



POLICY BRIEF 06

# Moving towards greener cities: Strategies to develop green spaces in vulnerable neighbourhoods



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## Moving towards greener cities: Strategies to develop green spaces in vulnerable neighbourhoods

This policy brief explores the pressing need to address the inequitable distribution of green spaces in cities. The core case study will be the experience of a pilot project in Conchalí, Metropolitan Region of Santiago de Chile, which offers insights on strategies to address the challenges to achieving a better distribution of green spaces in vulnerable neighbourhoods, strengthening aspects of environmental justice. In this way, this brief can contribute to the construction of more resilient and fair cities.

### Key Messages

- In Santiago de Chile, the scarcity of green spaces in marginalised communities exacerbates existing social disparities and perpetuates environmental injustices. The strategy adopted to tackle this issue was to include urban nature in an existing government program, thus benefiting from already consolidated governance and institutional resources.
- Adopting a multiple solution approach can effectively place nature on the agenda when other apparent priorities are already established.
- Co-production and co-implementation workshops can play a key role in creating community values and recomposing the social fabric.



IMAGES: Santiago City Council

## Equity in strategies for greener cities: A question of environmental justice

**In urban landscapes worldwide the quest for greener cities confronts a stark reality: not all communities have equal access to urban nature.<sup>1</sup> This imbalance is particularly pronounced in Latin American cities, where the lingering effects of inequality often leave vulnerable neighbourhoods deprived of green areas.<sup>2</sup>**

Yet, the importance of equitable distribution of green areas extends beyond mere aesthetics; it is a matter of environmental justice, since green spaces can contribute to improving the living conditions and well-being of inhabitants,<sup>3</sup> as well as strengthening the resilience of cities.<sup>4</sup> In this context, planning policies should not only focus on expanding vegetation cover, but also its equitable distribution in cities.

In Santiago de Chile, the scarcity of green spaces in marginalised communities exacerbates existing social disparities and perpetuates environmental injustices.<sup>5</sup> To respond to these challenges within the CONEXUS project, Santiago's Life-Lab (Laboratorio BioUrbano) - an inter-sectoral partnership between academics, public institutions, private actors, and civil society - instigated a pilot project in the Panamericana Norte neighbourhood, in the municipality of Conchalí, to test different strategies to address the challenge of bringing more nature to vulnerable neighbourhoods.<sup>6</sup>





## Improving the distribution of green spaces in vulnerable neighbourhoods in Santiago de Chile

**Santiago's Life Lab had the aim of co-producing urban Nature-based Solutions (NbS) to address the challenges faced by the city to reach sustainable urbanisation. Bringing more nature to vulnerable neighbourhoods was identified as an important goal to contribute to better distribution and access to quality green spaces.**

To accomplish this, the Life Lab adopted a strategy based on the identification of priority low-income neighbourhoods and communities, followed by the verification of existing governmental programs that were already being implemented in such areas that could accommodate initiatives related to improving access to green spaces.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the neighbourhood of Remodelación Panamericana Norte (RPN) was identified as a proper site for the implementation of a pilot via the Quiero Mi Barrio programme, an urban regeneration initiative for low-income neighbourhoods led by the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism (Minvu) since 2007.

The pilot neighbourhood, Panamericana Norte, was one of the communes with the greatest quantitative deficit of green spaces in the Metropolitan Region, occupying the lowest positions in indicators on the existence of minor parks, access to green areas and the lack of their connectivity.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a diagnostic analysis conducted within the Quiero Mi Barrio Programme identified the need for environmental education to foster community interest and engagement with caring for public spaces.

Quiero Mi Barrio has been implemented in more than 200 neighbourhoods in Chile and is focused on social and urban issues. Through a co-production approach, the Life Lab team sought to include nature and green spaces in the local implementation of the program. For that, a holistic, comprehensive and multi-solution approach was adopted for the Pilot, establishing collaboration in all stages from its design to its implementation.<sup>9</sup>



IMAGES: Santiago City Council

The Life-Lab, in partnership with the Quiero Mi Barrio team, carried out environmental education workshops on the topics of NbS, indicator monitoring, and co-design of public spaces, while supporting residents' activities to foster regenerative. A central aspect was the inclusion of environmental issues and NbS in the neighbourhood committee's development agenda, emphasising the connections that nature and urban ecology present with other issues relevant for the community. Another strategy was to organise field trips for the community to learn from other NbS initiatives and to promote exchanges with other organisations and communities, thus establishing the basis for regional partnerships.

As a result of the workshops, different interventions were envisioned for the neighbourhood, including community gardens, a native square with local species, sidewalk restoration in main avenues, rain gardens, and a prototype for recycling water, which 'reuses' water from washing machines for sustainable use and irrigation.

Through this co-production and co-implementation approach, which promoted not only the exchange of knowledge but also engaged citizenry in implementation, the pilot achieved significant progress, especially in the sense of creating community values and

recomposing the social fabric: the intervention linked neighbours with the development of different types of activities for the recovery of certain deteriorated spaces and promoted a sense of ownership.

An important outcome of the project is the perspective of upscaling the initiative and establishing a training program on NbS for Quiero Mi Barrio at the national level. This reinforces the positive aspect of the strategy adopted by the Life Lab, of including urban nature in an existing government program, thus benefiting from already consolidated governance and institutional resources.

The multiple solution approach embraced was an important element to effectively put nature on the agenda when other apparent priorities were already established. However, focusing on an already existing and wider government policy also presented challenges that will demand further attention. Since Quiero Mi Barrio originally focused on socioeconomic indicators, biodiversity and environmental aspects were monitored exclusively by the university part of the Life Lab. Therefore, monitoring will demand further adaptations in the programme, especially if environmental issues are to be integrated within the broader objectives of Quiero Mi Barrio at the national level.



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## Policy Recommendations

- Green spaces at a neighbourhood scale must be planned and conceived as a network that promotes connectivity, considering their distribution and resident access to contribute to equitable development.
- Strengthening the integration of green spaces with other public priorities is important to reinforce co-benefits and make the implementation of NbS viable. One strategy is to link specific investment for the development of green spaces to public policies aimed at other social objectives, readjusting design criteria so that they allow or facilitate the implementation of green spaces.
- Establishing clear specifications on the design characteristics of green spaces at the neighbourhood scale is key to guarantee quality standards.
- It is essential to focus on promoting gradual greening processes and community participation to incorporate different needs and points of view, in order to ensure the creation of green spaces appropriate to the local context and avoid processes of green gentrification and displacement.
- Government backing through technical or financial support and the establishment of coordination networks can enhance communities' management practices and initiatives, strengthening their capacity to influence decision-making, mobilise changes in the public agenda, and maintain or develop green spaces



IMAGES: Santiago City Council

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