

TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP FOR MORE BIODIVERCITIES?

TRANSFORMING OUR CITIES THROUGH BIODIVERSITY

Cities and urban citizens have always had an intimate relationship with nature, with early human settlements founded on near-critical resources for farming, freshwater, and forestry. Even now, urban growth is highest in biodiversity hotspots, according to a 2022 BiodiverCities report led by World Economic Forum and partners.

Despite benefits, rapid urban growth undermines nature's ability to contribute to our societies and economies: urban consumption is responsible for 75% of natural resource use, while sprawling cities threaten periphery areas. Cities and their citizens must urgently rebalance their relationship with the natural world. Doing so requires ambitious local government policy, planning, and actions to protect and invest in urban nature; it also involves citizen and stakeholder engagement to recognize its benefits while supporting its expansion. Such investments are paid by their taxes and endorsed through local votes. Citizens must value existing parks and green areas, especially in post-COVID cities, where interest has exploded. And although this is a positive sign, it requires respect to ensure conservation and prevent damage or misuse.

Investing in urban nature should prioritize native, climate-resilient plant species, while being equally distributed to the places we live, work and play. Historically, urban green areas have not always prioritized native

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plants best adapted to local climates, nor were they equally distributed. In Cape Town, recent water crises forced local leaders to re-evaluate their green cover, with this South African city going so far as to rip-out non-native vegetation to preserve its water supply. Working with local communities has been vital – to encourage public buy-in and recruit volunteers. Santiago de Chile also faces severe drought and another common challenge in cities: disproportionate access to public and private green spaces. In both cases, citizen engagement facilitated improved access, quality and resilience of urban green areas.

Citizens and stakeholders must be engaged alongside local governments – from the start – to ensure support, although doing so is not always easy. WWF offers tips for public engagement in its new guide, *Transforming Cities Together*; it includes the importance of collectively defining goals and expectations and building community trust. Moreover, any investment in urban nature should engage youth, women, and marginalized communities to be inclusive and representative, with



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benefits spanning the urban landscape. Investing in urban nature should rely on science and incorporate indigenous and traditional knowledge to represent the wider community, building co-designed and co-complemented initiatives.

Engaging citizen support for urban nature fosters awareness of localized benefits. From improving air quality to managing urban heat and enhancing job access while encouraging long-term maintenance through community ownership – as in Malmö, Sweden, and Medellín, Colombia, described in WWF's urban nature guide. When evaluating urban nature investments, these same citizens and stakeholders should be engaged to share feedback, identify best practices, or possible financial or human resources for continued development.

Citizens are curious about public investments, especially those they interact with or can benefit from. Building endorsement and engagement can enable a faster and more comprehensive rollout of efforts to improve urban nature. As the saying goes, "*many hands make light work.*"