Urban Forestry & Urban Greening 112 (2025) 128842

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Urban Forestry & Urban Greening

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ufug

Original article

A decision support tool for the selection of biophysical methodologies to assess urban nature-based solutions using regulating ecosystem services

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Nature-based Solutions
Regulating ecosystem services
Biophysical analysis
NbS type selection
Decision-support tool

ABSTRACT

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are cost-effective interventions that restore natural cycles while delivering environmental, social, and economic benefits. However, selecting appropriate biophysical evaluation methods remains a challenge, particularly in data-scarce urban contexts. Existing methodologies often lack guidance on method selection based on local data, resources, and technical constraints. To address this gap, this study develops a Decision Support Tool (DST) for selecting biophysical evaluation methods for urban NbS at neighborhood, block, or district scales. The DST is based on a systematic literature review (SLR) of 256 studies, which identified the most widely used methodology-empirical equations, computational tools, and monitoring systems—along with key constraints such as budget, timeline, data availability, and technical expertise. Using this analysis, decision rules were established to guide method selection under different resource conditions. DST comprises three components: (i) a feasibility analysis for NbS selection, (ii) a decision-making framework for biophysical evaluation method selection, and (iii) an ecosystem services index for scenario comparison. The methodology was tested in Bogotá, Colombia, within the "El Reencuentro" urban renewal project. Results highlight the importance of urban forests in delivering ecosystem services and demonstrate the suitability of simpler methods in resource-constrained settings. By adapting biophysical evaluation approaches to local conditions, this study provides a practical framework to support NbS implementation in urban planning.

1. Introduction

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) involve actions aimed at protecting, conserving, restoring, and sustainably managing natural or altered ecosystems—whether terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, or marine (The United Nations Environment Assembly, 2023). These solutions are designed to effectively and adaptively tackle social, economic, and environmental challenges while simultaneously enhancing human well-being, delivering ecosystem services, and promoting resilience and biodiversity (The United Nations Environment Assembly, 2023; European Commission – Nature-based solutions, 2024; Cohen-Shacham et al., 2016). Key features include multifunctionality, adaptability, and the capacity to provide regulating services such as water regulation, purification, air quality maintenance, and climate regulation (European Commission – Nature-based solutions, 2023; Pauleit et al., 2017; Estándar, 2020; Zafra-Mejía et al., 2021; Sanusi and Livesley, 2020; Selbig et al., 2022).Common benefits of NbS implementation include improved human health and well-being, enhanced thermal comfort, energy consumption savings, noise reduction, reduced carbon footprint, avoided risk damage costs, and water consumption savings (Tsai et al., 2019; Venter et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2018; Ow and Ghosh, 2017; Fraga et al., 2022).

Over the past decade, extensive research has underscored the potential of designing and managing new ecosystems—classified as Type 3 NbS according to Eggermont's framework (Eggermont et al., 2015) —to address urban challenges through the ecosystem services approach in spatial planning policies and practices (Cohen-Shacham et al., 2016; Castellar et al., 2021a; Dushkova and Haase, 2020; Langergraber et al.,

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2025.128842
Received 26 September 2024; Received in revised form 28 April 2025; Accepted 29 April 2025
Available online 1 May 2025

2021; Babí Almenar et al., 2021; Raymond et al., 2017). However, despite their growing recognition, the implementation of NbS still faces significant knowledge gaps regarding their effectiveness and long-term implications. Key challenges include assessing their benefits for well-being, analyzing synergies and trade-offs, and understanding their impacts on climate change, biodiversity, public health, and socio-economic factors (Raymond et al., 2017; Wild et al., 2024; European Commission, 2021). While biodiversity is often associated with NbS, its integration into urban planning remains inconsistent, as ecological benefits are frequently assumed rather than explicitly assessed (Lepczyk et al., 2017; Langemeyer and Gómez-Baggethun, 2017; Dasgupta, 2021). Addressing these gaps require structured methodologies that extend beyond ecosystem service provision to comprehensively evaluate the multiple dimensions of NbS benefits. However, this study focuses specifically on the biophysical evaluation of ecosystem services as a key approach to guiding urban planners decision-making processes.

Effectively assessing NbS ecosystem services within urban planning is a complex process that requires several critical steps both during the ex-ante planning phase and the ex-post NbS evaluation (Raymond et al., 2017; Beceiro et al., 2022; Calliari et al., 2019; Liquete et al., 2016; Croeser et al., 2021; Kuller et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2020; Beceiro et al., 2020). A crucial component of this process is the biophysical evaluation of urban ecosystem structure, process, and functions to quantify their impact on ecosystem service provision for subsequent benefit assessments (Semeraro and Buccolieri, 2022).In the past three decades, biophysical evaluation of ecosystem services has been considered in Decision Support Tools (DSTs) for NbS location and selection within urban planning. A diverse range of DSTs has been developed, including spatial models, optimization tools, and ecosystem service assessment frameworks (Beceiro et al., 2020; García et al., 2020; Langemeyer et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2021; Bach et al., 2013; Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Sebti et al., 2016; Raei et al., 2019; Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022; Ranta et al., 2021; Possantti and Marques, 2022; Sahay, 2025; Babí Almenar et al., 2023a).

While DSTs have significantly contributed to the integration of biophysical evaluation in urban planning, their practical implementation often faces limitations related to scope, comprehensiveness, and contextual constraints. Some researchers have proposed DSTs specifically for NbS selection based on their potential to provide various ecosystem services, particularly regulating services such as climate regulation, water regulation, water purification, waste treatment, and air quality maintenance (Fraga et al., 2022; Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022; Babí Almenar et al., 2023a; Engström et al., 2018; Epelde et al., 2022; Kourtis et al., 2021; Alves et al., 2020; Speak et al., 2022). However, most existing studies are limited to specific NbS types (e.g., green infrastructure, urban green spaces, urban trees, and wetlands) and often exclude economic or social assessments. Additionally, many focus on analyzing a single ecosystem service rather than adopting a comprehensive approach. These limitations restrict the applicability of DSTs in urban planning by failing to capture the broader impact of NbS implementation, underscoring the necessity for a more comprehensive approach that integrates diverse NbS types and multiple ecosystem services. A major limitation is that is that many of the DST methodologies do not consider contextual constraints for the analysis such as data accuracy, time, technical support requirements, or project budget defaulting their replicability outside their context of development (Wild et al., 2024; Wessels and Sitas, 2024; Ouyang and Luo, 2022). This gap highlights the need for DSTs addressing diverse NbS types and ecosystem services during biophysical evaluation and providing guidelines to select and implement feasible biophysical evaluation methodologies by urban planners.

Biophysical evaluation methodologies for NbS can be broadly classified into four categories: empirical approximations, computational tools, sampling and monitoring assessments, and mixed methods. Empirical equations, derived from observations or experiments, provide simplified assessments of ecosystem service provision (Buckingham,). *Computational tools use mathematical models to describe biological, chemical, and physical phenomena within NbS processes (*Wastewater, 2014*). Monitoring systems involve direct data collection on ecosystem service performance, while mixed methods integrate multiple approaches to enhance assessment accuracy (*W E et al., 2020; Dunford et al., 2018). However, the application of these methodologies —empirical equations, computational tools, and monitoring assessments—faces significant resource constraints that limit their broader applicability. Monitoring systems, for example, are often time- and cost-intensive, making them impractical for many urban planning processes (Stratópoulos et al., 2018). Moreover, the results are frequently context-specific, depending on variables such as climatic conditions, species composition, structural attributes, and other circumstantial factors that influence ecosystem service provision (Chen et al., 2021; Gillner et al., 2015). Computational tools, while useful, require specialized expertise for model implementation, evaluation, and validation, and they depend on precise data that may not always be available. Additionally, models like i-Tree, which are parameterized for specific factors such as climate, atmospheric pollution, and vegetation, are primarily designed for the U.S. context, introducing potential biases when applied elsewhere (Ersoy Tonyaloğlu and Atak, 2021; Berland, 2020).

The requirements in time, cost, and experience for biophysical evaluation complicate the urban planning decision-making process, particularly in zones with limited resources for urban planning analysis. While biophysical evaluations of NbS are crucial for informed decision-making, they remain particularly challenging in regions with limited data and financial resources, such as many Latin American countries. Barriers in these contexts include unclear institutional responsibilities, lack of technical expertise, financial constraints, inadequate citizen participation, absence of economic benefit valuation, and socio-economic inequities (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2021; Lafortezza and Giannico, 2019; Zheng et al., 2023). To address these challenges, there is a need for practical DSTs that offer easy-to-use methods to select and apply biophysical evaluation methods based on local constraints.

This study proposes an adaptable DST structured to guide urban planners decision-making on the selection and implementation biophysical evaluation of NbS ecosystem services. The primary objective is to develop a guide the selection of biophysical evaluation methodologies that function independently of resource constraints, thereby broadening analytical applicability and enabling NbS biophysical evaluation in resource-scarce settings. The research for the development of the DST include three main stages: (i) NbS feasibility analysis based on (Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022, Uribe-Aguado et al., Under submission)., (ii) develop a DST for selection and implementation of biophysical evaluation methodology according to the results analysis of a systematic literature review of 256 research papers conducted using Scopus (1999–2023), and (iii) develop an Ecosystem services index to guide decision-making process based on (Croeser et al., 2021; Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022; Longato et al., 2023). To validate this approach, the methodology was implemented in an urban renewal project in Bogotá, Colombia—a highly populated and dense megacity in Latin America—as a proof of concept.

This study aims to develop a DST to assist urban planners in selecting biophysical evaluation methodologies for NbS implementation, particularly in data- and resource-constrained contexts. Unlike many existing DSTs that focus on specific NbS types or require high data accuracy and technical expertise, the tool developed in this study incorporates decision rules based on real-world resource constraints (budget, timeline, data, skills). This enhances its applicability in contexts often excluded from traditional tools, such as resource-scarce urban settings in the Global South.

2. Methodology

The methodology presented comprises three main research stages for

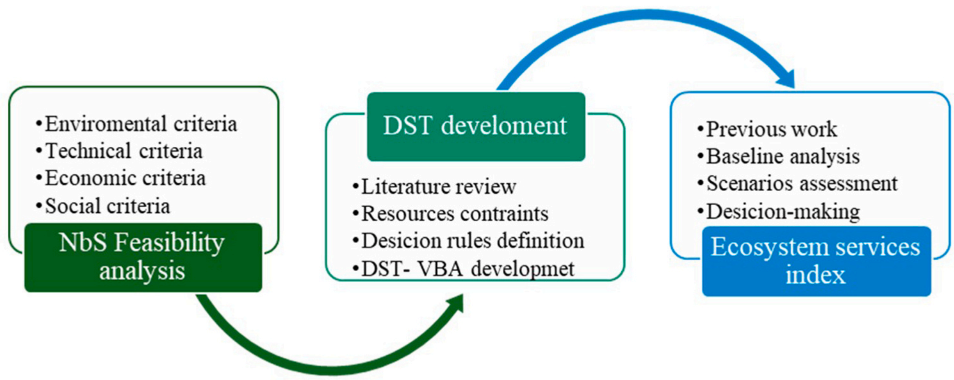

Fig. 1. Three stages for DST development: i) feasibility analysis, ii) DST development, iii) ecosystem services index development.

DST development: (i) NbS feasibility analysis (ii) develop a DST for selection and implementation of biophysical evaluation methodology, and (iii) develop an Ecosystem services index to guide decision-making process. A detailed description of each research stage is provided in the following sections (see Fig. 1)

2.1. NbS feasibility analysis

In this stage, the primary objective is to integrate an NbS feasibility analysis based on previous research by (Uribe-Aguado et al.,2022; Uribe-Aguado et al., Under submission). This analysis requires input from urban planners to define the suitable NbS types for implementation within the project area. First, environmental criteria are applied to identify areas within the project zone that meet the biophysical requirements for each NbS type. Each NbS is evaluated based on specific environmental factors, including proximity to the water table, infiltration rate, slope, and its potential to address urban challenges (Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Alves et al., 2024a). These criteria ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of NbS implementation in urban settings. Following the environmental assessment, the project zone is further evaluated using technical criteria to determine the physical availability of public or private space for NbS implementation. The technical evaluation considers geometric characteristics (e.g., area, width, and length) to assess spatial feasibility, structural characteristics of the built environment (e.g., load-bearing capacity) to ensure compatibility with green infrastructure, and design parameters (e.g., tree spacing to optimize shading and air quality benefits, as well as depth and volume requirements for hydrological performance). Additionally, the assessment incorporates an analysis of public space typologies—including parks, rooftops, building facades, railway corridors, waterways, squares, sidewalks, and buffer zones— to align NbS interventions with the most appropriate urban contexts (Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Alves et al., 2024a). This integrated approach enhances the strategic implementation of NbS, ensuring their structural viability and functional effectiveness within the urban landscape.

Subsequently, the feasible NbS options are classified based on economic criteria, such as implementation costs, to generate a subset of alternatives that align with different project budget constraints. This process integrates economic feasibility as a key criterion in the overall assessment, ensuring that the selected NbS solutions are both financially viable and sustainable within the project's scope (Sahay, 2025; Aghaloo and Sharifi). Finally, social criteria are evaluated through the inclusion of citizens' perspectives to identify NbS options that address priority urban challenges (Aghaloo and Sharifi,). The potential of NbS to meet social needs is assessed based on a literature review (Castellar et al., 2021b; Jim and Hui, 2022; Łaszkiewicz et al., 2023; Amegah et al., 2023). The inclusion of social criteria ensures that the selected NbS interventions are not only environmentally and economically viable but also aligned with the social demands of the urban population.

The outcome of this analysis is a set of urban planning scenarios that incorporate different NbS options deemed potentially suitable for implementation. This set includes the baseline scenario or *status quo.* The final step involves selecting the NbS types that align with the prioritized ecosystem services at the site, based on criteria established by urban planners and decision-makers. This process ensures that the evaluation scenarios are adapted to the specific context of the project, enhancing their relevance and feasibility.

2.2. Develop a DST for selection and implementation of biophysical evaluation methodology

The goal of this stage is to develop a DST to select and implement a biophysical evaluation methodology. This stage was developed through an analysis of 256 articles identified via a systematic literature review (SLR) and a complementary non-systematic literature review (N-SLR) conducted using Scopus (1999–2023). The primary objective of the review was to identify the most used methods for biophysical evaluation of ecosystem services generation through NbS implementation. To achieve this, the search strategy incorporated strategic keywords (e.g., *"Infiltration basin AND ecosystem service AND urban OR Nature-based solution"),* facilitating the identification of research papers that evaluate urban ecosystem services within the context of NbS implementation. Each identified article was then classified based on the ecosystem service assessed, the type of assessment methodology (i.e., direct or indirect), and the specific biophysical evaluation method employed. A total of 256 articles were included in this phase. This classification provides a comprehensive overview of the prevailing methodologies used in NbS assessments, guiding the selection of the most appropriate methodologies for biophysical evaluation.

Then, each article was evaluated to identify potential constraints that could impact the implementation of a biophysical evaluation methodology. This assessment allowed for the identification of project management constraints, which influence the decision to implement or exclude certain methodologies. One of the primary constraints was the cost of implementation (or project Budget), particularly for methodologies involving computational tools and monitoring systems, as these often require significant financial resources (van Lierop et al., 2024). Timeline constraints were also identified as a major limitation, given the periodicity and temporal variability of environmental variables and the time delay between NbS implementation and ecosystem services flow (van Lierop et al., 2024; Adamowicz et al., 2019; Lehmann et al., 2025). Data availability was another critical factor, as it directly affects the accuracy and reliability of the selected biophysical assessment methodology (van Lierop et al., 2024; Mulligan et al., 2024; Chappin et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2021). Lastly, team skills emerged as a key constraint, as the successful implementation of certain methodologies depends on the technical skills, multidisciplinary, and experience of the research team (van Lierop et al., 2024). These constraints were adapted

Table 1
Resource level status constraints.

Constraints	*High level*	*Medium level*	*Low level*
Budget: the approved estimate for the portfolio, program, or project, or any work breakdown structure component or schedule activity.	The project has abundant funding for the analysis of benefits. The budget can afford a sampling campaign.	The project has limited funding for the analysis but is not the most relevant constraint. The budget cannot afford a sampling campaign.	There is scarcity of funding in the project for the analysis of benefits.
Timeline: a short, fixed period in which work is to be completed.	A period of more than 10 months for the development of the analysis.	A period between 10 and 6 months for the development of the analysis.	A period of less than 6 months for the development of the analysis.
Data availability: a period of time when the status of a variable is recorded.	Sampled data, local official data for the site at project scale.	Local official data with mixed scales.	Local official data at city scale.
Team skills: a team that includes practitioners with all the skills necessary to deliver valuable product increments.	The team can develop a sampling or experimental design, statistical analysis, and experimental analysis. In addition, the team had high quality skills in GIS software and any specialized software for the analysis.	The team can develop a statistical analysis had medium quality skills in GIS software and any specialized software for the analysis.	The team can develop a statistical analysis had imitated or non-quality skills in GIS software and any specialized software for the analysis.

based on project management principles (Kerzner, 2025), ensuring that the selected assessment methodologies align with the available resources and operational feasibility within a project framework. A total of 133 articles were classified in this phase.

The information gathered from the literature review was analyzed and classified into three levels of complexity, organized according to specific project requirements. A total of 75 articles were classified in this phase. Table 1 provides an overview of this classification and its alignment with varying project needs and Fig. 2 an overview of the process analysis process.

After determining the resource-level status constraints of the project, the next step involves establishing key decision rules for selecting and implementing the most appropriate methodology. These rules were derived from the literature review, where each article was categorized based on the methods employed, their associated resource requirements, and specific constraints, including budget, timeline, data availability, and team expertise. Finally, the decision rules and the literature review were compiled into a VBA code in Excel (see detailed analysis in Supplementary Material A).

2.3. Ecosystem services index to guide decision-making process

The primary objective of the Ecosystem Services Index (IESS) is to analyze the results of the biophysical assessment to identify the NbS scenario that maximizes the provision of ecosystem services, including air quality maintenance, water regulation, and climate regulation, within the project. The construction of the index is based on previous research that recognizes the scoring process as a valuable tool for selecting urban planning scenarios for NbS implementation, considering both the demand for ecosystem services and the capacity of NbS to provide them (Croeser et al., 2021; Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022; Longato et al., 2023).

After selecting and applying the biophysical evaluation methodology across the different scenarios defined in the feasibility analysis, the differences between the baseline analysis (status quo) and each evaluation scenario (Ci) are normalized (Eq. 1). These normalized values are then aggregated to generate the Integrated Ecosystem Services Score (IESS) (Eq. 2). The index can be customized by decision-makers to reflect site-specific priorities, aligning with city plans and future project objectives. The customization process assigns a value between 0 and 1 to each priority score (Pw: priority score for water regulation, Pa: priority score for air quality maintenance, and Pc: priority score for climate regulation), ensuring that their total sum equals 1. The analysis results indicate the NbS configuration scenario that best provides the necessary ecosystem services for the project.

$$NC_i = \frac{C_i - C_{imin}}{C_{imax} - C_{imin}} \tag{1}$$

Where

NCi : normalized index benefit form ecosystem services in each scenario.

Ci : diference between the status of ecosystem services in comparison with baseline scenario.

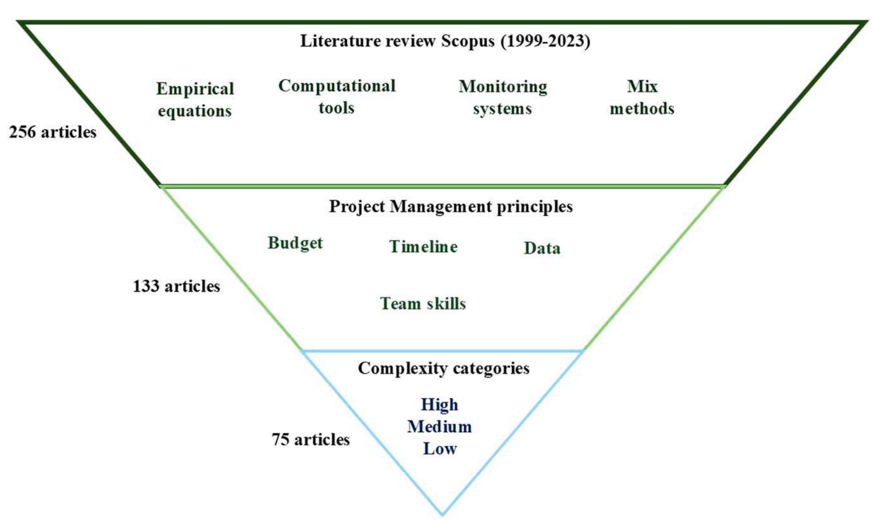

Fig. 2. Literature review paper classification process according to methodologies, project management principles, and complexity categories.

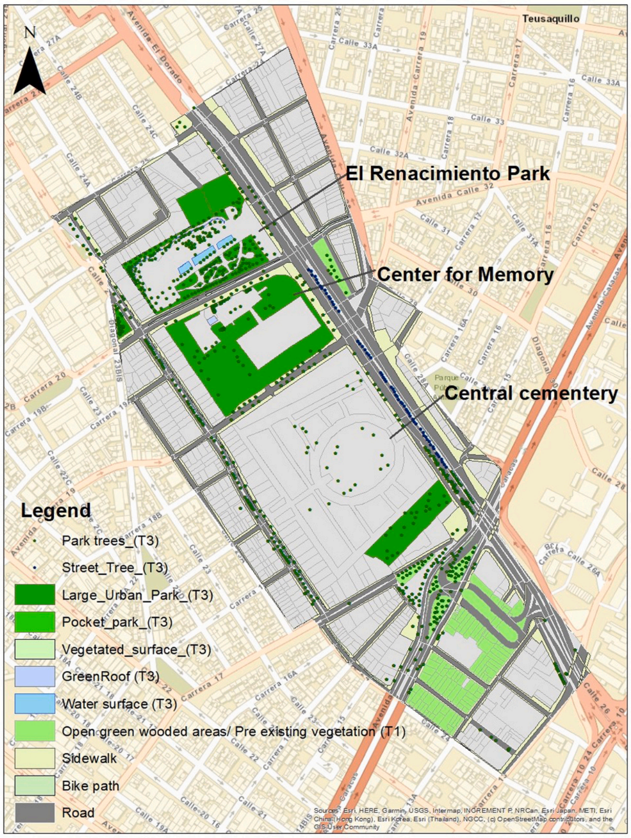

Fig. 3. El Reencuentro Case study, Bogotá Colombia.

$$IESS_Z = \sum NC_{wr}*Pw + NC_{aq}*Pa + NC_{cr}*Pc \quad (2)$$

Where

Z : Scenario number.
NCwr : results index preformance for water regulation.
NCaq : results index preformance for air quality maninteinance.
NCcr : results index preformance for climate regulation.

2.4. Case study

The proposed methodology was tested in the case study of “El Reencuentro,” an area located in Bogotá, Colombia (see Fig. 2). This area spans 18.70 ha and is home to 1.881 residents. It features a comprehensive road network and notable public facilities such as the Central Cemetery, the Center for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation, and “El Renacimiento” Park, among others. This study area was chosen due to its inclusion in a future urban renewal plan that envisions the construction of a major integrated transportation hub. This hub will connect various transportation modes, including the subway, Right-most Bus Lane (RMB), and a regional tram system, significantly increasing pedestrian traffic and public space usage in the zone. However, the current conditions present significant challenges. The area surrounding the future transport station suffers from severe degradation, with a high crime rate (7.830 crimes per 100,000 inhabitants), insufficient green space (less than 10 m^2 per inhabitant), and insufficient public space per inhabitant (2.75 m^2 per inhabitant) (Secretaría Distrital de Planeación, 2024). Additionally, institutional monitoring has identified high levels of air pollution, primarily due to the concentration of nearby transport stations, a problem expected to worsen with the construction of the new transport hub (Secretaría Distrital de Planeación, 2024) (see Fig. 3).

The available information for the case study is presented in Supplementary material B. To enhance data inputs, a comprehensive vegetation survey was conducted in two main campaigns: the first from September to December 2023, and the second from February to March 2024. During these field campaigns, 221 trees and 38 palms were identified, while an additional 159 trees were not recorded due to site security issues or restricted private access. A total of 35 tree species were recognized, with the most common being *Ligustrum lucidum (74), Fraxinus chinensis (52), and Citharexylum subflavescens (32). For palms, only four species were identified: Phoenix canariensis (5), Yucca gigantea (6), Phoenix dactylifera (6), and Ceroxylon quindiuense (21).* Other pre-existing NbS include a small green roof, a vegetated surface within Renacimiento Park, and open green wooded areas.

3. Results

3.1. DST development for selection and implementation

Though literature review empirical equations were identified as a common methodology for assessing urban ecosystem services (Vico

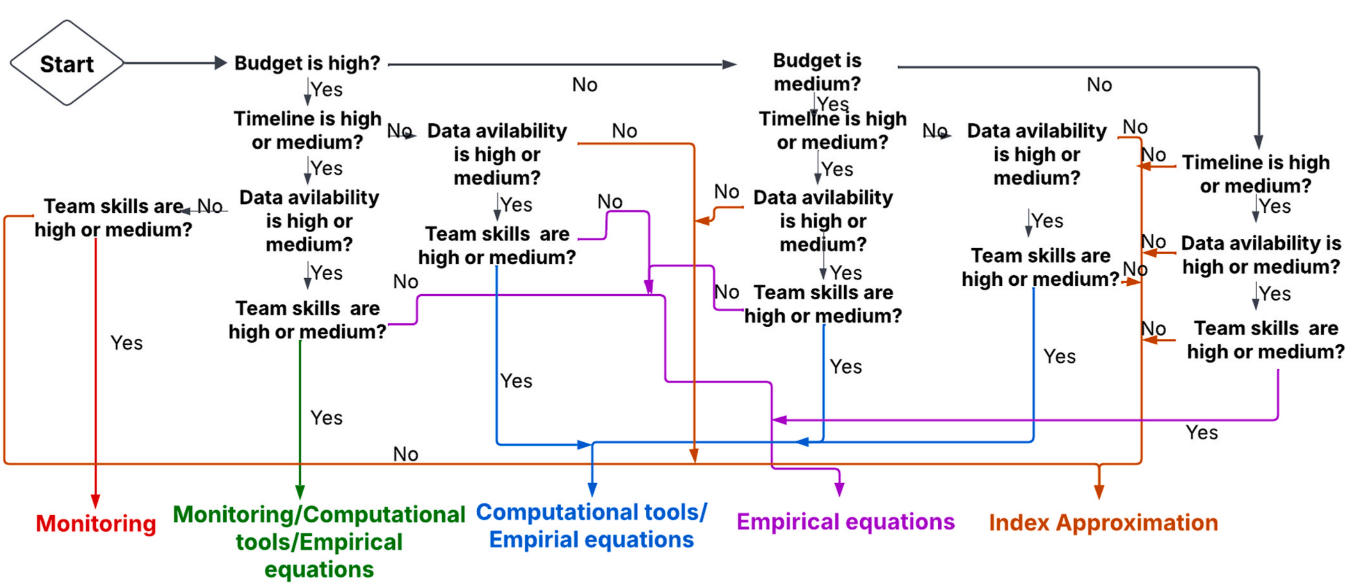

Fig. 4. Decision making process diagram to select the best biophysical methodology to implement in the project.

et al., 2014; Jim and Chen, 2008; Matos et al., 2019; Zardo et al., 2017; Meshram et al., 2021; Prenner et al., 2021), along with computational tools such as SWMM and i-Tree Hydro for evaluating water regulation services (Yang et al., 2023). Additionally, i-Tree Eco was frequently used to assess air quality maintenance and local climate regulation (Yousofpour et al., 2024; Elliott et al., 2018). Furthermore, monitoring systems were identified as key methodologies, with sampling designs varying depending on the ecosystem service being assessed. For water quality regulation, this assessment involves measuring NbS vegetation structure, such as Leaf Area Index and crown projection, alongside in situ meteorological data to evaluate impacts on water balance processes, including interception, infiltration, and evapotranspiration (Selbig et al., 2022; Stratópoulos et al., 2018; Elliott et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2011). For air quality maintenance, the effectiveness of NbS in capturing pollutants is assessed by measuring surface concentrations of particulate matter, such as PM10, PM2.5, NOx, PAH, and metals, on the stomatal surfaces of vegetation (Zafra-Mejía et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Muhammad et al., 2020; Ugolini et al., 2013; Tepanosyan et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2021; Papa et al., 2012) or through continuous air quality monitoring, comparing pollutant levels in scenarios with and without NbS implementation. For climate regulation services, analyses typically compare average temperatures before and after heat waves, measure temperature differences between shaded and sun-exposed areas, or assess temperature variations between tree-covered urban parks and areas exposed to direct sunlight (Sanusi and Livesley, 2020; Stanley et al., 2019; Georgi and Zafiriadis, 2006). Additional studies evaluate vegetation's impact on surfaces exposed to solar radiation (Balogun et al., 2014; Berry et al., 2013), or quantify species' transpiration rates to better understand the role of NbS in urban cooling (Gillner et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2019). This comprehensive approach identifies empirical equations, computational simulations, and monitoring systems as biophysical evaluation methodologies that allow the analysis across multiple ecosystem services. While several existing tools such as i-Tree, SWMM, and scoring-based frameworks have been widely used to support NbS evaluations, they frequently assume the availability of high-quality data, extended timelines, and specialized technical expertise. These assumptions constrain their practical application in cities with limited resources, especially in the Global South.

Among the 256 articles reviewed, 133 explicitly addressed project management principles relevant to ecosystem services assessment. These principles included project budgets (often linked to funding declarations), analysis timelines (typically dictated by sampling processes), data availability, and the technical expertise required for assessments. The analysis revealed that 59 studies employed monitoring systems, 23 used computational tools, 15 relied on empirical equations, and 36 adopted mixed-method approaches. A total of 75 articles explicitly declared funding sources for their assessments, including project grants, scholarships, or financial support from research institutions or local authorities. Of these, 41 incorporated a monitoring process, 11 utilized computational tools, 10 employed empirical equations, and 13 applied mixed-method approaches.

Monitoring systems required high budgets and advanced or intermediate expertise, including skills in sampling design, experimental and statistical analysis, and GIS. Similarly, computational tools demand moderate to high budgets, robust data quality (e.g., official or sampled datasets), and skilled personnel for effective implementation. In contrast, empirical equations were primarily constrained by data quality, relying on accessible and reliable datasets. Notably, none of the reviewed studies conducted biophysical analyses using low-quality data. Timeline constraints varied depending on the assessment methodology. Monitoring-based assessments had an average duration of 10 months, while computational tools required between 6 and 10 months. Empirical equation-based assessments were the fastest, typically completed within 6 months (see Supplementary Material A for detailed process).

Table 2
Decision rules for selected methodology.

Method	*Budget*	*Timeline*	*Data*	*Team skills*
Monitoring	*High*	*High Medium*	*Low*	*High Medium*
Monitoring or computational tools or empirical equations	*High*	*High Medium*	*High Medium*	*High Medium*
Computational tools or empirical equations	*High Medium*	*High Medium Low*	*High Medium*	*High Medium*
Empirical equations	*High Medium Low*	*High Medium Low*	*High Medium*	*High Medium Low*
Index approximation	*High Medium Low*	*High Medium Low*	*High Medium Low*	*Low*

As was mentioned before, none of the reviewed studies conducted biophysical analyses using low-quality data. To address this gap, an alternative and simplified methodology, referred to as "index approximation," was proposed for scenarios where data quality is limited. The Index approximation offers a preliminary biophysical assessment. This index estimates the following ecosystem services: water regulation, based on the effects of land-use permeability changes (Nachshon et al., 2016); air quality maintenance, using a simple velocity deposition model (Escobedo et al., 2015a); and shading, through canopy area calculations (Horváthová et al., 2021). The analysis of index approximation is particularly useful in data-scarce contexts where budget constraints or team skill levels make it impractical to improve data accuracy. It provides an initial approximation of biophysical analysis for various evaluation scenarios. Results analyses were compiled as decision rules for decision-makers presented in Fig. 4 and Table 2.

Then the tool developed consists of three main worksheets (see Supplementary Material C). The first worksheet, "Decision Support Tool 1," prompts users to input the status category of each resource. Based on these inputs, it generates a decision box recommending the most suitable method according to the decision rules. The results help identify the most appropriate method for the local context, whether it involves empirical equations, computational tools, or monitoring systems. The second worksheet of the Excel tool, "Implementation Guide," asks users to specify the ecosystem service they wish to assess and provides references to related articles and user manuals for certain tools, guiding the implementation process. The third worksheet of the Excel tool, "Index approximation," presents the simpler and feasible methodology for biophysical analysis approximation when it is not possible to improve data accuracy for the analysis.

The final DST consists of a three-stage methodology: (i) Definition of evaluation scenarios though a feasibility analysis (ii) Selection and implementation of biophysical evaluation scenario though VBA Excel tool (iii) Decision-making process by Ecosystem services Index (IESS). The primary objective of the first stage is to identify evaluation scenarios for NbS implementation based on technical, environmental, social, and economic criteria. In the second stage, the goal is to choose and implement a methodology to quantify a biophysical assessment methodology considering the local available resources for the analysis: project budget, timeline, and performance (data availability and team skills). In the third stage the objective is to analyze the biophysical assessment results to select the NbS scenario that promotes the generation of ecosystem services (i.e., a combination of air quality maintenance, water regulation, and climate regulation) in the project (see Fig. 5).

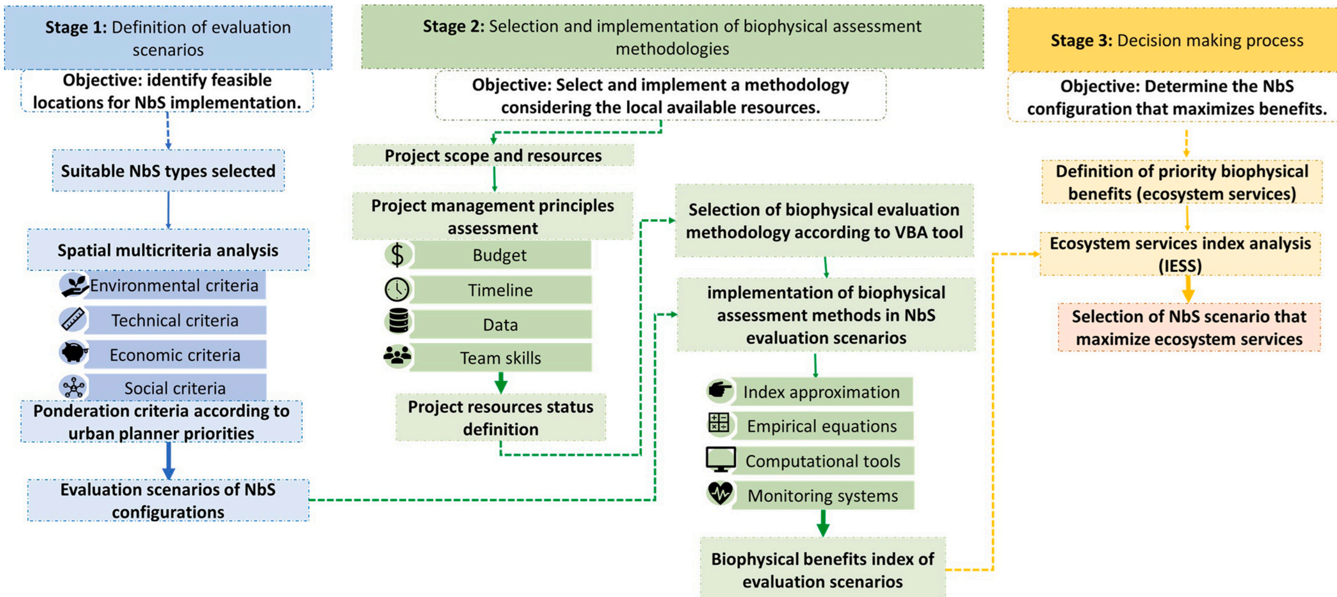

Fig. 5. DST overview. Input ().Process(). Results (). The process begins with Stage 1, which involves conducting a spatial multicriteria analysis that integrates environmental, technical, economic, and social criteria. Stage 2 focuses on evaluating project management principles, including budget, timeline, data availability, and team competencies. Finally, Stage 3 assesses the status of ecosystem services across different evaluation scenarios to identify the best option based on the site's priority ecosystem services.

3.2. Application to El Reencuentro case study

Through the implementation of the feasibility analysis, six scenarios were defined for biophysical evaluation, each varying according to social and economic criteria. Scenario 1a was derived from a feasibility assessment considering technical and environmental criteria, with no economic constraints and without incorporating the social perception criterion criteria. Scenario 1b was defined through a feasibility assessment considering technical and environmental criteria, with an economic constraint and without incorporating the social perception criterion. Scenario 2a was defined through a feasibility assessment considering technical, environmental, social, and economic criteria, with no economic constraint. Scenario 2b was defined through a feasibility assessment considering technical, environmental, and social criteria, with an economic constraint. Scenario 3a was defined through a feasibility assessment considering technical and environmental criteria, with no economic constraint and placing the highest importance on the social perception criterion. Scenario 3b was defined through a feasibility assessment considering technical and environmental criteria, with an economic constraint and placing the highest importance on the social perception criterion. The characteristics of each scenario are presented in Supplementary Material B.

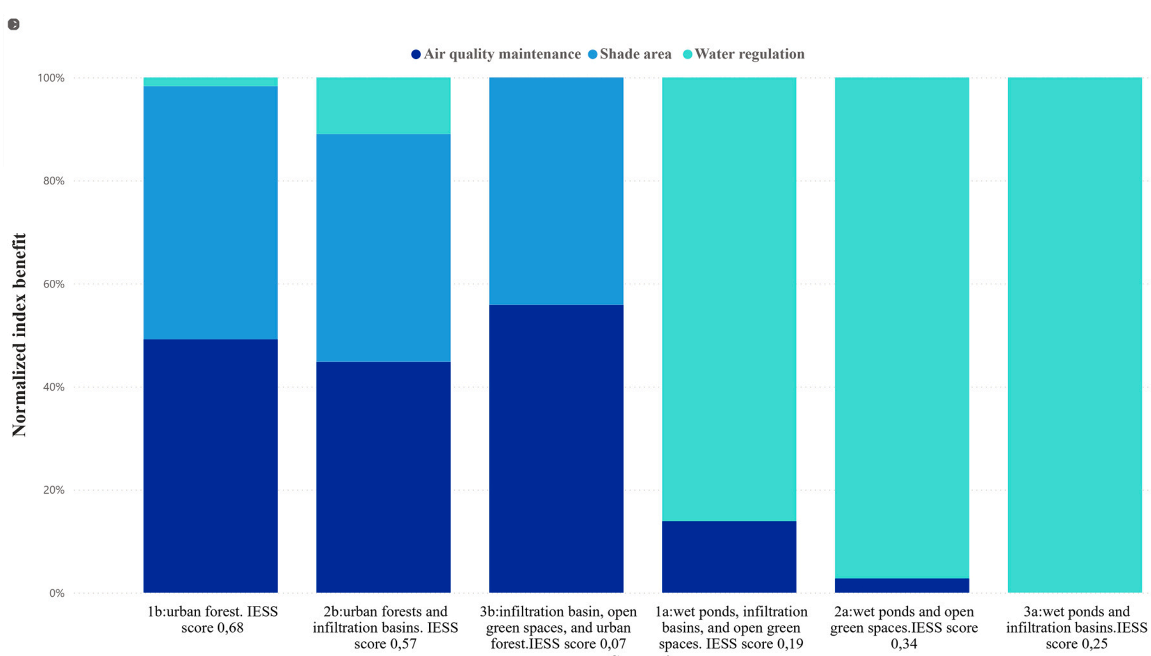

Fig. 6. Normalized index benefit -Index approximation. Air quality maintenance was calculated based on the PM_{10}Kg/yr removed, the shade area was calculated as the canopy area of trees in Km^2, and water regulation as the volume of run-off saved in m^3/month.

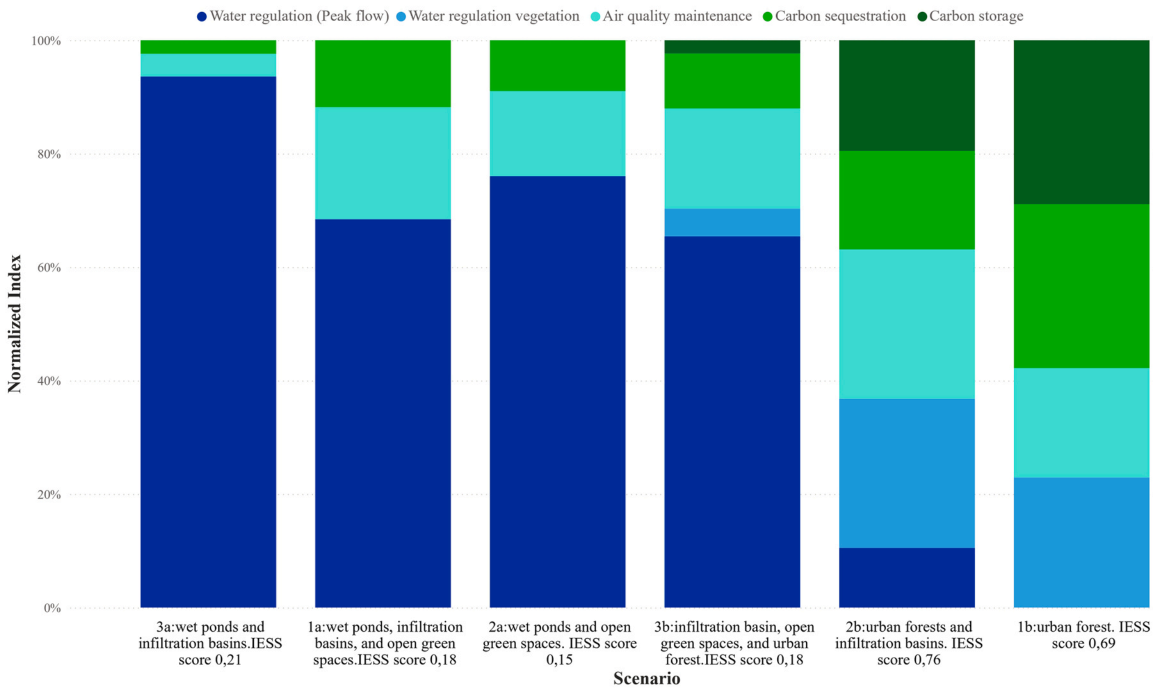

Fig. 7. Normalized index benefit -Computational tools. Air quality maintenance was calculated based on the PM_{10}Kg/yr removed, carbon sequestration as CO_2Tons/yr removed. Carbon storage as CO_2Tons, water regulation associated with permeability changes as the peak flow reduction, water regulation derived by vegetation presence as the volume of run-off saved in m^3/month.

Subsequently, an evaluation of local resources was conducted to inform the selection of the most appropriate methodology for assessing project benefits, utilizing the VBA Excel tool. The project's resource classification was determined as follows: medium budget, medium timeline allocation, medium data availability, and high team skills. Based on these classifications, empirical equations and computational tools were selected as the primary methodologies for implementation.

The next phase involved identifying key literature guidelines and reviewing previous experiences with computational tools such as EPA-SWMM and i-Tree Eco. Additionally, a rapid approximation of the bio-physical analysis was performed using the "Index Approximation" feature in the Excel tool. This preliminary assessment provides an initial

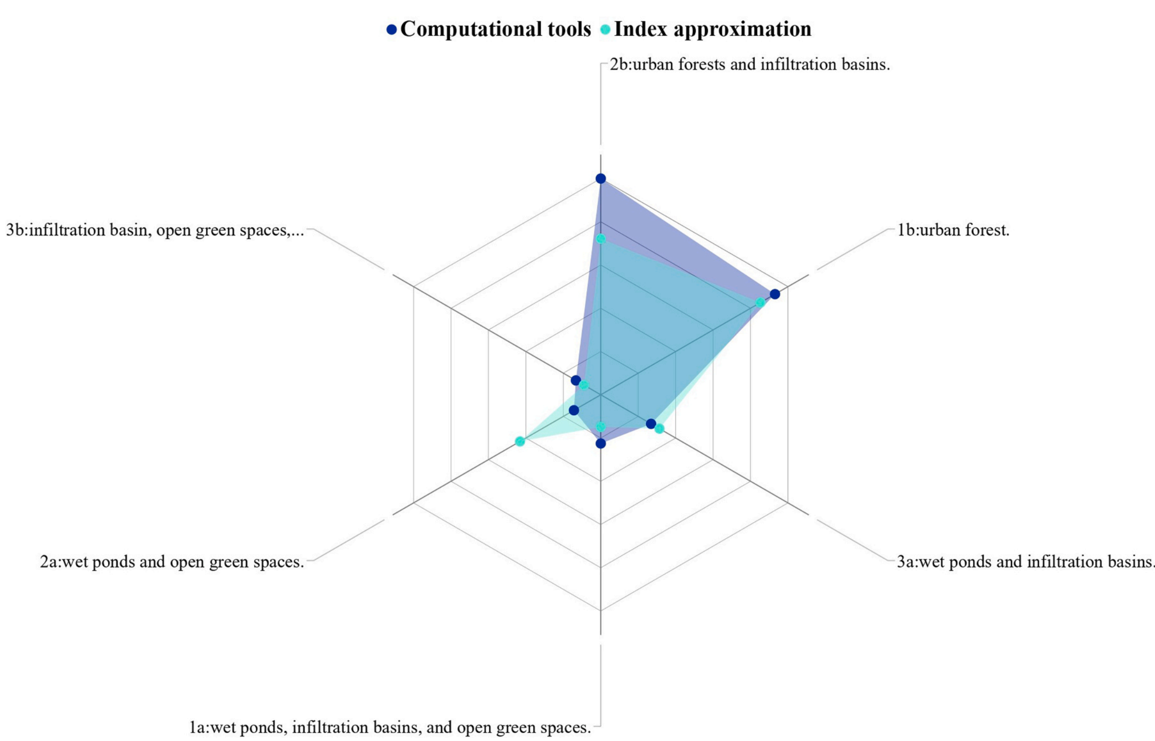

Fig. 8. IESS results (score 0–1) in multiple prioritizations of ecosystem services according to biophysical assessment methodologies. Index approximation and computational tools.

quantification of the biophysical status of ecosystem services across different evaluation scenarios and serves as a foundation for further analysis. Data input requirements for Index approximation and data set-up for each model are described in Supplementary material B.

As illustrated in Fig. 6, when all ecosystem services are equally weighted within the Integrated Ecosystem Services Score (IESS), Scenario 1b is identified as offering the greatest benefits, achieving an IESS score of 0.68. However, results may vary depending on the prioritization of specific ecosystem services within the IESS index. For example, Scenario 2a is the most effective for enhancing water regulation services, whereas Scenario 1b is optimal for maximizing air quality maintenance and shade provision.

The computational tools EPA-SWMM and i-Tree Eco were implemented according to the case study setup detailed in Supplementary Material B. The results, presented in Fig. 6, indicate that under this biophysical evaluation methodology, when all ecosystem services are equally weighted within the Integrated Ecosystem Services Score (IESS), Scenarios 2b and 1b offer the greatest benefits, achieving IESS scores of 0.76 and 0.69, respectively. These scenarios emphasize urban forests as the most effective strategy for generating multiple ecosystem services. The findings highlight the crucial role of terrestrial NbS in enhancing carbon sequestration within urban contexts (Pereira et al., 2024) and demonstrates the significant potential of green infrastructure strategies (e.g., urban forests, gardens, green areas, and green roofs) to improve carbon sequestration (Rachid et al., 2024). Additionally, the findings underscore the multiple benefits and co-benefits generated by urban forests in cities. Urban forests contribute to carbon sequestration both directly and indirectly: directly through CO_2 absorption via photosynthesis, and indirectly by providing cooling through shade, which reduces energy consumption and associated carbon emissions (Bherwani et al., 2024). Furthermore, urban forests create synergies with other services, such as water regulation through interception and evapotranspiration, as well as air quality maintenance (Babí Almenar et al., 2023b). The potential of urban forests to provide multiple benefits is especially relevant in cities with limited budgets for NbS implementation or where NbS is not prioritized in the city plans (Dunford et al., 2018). This challenge is especially evident in many Latin American cities, where cost-effective and efficient solutions for climate resilience are urgently needed (see Fig. 7).

The implementation of the methodology also demonstrates that when the selection criteria prioritize more than two ecosystem services, the influence of the biophysical methodology on the analysis becomes less significant. As shown in Fig. 8, the differences in percentage changes in ecosystem services provision are less pronounced when comparing index approximation to computational tools. This result support the suggestion that in contexts with high data scarcity, the best available information can still provide a reasonable estimation of changes in ecosystem services status through NbS implementation, guiding urban planning decisions effectively (Wild et al., 2024; Balzan et al., 2021; Alves et al., 2024b). It indicates that the lack of data or high technical skills is not necessarily a barrier to analyzing the effectiveness of NbS implementation. Supporting the previous implementation of alternative, simpler methodologies for NbS assessment in data-scarce contexts (Wild et al., 2024; Balzan et al., 2021; Alves et al., 2024b; Escobedo et al., 2015b). However, these results should be used carefully when reporting effectiveness to avoid raising unrealistic expectations among stakeholders. Despite this caution, the primary value of these results lies in their potential to foster discussions with stakeholders and urban planners, thereby promoting the implementation of NbS in cities.

4. Discussion

This study presents a structured DST designed to identify the most suitable methodology for assessing the implementation of NbS based on local constraints. DST integrates a feasibility analysis to evaluate the local context considering socio-economic criteria, a selection tool for biophysical assessment methodologies, and a scoring-based index to support the decision-making process. Compared to existing DSTs, which frequently presuppose ideal conditions—such as robust datasets, extended timelines, or specialized modeling skills—this study introduces a novel framework that formalizes method selection based on typical planning constraints. This distinction is particularly relevant for Global South contexts, where urban planning frequently operates under strict limitations in funding, data, and human resources. While this approach introduces key innovations that enhance the adaptability and applicability of NbS evaluations, it also presents certain limitations that should be acknowledged and addressed in future research.

The first stage of the DST follows a structured feasibility analysis similar to previous approaches but introduces two key innovations (Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022; Alves et al., 2024a). First, it systematically integrates environmental, technical, economic, and social criteria into a sequential decision-making process, ensuring that only environmentally and technically feasible NbS are considered in subsequent economic and social assessments (Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022; Basco-Carrera et al., 2023). This structure fills the gap by incorporating socio-economic factors into NbS DSTs (Sahay, 2025) and addressing user preferences, a key limitation identified in other studies (Babí Almenar et al., 2023a). Additionally, hierarchical feasibility analysis enables the identification of context-specific constraints and facilitates the adaptation of NbS through spatial and technical adjustments, creating a more flexible and adaptive framework. However, two main limitations must be addressed. First, the feasibility analysis assumes static conditions for NbS in public spaces, overlooking long-term urban transformations, vegetation growth, and climate variability. This issue has already been analyzed by Lehmann et al., 2025, who emphasize the importance of incorporating a long-term perspective into NbS policy and implementations (Lehmann et al., 2025). Second, and in line with the long-term view strategy of new NbS plans and policies, the economic criteria only consider implementation costs, without accounting for operation and maintenance expenses, which are critical for ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of NbS interventions (Dartée et al., 2023). Future refinements should incorporate dynamic feasibility assessments and cost-benefit analyses over extended timeframes.

The second stage introduces two significant methodological advancements. First, it implements decision rules to guide the selection of appropriate assessment methodologies based on contextual constraints, ensuring adaptability across both data-rich and data-poor environments. Second, it incorporates the Index Approximation, which provides a simplified and structured approach for estimating the biophysical impact of NbS when data accuracy is limited. These features enhance the accessibility and applicability of DST by allowing decision-makers to select the most suitable method—whether empirical equations, computational models, or monitoring systems—based on the availability of resources, expertise, and data. Despite these advantages, certain limitations remain. The primary input for DST development was a literature review of research papers. This means that other types of information, such as global analyses or guidelines (grey literature), were not considered, potentially introducing a bias—particularly in the budget and timeline categories—since academic budgets and timelines do not necessarily align with those of urban planners. However, given the available data, this approach provides the best possible approximation to real-world NbS biophysical analysis constraints. This issue has been highlighted in other studies, which identify the exclusion of grey literature as a limiting factor in the analysis (Wild et al., 2024). Additionally, while the Index Approximation serves as a valuable alternative in data-scarce environments, it presents inherent risks of overestimating ecosystem service provision, as it does not fully account for key biophysical processes. For instance, the simpler disposition velocity method does not capture aerodynamic effects like the canyon effect in urban areas that influences air circulation and can reduce dry deposition velocity (Abhijith et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2020; Buccolieri et al., 2009). In addition, the shade provision is fully captured by a circle area of the crown of the trees not considering the patterns of vegetation growth or transformation that the gradual development of ecosystem services (Lehmann et al., 2025; Rötzer et al., 2019; Weissert et al., 2017). To address these challenges, future refinements should incorporate automated data validation mechanisms and hybrid approaches that integrate empirical models with GIS-based spatial analysis to improve accuracy, scalability, and reliability.

In line with previous studies (Croeser et al., 2021; Jiménez-Ariza et al., 2023; Uribe-Aguado et al., 2022; Longato et al., 2023), Stage 3 introduces an innovative approach to scoring-based indices, allowing for customization based on urban planning priorities and policy objectives. Unlike conventional scoring methods that apply fixed weighting criteria, this tool enables urban planners to adjust parameters according to local ecosystem service priorities, urban development plans, and stakeholder inputs (Babí Almenar et al., 2023a). As in Stage 1, this flexibility ensures that NbS prioritization aligns with municipal planning frameworks, making it a more adaptive and policy-oriented tool than traditional scoring-based indices. However, this customization process must be carefully managed to prevent biased decision-making based on subjective preferences rather than scientific and technical evidence.

4.1. Limitations and future work

Despite the limitations discussed previously, a major overarching constraint of the DST is its current inability to quantify the effect of urban biodiversity on ecosystem service provision, despite strong evidence supporting this relationship in literature. For instance, certain biodiversity attributes stand out as particularly significant. For water regulation attributes like vegetation community/habitat area are essential. Similarly, for air quality maintenance and climate regulation, factors like community/habitat age and above- and belowground biomass play a critical role (Harrison et al., 2014). At an urban level, the implementation of NbS can be seen as an opportunity to enhance urban biodiversity. NbS initiatives such as parks or urban forests often promote both ecosystem services and biodiversity (Langemeyer and Gómez-Baggethun, 2017). Furthermore, the role of biodiversity becomes even more pronounced when economic benefits are considered. According to the *Dasgupta Review*, biodiversity ensures the harmonious interaction between Produced Capital, Natural Capital, and Human Capital, enabling nature to exhibit productivity, resilience, and adaptability (Dasgupta, 2021). Future iterations of the DST should therefore integrate biodiversity considerations as a core criterion in the feasibility analysis—especially for projects aimed at protecting or restoring urban nature. Doing so would strengthen the ecological validity of NbS evaluations and align planning frameworks with biodiversity conservation goals.

Another important limitationis a is the lack of integration of economic valuation methods beyond feasibility analysis, which could improve the analysis of NbS configurations and provide a deeper understanding of their effects on ecosystem service enhancement in urban contexts. Addressing this limitation will be crucial for future methodological improvements. The current absence of socio-economic assessments in the NbS selection process highlights a significant knowledge gap (Raymond et al., 2017; Kabisch et al., 2016; Colléony and Shwartz, 2019). Socio-economic assessments are essential as they acknowledge potential economic trade-offs and evaluate the financial feasibility of policies supporting NbS implementation. These assessments provide a comprehensive evaluation of project costs and benefits, which can significantly influence the optimal selection of NbS through well-informed policy decisions. They also enable the comparison of natural infrastructure and services, highlighting the monetary value derived from these assessments during cost-benefit analyses (Bockarjova and Botzen, 2017). Additionally, socio-economic assessments play a critical role in supporting decision-making regarding resource allocation and prioritization, compensation for losses, and the design of environmental markets (Champ et al., 2003). A logical extension of the proposed methodology would be the inclusion of valuation approaches in the final decision-making stage, enabling urban planners to select optimal NbS scenarios not only based on ecosystem service maximization, but also on economic efficiency and social equity considerations.

5. Conclusions

This methodology has the potential to guide the selection and implementation of a proper methodology for biophysical evaluation of NbS configurations in urban contexts considering the local constraints. It also sheds light on the importance of improving data inputs and the technical skills required for ecosystem service assessments. Notably, a thorough understanding of the biophysical effects of each NbS typology can reduce the reliance on complex assessment methodologies, making the process more accessible. However, enhancing the quality of data inputs remains critical for making robust and actionable recommendations during the NbS selection process.

The methodology highlights that a lack of data or technical skills should not be used as an argument to avoid conducting a biophysical evaluation of ecosystem services provided by NbS. The findings suggest that even in the absence of extensive data or advanced technical expertise, it is possible to assess the effectiveness of NbS implementation. This supports the use of alternative, empirical, or simplified methods in data-scarce contexts. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised when interpreting and communicating these results, as they may unintentionally create unrealistic expectations among stakeholders. Despite this limitation, the results have significant value in fostering dialogue with stakeholders and urban planners, promoting the adoption of NbS in urban areas. In addition, unlike prior tools that offer limited guidance for constrained environments, this DST formalizes resource-based decision-making and extends the analytical capacity of urban planners regardless of data or technical limitations.

The methodology was successfully applied to the case study in Bogotá, underlining the value of urban forests in delivering multiple regulating ecosystem services in local contexts. Finally, it is important to note that sampling and monitoring alternatives were excluded from this analysis due to high resource requirements (e.g., time and budget). A future iteration of this methodology could incorporate such approaches to explore their impact on ecosystem service quantification and further refine the assessment process.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Juliana Uribe-Aguado: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Juliana Nieto Patiño:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Kozak Daniel:** Validation, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Wild Tom:** Validation, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Juan Pablo Rodríguez Sánchez:** Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the European Union-funded project euPOLIS "Integrated NBS-based Urban Planning Methodology for Enhancing the Health and Well-being of Citizens: the euPOLIS Approach" under the Horizon 2020 program H2020-EU.3.5.2. The authors would like to thank the Vice Presidency of Research & Creation's Publication Fund at Universidad de los Andes for its financial support.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.ufug.2025.128842.

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