

HelpAge International

Growing wellbeing and resilience together

Inclusive community gardens as a model of climate adaptation

This project was delivered in partnership with
Fundación Placemaking México.
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FUNDACIÓN PLACEMAKING

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

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Inclusive community gardens as a model of climate adaptation

Published by HelpAge International

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Introduction

"It has been a great change. Now you feel more connected to nature, it's easier to support other people, and you feel glad to be able to carry out a project for the community and for ourselves."

Jose Miguel, 74,
Mexico City, Mexico

Climate change is challenging the resilience of cities and communities around the world, and older people are amongst the most impacted. Rising temperatures, flooding, and extreme weather events pose a serious and growing threat to the health, personal safety, social connectedness, and wellbeing of older people.

Older people are already too often excluded from community spaces and activities because of costs they can't afford, poorly designed streets and public spaces, and a lack of accessible transportation. Their exclusion from community life is further compounded by poverty and ageism - leaving their knowledge, experience and voices overlooked and undervalued.

However, communities, including older people, are already showing the way and strengthening their own resilience with whatever resources they have. Small scale, locally led initiatives that bring together nature-based solutions and age-friendly principles to create places where everyone can belong, participate, and thrive, are a great place to start. Inclusive community gardens are one powerful example of coming together and harnessing nature to address shared challenges.

National and local governments, donors, and civil society must listen to communities and older people, provide them with resources, and remove barriers that stand in their way. Together, social and climate resilience can be strengthened for the benefit of everyone.

This report discusses the challenges communities are facing, according to older people themselves. The examples of inclusive community gardens in Bogotá, Colombia and Mexico City, Mexico, demonstrate how community-led, nature-based initiatives deliver multiple social and climate benefits - improving wellbeing and building the capacity of communities to face a changing climate - showing what it means to be growing wellbeing and resilience together.

The perfect storm

Communities face four intersecting challenges - a changing climate, poorly designed streets and public spaces and a lack of green spaces, all compounded by poverty and ageism. Together, these challenges disrupt community resilience, inclusion, and wellbeing, particularly in older age.

In our engagement with communities in Mexico City and Bogotá, older people spoke about how the design of their communities make it difficult for them to move around, see friends and family, access services, stay healthy and be included in community life. They explained how these challenges are being further exacerbated by changes to the climate.

Challenge 1: Climate change is impacting communities and urban environments, and older people and other vulnerable groups such as those living with disabilities, are among those most affected.

Rising temperatures, increased flooding, and more frequent extreme weather events are making cities more hostile and harder to navigate. For older people, those with limited mobility, and others already at the margins of community life, these changes compound existing challenges and accelerate exclusion. Adaptation to these challenges is essential.

Challenge 2: The poor condition of streets, public spaces, and transportation is already isolating older people, making visiting friends and family and accessing services difficult.

Crumbling infrastructure and public spaces designed to prioritise cars over people create environments that are unwelcoming and hard to walk in or move through. Transportation that is infrequent, inaccessible, and unaffordable further limits the ability of older people to participate in community life, visit friends and family or go to a doctor or place of worship. This is especially the case in poorer communities where infrastructure and services have not been prioritised.

Challenge 3: A lack of green spaces, and the neglect of those that exist, deprives communities of places to gather, be active, and connect with the natural world.

Without well-maintained parks and outdoor spaces, people lack places to come together for shared activities, play sports, or find moments of peace and reflection. Declining biodiversity and access to local food sources can impact health and nutrition. The neglect of green spaces also drives away birds and small wildlife, weakening biodiversity and severing the connections between communities, nature, and the cultural traditions that are often rooted in the natural world.

Challenge 4: Economic and social exclusion are compounded by ageism leaving many older people isolated and disconnected from community life. Their voices are ignored and they are excluded from full participation in decision making that impacts their communities.

Poverty in older age and a lack of access to age-appropriate services can push older people to the margins, limiting their ability to participate in and contribute to their communities. These factors can also create a cultural and generational disconnection that sees a lifetime of knowledge and experience overlooked rather than valued by their communities.



Guiding frameworks

Existing frameworks seek to address these challenges independently of each other. However, inclusive community gardens provide a powerful example of how combining different approaches can deliver real impact.

What is ecosystem-based adaptation?

Ecosystem-based adaptation is an approach that harnesses the power of nature and biodiversity to help communities adapt to the impacts of climate change. It is a nature-based solution - such as creating green spaces, planting street trees, or developing community gardens - and builds the long-term resilience of communities in the face of a changing climate.

What are age-friendly cities and communities?

Age-friendly cities and communities are places intentionally designed to support older people to stay active, connected, and independent by ensuring that their physical environments, social services, and civic life are accessible and inclusive. The framework is built around eight domains of community life and encourages a participatory approach, actively involving older residents in shaping improvements to their own communities.

Together, these two frameworks are mutually reinforcing - age-friendly principles ensure that green and natural spaces are designed with the needs and voices of older people at their heart, while ecosystem-based adaptation ensures that those spaces actively strengthen the community's resilience to a changing climate, delivering benefits for everyone.

Delivering the Sustainable Development Goals

By implementing ideas adopting age-friendly cities and communities principles alongside eco-system- based adaptation approaches, communities can deliver on some of the key Sustainable Development Goals relevant to older people and others who are excluded from their communities. These include

- SDG 3 which calls for healthy lives and promotes well-being for all at all ages along with access to quality care services;
- SDG 10 seeks to reduce inequalities and to empower and include all people regardless of age;
- SDG 11 which aims to provide access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces; and
- SDG 13 calling for climate action that builds resilience and adaptive capacity, including among older people



Learning from community-led action in Mexico and Colombia

"The garden brings tranquillity, and those who come here can then take that tranquillity home with them. Tranquillity is not something you can buy."

Patricia, 65,
Mexico City, Mexico

"For me, the change was like night and day"

Antonio, 79,
Bogotá, Colombia

"I like that we work in a group, that it's not just one person tending the gardens, but that we're a group."

Ana Maria, 72,
Bogotá, Colombia

To better understand how social inclusion and climate resilience can be strengthened through inclusive nature-based solutions, HelpAge and Placemaking Mexico worked with community groups and gardens in the community of Brisas del Volador in Bogotá, Colombia and the Nuevos Horizontes community kitchen and garden in Mexico City, Mexico to enhance inclusion and ecosystem impact.

Community members led their own assessment to both identify local climate threats and recognise how social exclusion takes place. The community brainstormed nature-based and inclusion-focused improvements and activities that became a shared action plan to create a more welcoming and resilient community for all.

The community gardens in Bogotá and Mexico City demonstrate just how much is possible when older people lead community change. Community gardens offer neighbours a place to gather and socialise, reconnect with nature, and engage in physical activity that promotes healthy living. They are spaces where people can find relief from stress, anxiety, and depression through meaningful activity and social connection. They are also places where knowledge and experience accumulated over a lifetime can be shared across generations.

Over the following pages, we explore three key impacts that community members themselves talked about - and explain which specific features and improvements to the gardens helped the community realise those benefits.

→ Cultivating meaningful social connections

Inclusive community gardens as places for gathering, socialising and improved wellbeing

→ Harvesting and sharing skills and knowledge

Inclusive community gardens as places for sharing and harnessing knowledge and life experience

→ Rooting resilience and climate adaptation

Inclusive community gardens as places for climate adaptation and resilience strengthening

Cultivating meaningful social connections

Inclusive community gardens as places for gathering, socialising and improved wellbeing

Inclusive community gardens offer much more than a place to plant flowers and grow food. They are living spaces where people gather, build friendships, share knowledge, and feel part of something larger than themselves. For older people, they can provide a sense of purpose, routine and belonging that can be difficult to find elsewhere.

Across the gardens in Mexico City and Bogotá, older community members said that their relationship with their community gardens were deeply tied to personal well-being, community life, and the opportunity to actively contribute to something shared and meaningful.

How these benefits can be realised...

- **Raised garden beds** make it easier for older people to tend to the plants, remove weeds, harvest fruits, vegetables and herbs, and help in maintaining the garden.
- **Seating areas** provide opportunities for garden visitors to rest, socialise and participate in outdoor events and activities - make sure seating is physically accessible.
- **Shade and shelter** from the sun and rain, from trees or simple structures, means people can visit the gardens more often
- **Physical accessibility** is vital - Make the garden as physically accessible as possible - ramps, handrails - look at guidance. Handrails and clearly marked steps make navigating the gardens safer and more comfortable for all.
- **Smooth and level surfaces** where possible - however also avoid using concrete or asphalt which would cause rainwater to flood the area.
- **Signage** that is colourful, welcoming and inviting encouraged new people to visit the gardens as well as providing key information about the site.
- **Bathroom facilities** are essential for everyone. Provide toilet facilities within the garden if possible. If not, then provide toilet facilities nearby – perhaps there are existing public toilets, or you could approach a local business or school or church to see if they will agree to provide access. Signage pointing people towards the nearest bathrooms is essential in building confidence for people to visit the gardens regularly.
- **Programmes of events and activities,** including intergenerational activities, physical activities and community meals act to encourage people to visit, stay and participate in community gardens. These events and activities could include:
  - Tai Chi classes and Zumba sessions for older adults
  - Self-care and wellness workshops including meditation, mental health resilience and physical wellbeing
  - Creative activities including film showings, musical performances and story telling
  - Community meals using the food that the garden produces

"We don't just want this to be a space for older adults. We also want young people and grandchildren to get involved."

Patricia, 65,
Mexico City, Mexico

"I come here and clear my mind, I have a great time with my colleagues and working in the garden."

Cenaida, 78,
Bogotá, Colombia

"I live alone, and coming here makes me feel like I'm with family. This is a very pleasant and rewarding place for those of us who love nature."

Hugo, 78,
Mexico City, Mexico



Mental health and wellbeing

- ✓ **Connecting with others** underpins the mental health impact of community gardens. Gardens provide an opportunity to connect with others, share experiences, and form bonds. Community members said the gardens helped to 'activate their minds'. Watching plants grow, bear fruit and attract insects, birds and bees had a direct positive impact on emotional wellbeing.
- ✓ **Routine and purpose** are significant benefits, with gatherings at set times giving community members reasons to leave the house punctually and bringing welcome change to daily routines, helping them avoid isolation.
- ✓ **Respite from caring responsibilities** is another important theme. A community member described the garden as her main source of relief from caring for her husband with cognitive impairment — attending allowed her to clear her mind and reconnect with her community. Another said it helped her worry less about the difficulties her children and grandchildren were facing.

Inclusive sense of community

- ✓ **Shared experiences build social resilience.** Community gardens bring people together around a common purpose, creating bonds that extend beyond the garden itself and strengthen the fabric of the wider community. People spoke about their communities having lived through hardship together, and the garden as a place that held that shared history.
- ✓ **Welcoming spaces for all.** Community gardens can provide an accessible entry point for people who are isolated, marginalised or facing difficult circumstances including those living alone, people with physical or cognitive conditions, and those affected by social exclusion or violence. The informal, activity-based nature of garden participation means that community members can engage at their own pace, without the pressure of more structured social settings.

Encouraging community action

- ✓ **Sparking wider action and commitment**, involvement in the gardens inspired community members to contribute beyond their own participation — building skills, strengthening collective resilience and drawing in new groups over time. Gardens can play a fundamental role in community building, strengthening intergenerational bonds and promoting environmental practices adapted to the various abilities and capacities of older people.

Nutrition and community meals

- ✓ **Access to fresh, affordable food** is a practical but significant impact, with the gardens enabling community meals prepared from freshly harvested produce and providing community members with access to fruit and vegetables at a lower cost — including tomatoes, cilantro and cucumbers.

Intergenerational interaction and cohesion

- ✓ **Bringing generations together,** older community members spoke enthusiastically about the potential of the gardens to strengthen intergenerational relationships. Many expressed a strong ambition to involve local children from a young age, seeing great potential in helping them build a love for nature and gardening - and recognising that doing so would also help sustain the gardens for the future.

Connecting to other community activities

- ✓ **Gardens can be part of a broader system of support** when located near community centres and other community assets. In Mexico City, the Nuevos Horizontes garden sits within a community centre that also hosts a dining room, health clinic, gym and sports facilities - and community members described the garden as a natural complement to these services, drawing in people who might initially come for another reason and connecting different groups within the same community.

Harvesting skills and knowledge

Inclusive community gardens as places for sharing and harnessing knowledge and life experience

Lifelong learning is an important element of dignity and wellbeing in older age and older people bring a lifetime of knowledge, experience and memory to community gardens. Community gardens provide a space where that knowledge is valued, shared and put to use. From traditional agricultural practices to medicinal plant remedies passed down through generations, inclusive community gardens can act as living repositories of community wisdom that might otherwise be lost.

In Mexico City and Bogotá, community members described their gardens as places of active learning and exchange — where knowledge flows in both directions, and where older people are recognised not just as participants but as experts and teachers in their own right.

"I feel great because I really enjoy getting out of the house, being with my colleagues and learning other things I didn't know before."

Cenaida, 78,
Bogotá, Colombia

"Having this contact with nature is incredible. I've learned to better understand plant uses — which are medicinal and which are edible."

Marina, 62,
Mexico City, Mexico

"I've learned a lot; many things stay with you: the lessons from the teachers, from the gardening groups, and also how to make the raised beds."

Antonio, 79,
Bogotá, Colombia



Workshop on macerated herbs, oils and herbal preparations — Bogotá, Colombia

In the garden in Colombia, a workshop on traditional herbal remedies brought together community members to share and document knowledge that had been passed down through generations. Using locally grown plants, participants explored the preparation of macerated herbs, oils and natural remedies — including the use of pure honey for healing and cosmetics, and traditional preservation techniques for plantain and dried oranges.

The workshop powerfully illustrated the role older community members can play as knowledge holders. Participants left having agreed to establish a community record of ancestral knowledge — capturing it through recordings and written accounts — and to increase the holistic use of medicinal plants in the garden going forward. What began as a single session became a catalyst for preserving and celebrating the community's collective memory.

Lifelong learning

✓ **Learning doesn't stop with age.** Community members described their gardens as places that kept their minds active and opened up new areas of knowledge — from understanding the medicinal properties of plants to learning new techniques from workshops and from each other. People described learning from their peers, from younger generations and from community leaders, in an environment where everyone had something to contribute.

Reconnecting with indigenous knowledge

✓ **Indigenous and traditional knowledge** is at particular risk of being lost. Community gardens can provide a vital space for different understandings and uses of plants, vegetables and fruits to be shared, documented and appreciated — keeping that knowledge alive for future generations.

✓ **Gardens can be a bridge back to the past.** In Colombia, community gardeners spoke about how participation provided an opportunity to reconnect with nature and agriculture, and with childhoods spent working the land before their families moved to the city. The gardens gave them a context in which to share and apply their long held knowledge and experience.

Strengthening community capacity for action

✓ **Participation builds wider community skills and confidence.** In Colombia, community members described how working with the local authority on planning improvements to the gardens strengthened their understanding of processes that could help them advocate for further changes in the future — turning garden participation into a foundation for broader civic engagement.

How these benefits can be realised...

➔ **Spaces for learning** should be sheltered to provide shade and protection from the hot sun and rain, with tables and chairs and bathroom facilities nearby.

➔ **Workshops and other opportunities for knowledge sharing** are an essential way of activating community gardens, encouraging participating and harnessing knowledge and experience. Topics could include:

- Traditional and indigenous practices including macerated herbs, oils and herbal preparations
- Nutrition talks that introduce fruit, vegetables and herbs produced in the gardens as part of a broader balanced and healthy diet
- Knowledge sharing on community resilience
- Community ancestral knowledge sharing and record-keeping through recordings and written accounts
- Creative activities including drawing, painting and simple pottery
- Workshops around woodworking and general garden maintenance

➔ **Workshops on advocacy and civic engagement** including developing advocacy strategies and building relationships between older people, community leaders and local policy makers will build confidence and skills to demand change.

Rooting resilience and climate adaptation

Inclusive community gardens as places for climate adaptation and resilience strengthening

Inclusive community gardens can actively help communities adapt to the environmental challenges they face. From reducing urban heat to restoring biodiversity and improving air quality, gardens generate environmental benefits in the neighbourhoods where they are planted. They also nurture a deeper connection with nature among community members, strengthening environmental awareness and sustainable practices that extend beyond the garden itself.

In Mexico and Colombia, community members described witnessing tangible changes to their local environment - and feeling a growing sense of responsibility for protecting it.

"Birds we didn't know have arrived, along with new animal species, even squirrels. Biodiversity has increased."

Jose Miguel, 74, Mexico City, Mexico

"I've learned what types of plants to sow, what they're for, and how often to water them."

Patricia, 65, Mexico City, Mexico

"I have learned to respect all forms of life, understanding that each one has a role on this planet."

Hugo, 78, Mexico City, Mexico

How these benefits can be realised...

- **Diversified planting** strengthens local biodiversity by introducing a wider variety of plants, flowers, and shrubs that provide habitat and food for birds, insects, and small wildlife.
- **Growing food** in the garden gives community members access to fresh vegetables, fruit, and herbs, improving nutrition and food security while reconnecting people with where their food comes from.
- **Green walls and fences** bring nature into every corner of the garden, providing additional planting space, improving air quality, and creating shade and shelter for people and wildlife alike.
- **Reclaim vacant and derelict land,** especially places with hard surfaces made of concrete or asphalt, whether large or small, by transforming it into productive green space with planting.
- **Rainwater harvesting** captures and stores rainwater for use in the garden, reducing reliance on mains water, lowering costs, and helping the community adapt to increasingly unpredictable rainfall.
- **Workshops and activities focused on nature** give community members the opportunity to learn new skills, share knowledge passed down through generations, and deepen their connection with the natural world. Themes can include:
  - Documenting and sharing knowledge about the environmental role of plants, insects and wildlife
  - Teaching, sharing and encouraging community members to replicate sustainable practices at home such as window gardens



Renewing connection with nature

- ✓ **Gardens reawaken environmental awareness and responsibility towards the natural world.** Community members described developing a deeper understanding of the role that plants, insects and animals play in the ecosystem around them - and a greater appreciation for practices that support rather than deplete it. Environmental practices can be taken home and into the broader community and community members described changing their own habits.

Producing healthy organic food

- ✓ **Growing food together encourages healthier eating habits.** Having a direct connection to where food comes from - watching it grow, tending it and harvesting it - naturally deepens community members' interest in and appreciation of fresh, whole foods. The gardens strengthened community members' intake of vitamins and minerals while fostering a greater understanding of what they are eating and where it comes from.
- ✓ **Access to organic, chemical-free produce** is a significant benefit for communities where fresh, high-quality food can be hard to come by or expensive. Food grown in the gardens is free from harmful pesticides and chemicals, offering community members a source of fruit and vegetables that is as nutritious and natural as possible.

Strengthening local biodiversity

- ✓ **The return of wildlife** was one of the most celebrated changes observed after the gardens were established. Species not previously seen in the area began to appear - including bees, bumblebees, butterflies, hummingbirds and cardinals - signalling a meaningful recovery of local biodiversity.

Harnessing rainwater

- ✓ **Rainwater harvesting** systems provided a more secure supply of water for community members to care for plants, vegetables and flowers, especially during periods of drought.

Pockets of fresh air

- ✓ **Respite from heavily polluted roads.** Community members described feeling that the gardens produced oxygen and improved the quality of the air around them - a particularly significant benefit in dense urban areas where green space is scarce.
- ✓ **Plants with air-purifying properties** including mother-in-law's tongue and lavender were deliberately cultivated, with community members noting their role in cleaning and regenerating the air in the immediate environment.

Reducing the risk of localised flooding

- ✓ **Permeable soil absorbs excess rainfall.** In urban areas where concrete and paving dominate, heavy rain has nowhere to go - overwhelming drainage systems and causing localised flooding. By replacing impermeable surfaces with planted soil, community gardens play a small but meaningful role in managing surface water and reducing flood risk in the immediate area.

Shade and cool against urban heat

- ✓ **Providing natural cooling and shade**, green spaces play a critical role in keeping communities cool. Replacing concrete and paved surfaces with plants, soil and vegetation directly reduces the urban heat island effect - hard surfaces absorb and retain heat, while plants and soil absorb moisture and provide natural cooling. Trees and other tall plants and simple structures or sails provide shade and further reduce ambient temperatures - a practical and increasingly important response to extreme heat that disproportionately affects older people and other vulnerable groups.



Recommendations for action

For older people

- **Organise the community.** Bring neighbours together, including younger people, around shared challenges and shared assets - a community that acts collectively is far more powerful than groups attempting to act alone - and the impact of your collective work is more likely to include and benefit everyone.
- **Recognise your knowledge, experience and agency.** The knowledge, memory and relationships older people hold are resources no outside expert can replicate and are essential for strengthening community resilience. Your voice is legitimate and valuable.
- **Look for existing strengths and assets in the community that can be built upon.** Identify neglected green spaces, underused land, or existing community groups that could be the foundation for something new. Small, locally rooted initiatives can grow into powerful change.

For national and local governments

- **Engage with local groups but let them lead.** Communities already understand their own challenges. Listen first, understand what support they require - and resist the urge to design solutions from the top down.
- **Provide funding and other resourcing.** Low-cost, community-led initiatives can deliver significant social and climate benefits. Small grants and in-kind support can unlock big impact and are a great first step.
- **Support with permits and paperwork.** Bureaucratic barriers - planning permissions, land access, liability requirements - can stop community initiatives before they start. Streamline processes and actively help communities navigate them so they can get to work and deliver the change everyone wants to see.

For civil society and other stakeholders

- **Develop a strategy with a clear action plan.** Document what your community is already doing, identify gaps, and create a shared roadmap that links community gardens and other nature-based solutions to wider social inclusion and climate adaptation strategies - and outline a clear path to getting there.
- **Build broad alliances.** The most resilient initiatives connect across sectors - bringing together community groups, NGOs, local businesses, health services and faith organisations around a common goal.
- **Push local and national governments to act.** Advocate for policies and funding that recognise community-led, nature-based approaches as legitimate and effective climate adaptation. Make sure the voices of older people and others in the community are at the centre of urban planning decisions.

Further resources

As part of this project, HelpAge, alongside its project partners, produced a number of resources to support communities and policymakers to take action. These include an Implementors Guide and Case Studies of the community gardens in Mexico and Colombia. You can find all of this content and more online at:

www.helpage.org/america-latina-y-el-caribe/adaptacion-basada-en-ecosistemas/



The Global EbA Fund is a catalytic funding mechanism for supporting innovative approaches to EbA to create enabling environments for its mainstreaming and scaling up. The fund is financed by International Climate Initiative (IKI) of the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV) and comanaged by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and partners. Learn more about the Fund and apply for a grant through the website: https://globalebafund.org







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