URBAN NATURE PLANS +

Short brief on justice and well-being for urban nature plans

Justice and well-being

*This short brief explores the importance of justice and well-being in the context of urban nature. It is imperative to engage with justice to overcome **systemic risks** associated with resilience, social issues and well-being. For city planners and decision-makers, consideration of justice themes can also contribute positively to the added value of urban nature planning and the successful delivery of **multifunctional outcomes**.*

Key messages:

1. **Greening is not always positive:** Whilst greening offers mostly positive benefits, poorly conceived plans can worsen the inequalities through green gentrification and displacement of existing residents.

2. **From equality to equity:** Cities should shift from generic quantitative targets (equality) to equity-cantered objectives that prioritise the specific needs of vulnerable groups. This requires addressing the three main dimensions of justice: procedural, recognitional, and distributional.

3. **Dual barriers:** Achieving justice requires a dual approach that considers barriers experienced by communities (e.g. safety, lack of belonging) alongside institutional barriers (e.g., data gaps, funding, silos).

4. **Beyond the technical fix:** Urban nature planning cannot stand alone, it needs a cross-departmental structure to be integrated with housing, mobility and social policies to address the root drivers of vulnerability and ensure outcomes that improve health and wellbeing of all beneficiaries.

Why justice matters?

Urban nature is essential for a just transition to resilient cities. However, planning that fails to address the drivers of vulnerability, not only fails to address such drivers (Schipper, 2020) but can actively further reinforce them. For city planners and decision-makers, ignoring justice creates three systemic risks for a city:

Resilience risk: Planning that relies on generic quantitative targets often fails to reach the areas that need climate adaptation the most. Focusing on number of green areas without equity in accessing them for all, leaves the most vulnerable groups exposed to climate-induced events.

Social risk: Poorly conceived interventions can trigger gentrification and displacement, where improvements make neighbourhoods unaffordable for previous inhabitants. This displacement not only creates housing insecurity but can further erode social cohesion and trust in public authorities. Furthermore, if stakeholders are not sufficiently involved, co-creation processes can backfire, resulting in spaces that do not reflect local needs or preferences (Anguelovski and Corbera, 2023; Creasy and Maxwell, 2024; Sekulova et al., 2021). This can reinforce an investment risk, where expensive interventions may not serve the needs of the intended recipients.

Well-being risk: Access to urban nature is a determinant of health. When planning fails to address the underlying drivers of vulnerability, it exacerbates negative health (physical and mental) impacts, including limiting physical activity, increased exposure to heat and pollution and chronic stress.

Levels of Justice and Well-being

To achieve wellbeing for all, cities should evolve their approach to justice in urban nature planning. This can be viewed as a three-stage process, moving from basic equality level to a systemic justice level.

Level 1: Equality (The baseline): Equality means providing the same opportunities, resources, and access for everyone. In practice, this often relies on quantitative distance metrics, such as the WHO standard of ensuring everyone has access to a greenspace of at least 0,5 to 1 ha within 300 m walking distance (World Health Organization, 2016). While a necessary starting point, equality assumes everyone starts from the same place. It fails to address the various needs of stakeholders or existing vulnerabilities, for example because of the layout, physical barriers to access the greenspace (e.g. for people with reduced mobility)

Level 2: Equity (The desired outcome): Equity offers targeted support and investments to ensure equal opportunities for all. Equity is the outcome of fair and inclusive governance, and design (Pike et al., 2024). In practice, this means providing equal access not just to physical space, but to tangible and intangible benefits (wellbeing) that urban nature offers (improved human health and well-being, reduced heat during summer, improved air, water quality and flood mitigation).

It involves adapting green spaces to the specific needs and desires of citizens so they feel welcome and included, for example providing infrastructure that supports the use of a greenspace by people with reduced mobility (benches to rest, ramps instead of steps, guiding strips for blind people, …) or for families with children (e.g. playgrounds or picnic areas) can improve equity. Equity extends beyond human needs to include benefits of other species (multispecies justice) (Tschakert, 2022; Winter, 2022; Tschakert et al., 2021).

Level 3: Environmental Justice: Environmental justice aims to transform the system itself to guarantee fair allocation of environmental advantages and disadvantages for all (EEA, 2024; Schlosberg, 2007) Environmental justice is not only a key outcome of implementing an UNP but should guide the entire UNP planning and implementation process.

Dimension of Justice and Well-being

It's also important to understand and distinguish the three dimensions of environmental justice (Pike et al., 2024):

Procedural justice: Ensuring that all stakeholders have equal opportunities to participate, through inclusive and fair UNP decision-making and governance processes. This helps achieve recognitional justice by integrating local knowledge through co-creation and grassroot initiatives.

Recognitional justice: acknowledging diverse identities, traditions, experiences and uses of urban nature. This creates spaces where vulnerable groups feel a sense of belonging.

Distributional justice: Ensuring a fair distribution of urban nature and (dis)benefits across all neighbourhoods.

Equitable urban nature has mainly been addressed through distributional justice so far (Pike et al., 2024), both in policy and research, with a focus on increasing access to urban greenspace (through increasing the greenspace and/or through opening existing greenspace to the public) or on increasing tree cover and urban green space - e.g. the 3+30+300 rule (Konijnendijk, 2023), or the Tree Equity Score (American Forests, 2026). Focusing on access to urban green space mainly narrows the benefits provided by urban nature to recreation (and its indirect benefits to mental and physical health and wellbeing) without taking the quality of the greenspace into account, whereas a focus on increasing green cover includes a broader range of ecosystem services (e.g. reducing urban heat island effects and impact of extreme weather/flooding events).

Distributional justice aspects look at the current state in a quantitative and spatial way through comparing factors such as tree cover and accessible urban green space between districts, often revealing that affluent neighbourhoods attract greater investment while disadvantaged areas face piecemeal interventions. However, a focus on distributional justice is inevitably an outcome-oriented one (reflecting equality rather than equity). It does not take into account aspects of quality of a green space, the desired use by citizens, potential barriers to its use, cultural perceptions or barriers, aesthetic preferences or the availability of transport to reach the urban green space. Consequently, distance-based indicators often provide a superficial picture of equity. Even where targets are met, vulnerable groups may experience these spaces as unsafe, unusable, culturally exclusive, or simply irrelevant to everyday basic needs.

The latter aspects are the focus of recognitional justice and are crucial for the design and implementation of equitable Urban Nature Plans, but also to ensure that local knowledge, skills and cultural considerations are meaningfully integrated into place-based interventions. However, gaining insights into these, often qualitative, aspects require intensive questioning and consideration of the interests of all potential stakeholder groups, including vulnerable groups and voiceless stakeholders (also taking into account nature itself and the potential

interests of future generations). This is critical to overcoming planning barriers where the knowledge and experience of vulnerable communities are often undervalued in planning processes.

Procedural justice serves as the critical mechanism to achieve recognitional justice. It moves beyond simple consultation to ensure all stakeholders have equal opportunities to participate through inclusive decision-making and governance processes. This is often realised through co-creation and grassroots initiatives which act as a vehicle to engage local communities and residents directly. However, practitioners should be cautious, while well-designed/implemented co-creation can improve equity, if all stakeholders are not sufficiently represented/involved, these processes can ironically lead to a less equal provision of urban nature. This failure often results in space where quality, design, and management do not reflect the actual needs and preferences of beneficiaries.

Key Barriers for Justice and Well-being

Research undertaken by the UNP+ project has identified seven key types of barriers and gaps for achieving distributional justice for vulnerable and marginalised groups. These are viewed through a dual lense:: community barriers (i.e. the lived experience of vulnerable groups) and city/planning barriers (institutional shortcomings). Table 1 presents these findings in detail.

Table 1. The Seven Theme Justice Barrier Framework

Theme	Community barrier	City & planning barrier	Wellbeing impact
Distribution, Access and Quality	Marginalised communities, especially low-income and immigrant communities, have less access to quality greenspaces.	Reliance on quantitative metrics ignores actual accessibility barriers.	Inactive lifestyle and lack of restorative environments contribute to higher rates of chronic physical/mental illness.
Safety, Fear and Usability	Perceptions of insecurity and fear are primary reasons vulnerable groups avoid urban nature.	Safety is often treated as a secondary technical fix (e.g., just lighting). Authorities rely on crime stats rather than perception data.	Chronic stress from fear of crime; avoidance of physical activity and social interaction in public spaces.
Cultural and Social Belonging	A lack of belonging, feeling that a space is "not for us" due to design or norms, prevents frequent use.	Local knowledge is often undervalued; planning processes fail to recognize diverse cultural uses of space.	Social isolation and reduced community cohesion. Feeling "othered" in public spaces undermines mental wellbeing.
Green Gentrification and Displacement	Green improvements contribute to rising costs, exacerbating housing insecurity and fear of displacement.	Greening is linked to real estate speculation and place-branding; cities often lack tools to monitor displacement.	Traumatic stress of displacement, breaking social support networks and causing financial anxiety.
Economic and Resource Constraints	Economic insecurity limits the ability to prioritise nature (e.g., cost of travel, time poverty).	Funding inequities often funnel investment to affluent neighbourhoods while disadvantaged areas face underfunding	Financial stress prevents restorative use of nature; unequal distribution of health resources exacerbates inequality.

Climate and Environmental Justice	Vulnerable groups are disproportionately exposed to heat, flooding, and pollution.	Strategies prioritise technical fixes (e.g., "more trees") without addressing which neighbourhoods need them most.	Measurable health disparities, including higher respiratory illness, heat-related mortality, and economic recovery stress.
Data and Knowledge Gaps	Language barriers and lack of information prevent awareness of amenities and programs	Inconsistent data definitions and a lack of qualitative data lead to a superficial picture of equity.	Missed opportunities for health interventions; reduced agency and exclusion from beneficial public services.

Key Recommendations

Integrating Justice, equity and accessibility principles into Urban Nature Plans to offer the full range of benefits, derived from developing healthy ecosystems in metropolitan areas. This is critical in unlocking the potential of urban nature, realising its added value and its role in social and environmental regeneration of the built environment.

This will only be achieved through acknowledging and addressing identified barriers. These relate to distribution, accessibility and quality of urban nature, and data and knowledge gaps, followed closely by economic and resource constraints and issues around cultural and social belonging.

Although cities (or city districts) may formally meet minimum greenspace requirements, vulnerable groups (e.g., older adults, children, migrants, low-income households, people with special needs) repeatedly experience those spaces as unsafe, unusable, culturally alien, or simply irrelevant to everyday basic needs.

Cities need to move from generic quantitative greening targets towards equity-centred objectives, for example, by prioritising investments in neighbourhoods with cumulative vulnerabilities and linking greening to strong anti-displacement safeguards and anti-gentrification policies.

Furthermore, urban nature planning should be integrated with housing, mobility, and social policies, which requires cross-departmental governance structures that mainstream and coordinate justice criteria rather than treating urban nature as a stand-alone technical fix. To move from generic greening to just urban nature, cities can follow the following operational steps:

1. Diagnose: before planning new interventions, assess the current state using the seven barriers framework. This assessment needs to engage communities to uncover experiential gaps in addition to spatial ones.

Action 1: Overlay green spaces distribution maps with socio-economic data (income, health disparities) to identify priority zones.
Action 2: Conduct safety and usability surveys with vulnerable groups (e.g. women, elderly, migrants) to understand why existing spaces may be perceived as unsafe or culturally excluded.
Action 3: Identify where current investments are concentrated and assess whether they are flowing to low-income neighbourhoods.

2. Redefine evaluation (new indicators): shift from equality-based targets (e.g., 300m distance to a green space) to equity-centered objectives that track well-being outcomes.

Action 1: Adopt needs-based targets, prioritising investments in neighbourhoods with the highest vulnerability and poorest wellbeing and health outcomes.
Action 2: Measure quality, not just quantity by tracking indicators such as perceived safety, amenities for diverse cultural use, and accessibility for special needs.

3. Break the silos (inter-departmental coordination): urban nature cannot be treated as a stand-alone technical fix. It should be embedded in wider urban planning and social policies to prevent maladaptation.

Action 1: Establish a cross-departmental structure involving relevant departments (including management and maintenance) before the planning and design phase begins.
Action 2: Implement anti-displacement safeguards, pairing greening interventions with affordable housing policies to prevent gentrification.
Action 3: Create inclusive communication channels to ensure that information is available and accessible in relevant formats and languages to address the knowledge gaps.

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