Case study ID

PO_02

GREEN LUNGS FOR OUR CITIES

CASE STUDY
SHORT SUMMARY REPORT

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GREEN LUNGS FOR OUR CITIES

Case Study at a Glance

The "Green Lungs for Our Cities" project is a case study led by Co-PLAN that addresses the pressing challenges of air pollution and noise in Albania's urban environments, particularly in Tirana. The initiative advocates for the integration of green infrastructure, such as urban parks, tree-lined streets, and green belts, as natural solutions to improve air quality, reduce noise pollution, and enhance the overall quality of life for residents. The project combines community awareness, policy advocacy, and research to support sustainable urban planning. Through partnerships with local authorities, experts, and citizens, the initiative promotes the expansion of green spaces as a strategic response to environmental degradation. Key actions include the development of new public parks, urban greening strategies, and public education campaigns on the benefits of green areas for urban health. This case serves as a model for how local interventions can contribute to broader climate and sustainability goals, aligned with the SDGs and EU Green Deal objectives.

Case Study Profile

Topic

- ☐ Community Gardening & Urban Agriculture
- ☐ Community Hubs & Cultural Activities
- ☒ Urban Design & Planning Processes
- ☒ Public Space Development & Management
- ☐ Local Economic Development
- ☒ Urban Regeneration & Rehabilitation

Scale

- ☒ Metropolitan / city region
- ☒ City scale
- ☒ Neighbourhood scale
- ☐ Block scale
- ☐ Building scale

Resilience Challenge

- ☒ Environmental and ecological resilience
- ☒ social & cultural resilience
- ☒ Infrastructure and technological resilience
- ☐ Economic & livelihood resilience

Duration

- ☐ Immediate (less than 1 month)
- ☐ Project-Based (1–12 months)
- ☒ Programme-Based (1–3 years)
- ☒ Strategic (3–5 years)
- ☐ Structural / Transformative (more than 5 years)

Stakeholders

- ☒ Community members
- ☒ Local government
- ☒ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- ☐ Private sector
- ☒ Academic and research institutions

Type of Civic Engagement Supporting Neighborhood Resilience

- ☒ Resident-led and grassroots initiatives
- ☒ Collaborative planning projects or processes
- ☒ Advocacy and capacity building
- ☐ Volunteer and community service projects
- ☒ Short-term, more flexible project-based engagement
- ☒ Long-term, more institutionalized engagement (development of stable structures, etc.)
- ☐ Protest and resistance mobilization
- ☐ Art-and culture-based civic Engagement

Level of Civic Participation

- ☐ Information
- ☒ Involvement or participation
- ☒ Collaboration or co-creation
- ☒ Empowerment
- ☐ Resistance and protest-based empowerment

Empirical Basis and Methodological Approach

The Green Lungs for Our Cities case study focuses on urban environmental resilience initiatives implemented across several Albanian cities, particularly Tirana, where rapid urbanization and environmental degradation have intensified challenges related to air pollution, noise, and the lack of green infrastructure. The study is based on evidence gathered through community awareness campaigns, participatory environmental monitoring, spatial analysis, and collaborative initiatives involving civil society organizations, local authorities, researchers, and residents. Methodologically, the case study adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates spatial analysis, participatory planning tools, citizen science practices, and qualitative assessment of civic engagement mechanisms to examine how community-led environmental advocacy can influence urban planning and resilience-building processes.

As part of the case study, interviews were conducted with representatives from Co-PLAN and other actors involved in the environmental awareness and advocacy processes linked to the initiative. The interviews explored how participatory approaches, environmental monitoring tools, and civic engagement strategies contributed to raising awareness about urban environmental challenges and influencing spatial planning discussions. Particular attention was given to the interaction between community-based initiatives, local governance structures, and broader sustainability objectives related to urban resilience and environmental quality.

Compendious summary

The "Green Lungs for Our Cities" project is situated in several urban centers across Albania, with a primary focus on Tirana, the country's capital and most densely populated city. Tirana exhibits high urban density, rapid urban sprawl, and a mixed-use built environment characterized by irregular housing developments, limited zoning enforcement, and a significant deficit in accessible green and public spaces. Much of the city's expansion over the past two decades has occurred informally, resulting in fragmented land use, poor street connectivity, and inadequate infrastructure, especially in peripheral neighborhoods. One of the key resilience challenges is the lack of integrated green infrastructure, which contributes to increased air and noise pollution, poor stormwater management, and heightened vulnerability to urban heat island effects and flooding, particularly in low-lying areas with impermeable surfaces.

The objective of this case study analysis is to explore how civic engagement, through awareness, data sharing, and collaborative action, can influence spatial planning and environmental decision-making in urban neighborhoods facing critical resilience challenges. Focusing on the "Green Lungs for Our Cities" initiative, the analysis examines how citizen involvement in environmental monitoring and advocacy contributes to improving neighborhood resilience, particularly in relation to air quality, noise reduction, and green space provision.

The study highlights the importance of participatory urban design and community-led environmental initiatives in addressing spatial inequalities, enhancing urban livability, and promoting a more inclusive planning process that responds to residents' real and localized needs.
The analysis of the "Green Lungs for Our Cities" project utilizes a mixed-methods approach that combines spatial analysis with civic participation tools to assess how environmental challenges are identified and addressed through community involvement. Through this combination of spatial evidence and citizen engagement, the methodology provides a bottom-up framework for integrating environmental data into urban decision-making, with a focus on enhancing neighborhood-level resilience.

Key Urban Issues/Questions Analyzed (Spatial Resilience Challenges in the Neighborhood)

The "Green Lungs for Our Cities" initiative addresses several pressing spatial resilience challenges in Albanian urban neighborhoods, particularly in Tirana. Key spatial issues include the lack of accessible green spaces, poor air and noise quality, unplanned urban expansion, and fragmented urban design that contributes to environmental vulnerabilities, such as urban heat islands, limited stormwater absorption, and increased pollution exposure. The city's rapid densification and informal development patterns have led to inadequate housing layouts and deficient public infrastructure, especially in peripheral and marginalized neighborhoods.

The role of citizens and civil society in identifying and responding to these issues has been central to the project. Public engagement has primarily occurred through informal and participatory channels, such as grassroots advocacy, community education campaigns, and citizen science tools like low-cost environmental sensors. Residents have participated in data collection, shared experiences of environmental stress, and contributed to shaping the narrative around urban livability. Co-PLAN facilitated these actions by promoting bottom-up environmental awareness and equipping communities with tools to monitor and visualize their spatial realities.

Stakeholder dynamics reveal a collaborative yet complex interplay. While Co-PLAN and other civil society organizations have taken the lead in mobilizing community action and generating evidence-based pressure, local governments have been gradually engaged in the dialogue, particularly as environmental data began to inform broader planning debates. The private sector's role has been less pronounced but has become relevant in discussions around urban development and potential green infrastructure investments. Overall, the initiative reflects a shift toward collaborative governance, where citizen participation, though largely informal, is instrumental in prompting institutional responsiveness

Mechanisms of Civil Engagement in Spatial Planning for Resilience

The "Green Lungs for Our Cities" project showcases a multi-layered model of civil engagement that actively integrates community voices into spatial planning for resilience. It employs diverse forms of participation, including advocacy groups, public awareness campaigns, and citizen science methods, where residents used low-cost sensors to monitor air and noise pollution in their own neighborhoods. These methods empowered citizens to produce localized environmental data and to advocate for more inclusive, responsive urban planning policies.

In terms of community participation in spatial design, although formal co-design workshops or participatory budgeting processes were not extensively documented, the project facilitated collaborative mapping and visualization of environmental data across six cities. This enabled residents to better understand how spatial layouts contribute to pollution hotspots and to engage in dialogues with planners and municipal officials. These engagements created an indirect but meaningful influence over how and where interventions (like green spaces or mobility corridors) should be prioritized.

The role of spatial activities in resilience was evident in several project-driven actions. For example, the environmental data collected by citizens was used to propose the placement of green buffers, promote green corridors for air flow, and advocate for quieter, cleaner mobility alternatives. These spatially targeted recommendations were aimed at mitigating urban heat, reducing exposure to pollutants, and enhancing livability and public health, particularly in densely built or marginalized areas.

On inclusivity in spatial decision-making, the project made efforts to engage youth, women, and neighborhood groups through targeted awareness campaigns and accessible digital platforms. However, some barriers to participation persisted, including digital divides, limited environmental literacy, and the lack of formal mechanisms for integrating citizen input into municipal planning procedures. Despite this,

Co-PLAN and partners worked to bridge these gaps by translating complex environmental data into visually intuitive formats, conducting school and neighborhood outreach, and engaging local media.

The project supported and amplified community-led initiatives, such as environmental clubs and local campaigns calling for cleaner air and more green space. These grassroots efforts proved effective in mobilizing public discourse, influencing local agendas, and reinforcing the legitimacy of environmental concerns in spatial planning processes. By combining scientific evidence with civic voice, the initiative established a compelling case for bottom-up resilience planning in Albanian cities.

Case study findings and lessons learned

The "Green Lungs for Our Cities" project shows how civic participation can enhance spatial resilience by enabling residents to monitor environmental conditions and raise awareness about pollution and green space shortages. While direct involvement in formal spatial design was limited, citizen-generated data influenced local discussions and advocacy efforts, leading to proposals for green buffers, adaptive public spaces, and improved air and noise management.

- However, challenges such as bureaucratic inertia, limited municipal capacity, and weak integration of community input into official planning processes hindered broader impact. Economic constraints and limited public access to planning tools also posed barriers.
- Despite these obstacles, the project led to successful community-driven initiatives, like expanding green spaces and pedestrian areas, using citizen-collected data. These actions improved local livability and helped push municipalities toward adopting greener, more inclusive urban planning strategies.

Lessons Learned

The "Green Lungs for Our Cities" project highlights key practices for enhancing spatial resilience through civic engagement. Low-cost environmental monitoring tools and clear data visualization helped translate complex issues into accessible, localized knowledge, fostering trust and participation. Empowering local NGOs and youth leaders strengthened grassroots advocacy and bridged gaps with local authorities.

- Effective community engagement methods included citizen science, participatory mapping, and school-based campaigns, which—despite the absence of formal co-design workshops—still influenced spatial decisions by raising awareness and sparking neighborhood dialogue.
- Innovative outcomes included proposals for green corridors and modular green spaces as adaptable, nature-based solutions. The project also demonstrated how mobile sensors can democratize environmental monitoring in urban areas.
- Challenges included limited institutional willingness to integrate citizen data into formal planning, lack of funding for participatory processes, and low planning literacy among some residents. Marginalized groups were often underrepresented, and sustaining engagement beyond early phases was difficult without ongoing support.

- Despite these barriers, the project offers a replicable model for community-driven urban resilience—combining citizen science, transparent communication, and NGO facilitation to support inclusive, data-informed planning.

Conclusion

The "Green Lungs for Our Cities" project shows that civic engagement, especially through citizen science and local advocacy, can meaningfully influence spatial planning and urban resilience. By monitoring air quality and noise pollution, communities raise awareness and pushed for greener, healthier environments. While not directly involved in formal design, their efforts laid the groundwork for future interventions, particularly in green infrastructure and public space improvements.

This case underscores the need to integrate community-generated data and experiences into urban planning, especially where official data is lacking. Civic participation should be viewed as essential, not optional, and informal input must be recognized as valuable in shaping inclusive, adaptive cities.

For future efforts, strong partnerships between communities and planners, accessible engagement tools, and funding for grassroots initiatives are critical. Training in spatial literacy and adapting planning frameworks to embed civic input will ensure long-term, systemic impact on resilient urban development.

Attachments

Photos

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References

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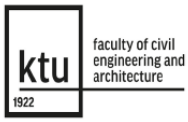

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