Green for Everyone
Promoting Green Spaces and Mitigating Gentrification

RESISTIRE recommendations to policymakers, civil society organisations and employers to mitigate the gendered impacts of Covid-19, based on RESISTIRÉ findings.

20 December 2021

COVID-19 and the associated policy measures that curbed vast stretches of public life highlighted the need for more urban green spaces, as people started to utilise existing green areas significantly more (in countries where parks and other green spaces were not closed down). This trend also emphasised the fact that some neighbourhoods – often populated by vulnerable socioeconomic groups, such as ethnic minorities, low-skilled and informal workers, etc. – have a lot less green space than others, exacerbating physical and mental health problems, as well as making it more difficult for people to socialise and engage in community-building.

❯Background Information

- Urban areas that have undergone greening often become gentrified: because green environments are in high demand on the housing market, property prices tend to rise in areas that implement greening measures, thereby pushing out people with low incomes and vulnerable groups. In fact, wealthy investors and companies increasingly develop costly and unaffordable infrastructures in less affluent neighbourhoods. This leads to the intra-urban displacement of people with a low socioeconomic status, effectively preventing them from benefitting from any positive urban (re)development, like the expansion of green spaces.

- Levels of access to green areas, exposure to pollution, the effects of gentrification and the availability of recycling schemes analysed through a socioeconomic lens remain under-researched areas. There is currently too little data that is both representative and disaggregated by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status and education.

- There is a real opportunity now to improve this situation. Across various major European urban centres, a majority of respondents to public opinion polls carried out by YouGov between 14-21 May, 2020, expressed the need for better mobility policies and cleaner air in their cities, and demanded change in the outlook of urban life in the future[1].

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[1] Source: YouGov, data obtained and available at:
https://www.transportenvironment.org/publications/no-going-back-europeanpublic-opinion-air-pollution-covid-19-era

› Expert consultations and quantitative data: main findings

According to the workshops and interviews with inequality experts that were organised by RESISTIRÉ, inequalities related to peoples' access to nature and green spaces have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. People with a low socioeconomic status are often more dependent on public spaces like parks than those with access to private natural spaces (i.e., gardens). While some cities and countries kept green spaces open during their respective lockdowns, other areas/countries had a more restrictive approach and closed public green spaces. Even though these kinds of policies affected all citizens, the impacts were unequal across inequality grounds such as ethnicity and socioeconomic background. For those with no private gardens, the closure of public parks and gardens had a stronger negative impact on their physical and mental well-being.

Moreover, different neighbourhoods have differing amounts of green space within them, with poorer neighbourhoods often containing very little. This is further reinforced by the process of gentrification outlined previously. As a concrete example, certain lockdown policy measures in Spain temporarily increased environmental inequalities by only allowing residents to walk around in their general neighbourhood, which deprived people living in greyer neighbourhoods from enjoying nature.

The analysis of quantitative data in the RESISTIRÉ project[2] granted a few more insights: *"A RAS (Rapid Assessment Survey) from Greece with 730 respondents aged over 18 years old and living in urban areas indicates that women were more concerned about their neighbourhoods during the pandemic and moved around in them more. Among all respondents to this survey, concerns about urban space increased, especially as far as the quality of public space, walking conditions, and cycling facilities was concerned."*

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[2] https://zenodo.org/record/5541035#.YZ5W7NDMKUk

❯Narratives: main findings

Narratives collected by the RESISTIRÉ[3] project have indicated some examples of how green spaces provided a vital component of people's lives during the pandemic and how access to these spaces was sometimes denied. Below are two examples:

CROATIA

An elderly woman with a physical disability living in Zagreb, Croatia experienced the beginning of the pandemic in a locked-down residential home, where she was not able to see relatives or friends from outside. She was also unable to go outside to take care of her dog herself. Eventually, she decided to move to the house of her grandparents, which was located next to the coast in a more natural environment. Despite the scepticism of other people and the accessibility limitations she had to deal with, she experienced more joy. She loved to swim in the area, was able to spend more time with her dog, and even engaged with the local community to start a beehive on her own in a nearby abandoned village.

"My daily routine has become to ride every day by my wheelchair scooter six kilometres to that village, work with bees and prepare different healthy products for several hours, and then ride back. (…) I do not sell products, but ask people to donate money to the NGO I founded."

SLOVENIA

Due to pandemic curbs a middle-aged mother from Ljubljana, Slovenia, was unable to leave her municipality and was, therefore, limited to very little green space during lockdown. She started to miss having a house with a garden (like her parents had) and did not find the green spaces within the city adequate for her needs. Municipal borders prevented her from accessing more expansive green areas, despite the fact that there are some nice parks just outside of the city.

"At that time, I really missed a house with a garden. I do not miss it otherwise, because I have great parks in short proximity of our apartment, but at the time of the lockdown and the limitations on movement I really missed it."

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[3] https://zenodo.org/record/5595815#.YaT_49DMKUk

› Better Stories

Within RESISTIRE, we identify "Better Stories", a term taken from Dina Georgis for promising practices that identify how a given societal situation can be ameliorated to improve existing practices.

- **A bottom-up initiative was started by local residents to develop and open a community-created urban garden in a formerly grey space in <u>Belfast</u>.** <u>Find out more</u>

- **Pre-pandemic, the Finnish city of <u>Turku</u> started funding and organising 'safety walks' to engage its citizens in creating safer and more equal public spaces, including green spaces.** This participatory approach tries to bring together a diverse group of residents of all genders, ages, and backgrounds. A similar approach targeted towards women in particular was used in <u>French cities</u> to promote gender mainstreaming. <u>Find out more</u>.

- **London's Grow Back Greener Fund:** to stimulate a green urban recovery from COVID-19, the Greater London Authority awarded grants to community projects that applied for funding in <u>2021</u> (£700,000 for 34 approved projects) and it will fund additional community projects in <u>2022</u> that fall under the two broad themes of access to green space and climate adaptation & water. <u>Find out more</u>.

BENEFITS OF GREEN SPACES

❯Recommendations

1. Prioritise Green Space in Policymaking

Policymakers should make the accessibility of green spaces a priority when designing policies and engaging in urban planning. It is also important to lower green spaces' barriers to entry for users from vulnerable socio-economic groups (ethnic minorities, homeless people, people with disabilities, …) with a particular attention to gender differences, for example by providing ample space and necessary services, and improving inclusivity and safety through adequate, inclusive and participatory design.

2. Green Public Spaces

A more equitable distribution of green spaces should be encouraged by both policymakers and civil society organisations (CSOs) by repurposing (little-used) grey areas and greening them, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This can be done on both a small scale with relatively little resources, for example by planting small groups of trees and/or flower boxes, or starting a community garden in a street or back alley, as well as on a larger scale by creating and expanding parks and urban forests. It is imperative to take a strongly participative approach when creating or altering green spaces and to enable the local community to engage in co-creation processes to shape their surroundings. Green spaces will, in this case, not only lead to improved physical and mental health outcomes, but also to increased social cohesion and community development.

3. Adopt a Holistic Policy Approach

Any initiative to green a neighbourhood should include policy measures to prevent an increase in housing prices and general cost of living. To adequately mitigate gentrification, a holistic approach is needed to ensure that actions from different policy domains can be combined effectively and that new policies can be integrated when necessary. To illustrate, this would mean that efforts to green a neighbourhood have to be combined with a host of social policies that can improve income levels and employment rates. Also important is the simultaneous development of affordable housing and accompanying social infrastructure (i.e., local services) in the area to prevent a strong upward trend in house prices. This could be combined with rent control and rent freezing policies to be as effective as possible. The effort to promote green spaces can, itself, be utilised as an instrument in socioeconomic policy, as they can foster social cohesion and play an important role in people's general wellbeing.

4. Role of Local Governments

Cities and municipalities, due to their status as landowners, have a crucial role to play and should prioritise community development rather than economic gains. Measures such as promoting good-quality high-capacity buildings instead of single-family houses, or keeping housing prices affordable and in line with the median income of residents, are crucial to avoid gentrification. Combined with measures that boost local economic activity, such as local currencies and the creation and protection of (green) commons, these policies will lead to increased living standards and well-being, while protecting vulnerable populations.

5. Involve Users and Mobilise Community

Another way of mitigating gentrification is to have users (i.e., the original residents of a neighbourhood) participate in the creation and definition of new green spaces. This would ensure that they are included in a feedback loop with (local) policymakers and civil servants, and that they actively shape – in terms of practical, environmental, and aesthetic aspects – the local green spaces in which they live. The same can be true for the 'programming' of green spaces: locals should influence the programming of activities and events within a green space so that it becomes more attractive to them and less relevant for newer groups who might be economically disruptive. In these ways, green spaces can be slowly leveraged as social spaces for local mobilisation against gentrification and for promoting a genuine community feeling.

To enable developments like this, positive evidence-based narratives around green interventions and co-creation should be constructed and propagated by local policymakers and CSOs through multimedia channels, community organisations (like housing cooperatives, local churches and schools), and local businesses, so that potential users become more aware of green spaces' benefits and become more involved in participative processes that relate to them. Special attention should be paid by these policymakers and CSOs to utilise a gender+ approach and include marginalised groups, for example by facilitating bottom-up initiatives and making inclusive co-creation toolkits widely available. Another method of doing this is to label green spaces in a gender+ way by naming them after inspirational (historical) members of disadvantaged communities. Inclusivity can also be promoted by not just emphasising the diverse identities of people that (might) use green spaces, but also by accepting and enabling all kinds of practical behaviours in and specific uses of green spaces.

About RESISTIRÉ

This factsheet is based on data collected within RESISTIRÉ's first research cycle which ran from 15 May to 30 June 2021. 31 national researchers worked with the consortium to map policies and societal responses, together with qualitative and quantitative indicators, related to the pandemic in the EU27 countries along with Iceland, the UK, Serbia, and Turkey.[4] This research activity was completed with workshops and interviews with gender equality experts whose input informed the main findings from expert consultations.[5]

RESISTIRÉ is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project the aim of which is to 1) understand the impact of COVID-19 policy responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities in the EU27, Serbia, Turkey, Iceland, and the UK on the basis of a conceptual gender+ framework, and 2) design, devise and pilot policy solutions and social innovations to be deployed by policymakers, stakeholders and actors in different policy domains.

Find out more about the project at **https://resistire-project.eu**.

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Discover all project outputs at https://resistire-project.eu.
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Acknowledgement and Disclaimer