming of NbS?



Literature

Cohen-Shacham, E., Walters, G., Janzen, C., & Maginnis, S. (Eds.). (2016). Nature-based Solutions to address global societal challenges. IUCN.

Covey, S. R. (1989). The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Free Press.

Interreg North Sea Region. (2021). Building with Nature – Final Report. Retrieved from <https://northsearegion.eu/building-with-nature/>

Interreg North Sea Region. (2022). Mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions for Resilient Coasts (Manabas Coast) – Project Proposal [Unpublished].

Mayne, J. (2015). Useful theory of change models. Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, 30(2), 119–142.

Nesshöver, C., Assmuth, T., Irvine, K. N., Rusch, G. M., Waylen, K. A., Delbaere, B., ... & Wittmer, H. (2017). The science, policy and practice of nature-based solutions: An interdisciplinary perspective. Science of the Total Environment, 579, 1215–1227.

Valters, C. (2015). Theories of Change: Time for a radical approach to learning in development. Overseas Development Institute.

Wenger-Trayner, B., & Wenger-Trayner, E. (2020). Learning to Make a Difference: Value creation in social learning spaces. Cambridge University Press.