Delivering access to natural spaces for all city residents

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A growing body of research highlights the benefits of contact with nature, which promotes physical, mental, cognitive and social health [1]. However, research also shows that humans are becoming increasingly disconnected from the natural world. There are many reasons for this, ranging from urbanisation to technology use, changing lifestyles, the difficulty of accessing green and blue spaces due to cost or lack of transport, low awareness of the benefits associated with spending time in nature and the risks associated with climate change [2].

Vulnerable groups have even less contact with nature than privileged groups, due to the lack of natural and recreational areas, as well as safety concerns in their neighbourhoods [3]. This means that environmental inequalities go hand in hand with social inequalities. Typically, people living in wealthier neighbourhoods enjoy more abundant and better-maintained parks, denser tree cover and greater access to nature than those living in lower-income areas [4]. It has been proven that contact with nature in an urban environment contributes to health and well-being; this imbalance therefore plays a role in widening health disparities between different socio-economic groups. This intersection of social, environmental and health inequalities raises the question of what action cities can take. What can they do to reduce the gap and promote access to nature for all? Examples of successful approaches are presented in this article, together with some relevant urban planning strategies.

Community gardens deliver psychological and social well-being

Disadvantaged socio-economic groups are more likely to experience health problems or face barriers to accessing healthcare and other essential services. Different approaches to help them reconnect with nature can be beneficial. One useful strategy is community gardens. These are communal green spaces where people from one or more households garden together or side by side [5]. They represent grassroots efforts to bring about positive change at a local level and contribute to broader movements for social and environmental justice.

Community gardens tend to improve the physical health of residents, who have the opportunity to engage in physical activity through gardening and gain access to fresh food. They are increasingly seen as socially active environments, promoting cohesion and a sense of belonging by bringing members together in sharing tasks, practices, seeds, tools, produce and recipes. These interactions are a key element in delivering the potential psychological and social benefits of community gardens. However, studies show that community gardens can also contribute to gentrification and the displacement of vulnerable individuals [6]. Implementing fair greening policies will help to counter this risk.

Several cities in the United States have set up nature programmes designed specifically for disadvantaged groups, such as Baltimore in Maryland and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. They provide access to green spaces, facilitate community engagement and promote environmental stewardship. The citizen-driven initiative Backyard Basecamp in Baltimore aims to (re)connect people from diverse backgrounds to the land and to nature [7]. It was created by Atiya Wells, a paediatric nurse who wanted to encourage families, particularly people of colour, to discover and enjoy nearby outdoor spaces. Reconnecting with the natural environment begins with walks in the green spaces of their neighbourhood, followed by nature walks around Baltimore. Atiya and her team have also acquired an abandoned plot of land, which they have named Bliss Meadows. They have turned it into a real urban oasis, with a farm, a pollinator meadow, ponds, woods and orchards [8]. It is now a meeting place and a natural retreat for residents of all ages and social backgrounds.

KEY POINTS

▣ **Environmental inequalities go hand in hand with social inequalities: those in poorer social categories have less opportunity for contact with natural environments than more affluent people. The challenge for cities is to remedy the unequal distribution of urban green spaces to promote equity in health and well-being. This issue can be approached in a number of ways. Involving residents in the projects is an essential first step.**

Feature

Preserving Nature to Protect Human Health

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Allotment gardens in the town of Ris-Orangis.

Counterproductive effects of urban greening projects

Making nature accessible to marginalised communities remains a major challenge, not least because cultural factors play an important role in the effectiveness of interventions.

PHILADELPHIA COMBINES URBAN NATURE AND JOBS

In Philadelphia, the *Pennsylvania Horticultural Society* offers training and support to residents with employment difficulties who are looking for opportunities in the horticulture and landscaping sectors [9]. In addition to training in horticulture, the upkeep of green spaces and management roles, this programme offers job preparation workshops, as well as links with social services and job placements.

Since 2010, 250 people have participated, 90% of whom have completed the programme. Of the graduates, 97% found employment with local minority-owned companies. Many of them work for organisations that clean up empty lots in Philadelphia and green them. These people are helping to make the city a healthier, more welcoming environment for everyone.

For example, data show that people who identify as Latin American largely prefer to spend time outdoors with their immediate or extended family, and are more socially motivated by leisure activities than other ethnic groups [10]. However, studies carried out to date to identify preferences for outdoor activities and social nature-based prescribing have focused mainly on individual rather than family participation. It is essential to consider cultural preferences, beliefs and traditions when designing and implementing nature programmes to ensure they resonate with the target audience.

What's more, actions taken by local authorities can have counterproductive effects. This can happen when the approach focuses only on health, overlooking the equity and social justice implications of greening urban spaces [11; 12]. It is critical to consider the concept of "green gentrification" in any urban renaturing project. This term refers to new, more affluent residents arriving in previously low-income neighbourhoods, where investments are being made to develop parks and greenways, plant trees and improve the environment [13]. This is a major challenge for many municipalities [14], where private sector economic stakeholders

are involved in restoring neighbourhoods that have suffered decades of under-investment. Rising house prices resulting from gentrification are displacing former residents who can no longer afford to live there. The solutions for avoiding this phenomenon are complex and require coordinated action [15]. By bringing together those involved in housing and green space management, towns and cities can give themselves the means to invest in greening programmes that improve the urban living environment for all.

Strategies to combat these inequalities

It is crucial to promote social equity alongside urban greening initiatives to ensure that the health benefits associated with natural spaces are accessible to the entire population. Different strategies can be put in place to achieve this.

Community engagement and participation

Particular efforts should be made to engage those living in marginalised or poorly served areas in developing and implementing greening and rewilding projects, bearing in mind the possible effects on health (allergies, injuries, vector-borne diseases,

sheltered or cool-down areas to protect against the heat, etc.). Local residents should be encouraged to contribute, their needs and preferences should be heard, they should be empowered to take ownership of the natural spaces in their neighbourhood.

Equitable distribution of green and blue spaces between neighbourhoods in public planning policy

Prioritising investment in underserved populations helps to remedy historical disparities in access to nature, while ensuring that sites are of high quality and safe.

Accessibility

When designing natural spaces, it is important to ensure that they are inclusive and welcoming to people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds. This means incorporating features such as wheelchair-accessible paths, places to sit and sufficient shade for all users to enjoy the space.

Cultural events

Offer activities within the green spaces that reflect the cultural diversity of the residents, while protecting the natural environment. This might involve celebrating traditions, organising events and offering educational activities in conjunction with the local population. All these actions help to cultivate a sense of belonging and attachment to the neighbourhood.

Combating gentrification and exclusion of people on lower incomes

It is essential to work with all stakeholders to develop strategies to mitigate the impacts of renaturing projects, such as an affordable housing policy or community land trusts.

Training and job opportunities

Alongside urban greening projects, it is worth setting up career pathways that lead to serious employment and economic stability by offering training in landscaping, horticulture, conservation and other related sectors.

Data collection and assessment

Prior to any intervention, it is crucial to gather knowledge about the demographic profile of users of green spaces, as well as their habits and preferences, in order to inform decision-makers and make sure that these places meet the needs of all residents.

In conclusion, addressing the inequitable distribution of urban green spaces is critical for promoting health equity and well-being among vulnerable populations. Further research is needed to better understand the barriers to access and the effectiveness of nature interventions in diverse communities. Policy makers, urban planners and local stakeholders must work together to implement greening and housing strategies that ensure access to nature for all. ■

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