

CLEVER Cities Podcast

CLEVER City Quito

Introduction

A big hello to everyone listening to this podcast, the aim of which is to offer a space for discussion about the environment. My name's Gabriela Galindo and I'd like to extend a warm welcome to all of you. CLEVER Cities is a consortium of cities and academic institutions that promotes nature-based solutions worldwide. So, without more ado, I'd like to welcome Daniel Bonilla, CLEVER Cities representative in Quito.

Podcast Transcript English

Hello Dani. Tell us more. What is CLEVER Cities?

Daniel: Well, as you've already said, CLEVER Cities is a group of cities and academic or technical bodies that are promoting nature-based solutions as a response to the need for climate change adaptation. Although this isn't a comprehensive solution, nature is wise and provides us with benefits which, if properly combined with classic infrastructure, can bring great benefits in terms of reducing the effects of climate on Quito, such as floods, landslides, and heatwaves. The project began in 2018 and is due to end this year. In Quito it is seeking to promote nature-based solutions as part of local regulations. This activity is funded by the European Commission and, under the leadership of CLEVER Cities in Europe, we are achieving the project's overall objective, with a particular focus on community engagement.

The concept of "Nature-Based Solutions" or NBS refers to actions aimed at addressing environmental, social and economic challenges from a sustainable development perspective. So tell us, Dani, what are the benefits of these "nature-based solutions"?

Daniell: There are so many. NBS themselves are an excellent way of achieving sustainable development. In other words, they have environmental, economic and social benefits.

Environmentally, NBS help to protect biodiversity; green corridors can be created to connect parks and protected areas; they protect water sources and absorb the greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

Socially, NBS promote greater access to green areas, reduce vulnerability to extreme events such as rains/flooding and even exposure to UV rays, something that is especially common in our country. And, in economic terms, we can mention low-maintenance economic solutions: promoting urban

vegetable gardens, for example, which are considered a NBS. The population can save money on their food purchases or even generate a source of income if they sell the produce. Other benefits include improved health, reduced wind speed, greater sources of food and shelter for animals and insects.

In this regard, work has been done in the San Enrique de Velasco neighbourhood, situated in the north-west of Quito's urban perimeter. This neighbourhood was selected because of its hillside location and because it has general features common to other Quito neighbourhoods. We work together with the local residents to co-design processes, i.e. involving the community in imagining their neighbourhood with trees, plants and other nature-based solutions that would bring beauty to the area while at the same time achieving the co-benefits of nature-based solutions.

Quito has a Quito Climate Action Plan (PACQ 2050) as a climate adaptation measure. How do nature-based solutions link into this plan?

Daniel: Quito's Climate Action Plan sets out goals and projects that will mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and help us adapt to the effects of climate change. NBS are internationally considered to be an adaptation measure, and this means that despite the changes in climate that are expected in Quito, such as episodes of intense rainfall, drought or high temperatures, the local citizens and nature would not feel these effects to such an extent and would have greater resilience to extreme events. Within the Quito Climate Action Plan, NBS are considered a measure that can promote eco-efficient neighbourhoods while at the same time engaging citizens in the design of such projects by means of a multi-stakeholder approach to governance. This means that these actors thus take ownership of the measures, which is good because the municipal authorities should not be alone in taking responsibility for this kind of project. But for this to be possible, people need to have a better understanding of NBS. They need to be empowered and, to do this, we need to share knowledge of these concepts. This is where UrbanbyNature comes in.

UrbanbyNature is a platform that forms part of the CLEVER Cities concept. Tell us a bit more about this initiative?

Daniel: It is part of CLEVER Cities, it's a regional knowledge platform at the South American level that enjoys ICLEI's collaboration and coordination with the aim of bringing together Latin American cities that want to share NBS experiences that could be replicated in other cities around the region. It was launched in April last year in Quito, under Quito's municipal leadership. It has been an important experience as we have been able to find out what other cities in the region are doing and what we could replicate in Quito. Five webinars were held throughout the second half of 2022 and the start (February) of 2023 at which several South American cities shared their experiences and success stories, including Quito and the company Yes Innovation.

Yes Innovation... this is a strategic partner of CLEVER Cities, right? But what does its role involve?

Daniel: There are cities involved in CLEVER Cities and also academic and other private entities; in the case of Quito, it's not only the municipal authorities that are participating but also a company called Yes Innovation. They act as our technical advisers for the project; they guide us on issues of standards, examples and other experiences that might be useful for this project.

Thank you, Dani. CLEVER Cities clearly has a very important strategic partner in Yes Innovation. In this regard, I would now like to welcome two experts and co-founders of this company: Grace Yépez and Nicolás Salmon.

The following discussion was led by Gabriela Galindo and Daniel Bonilla.

Gabriela: Welcome to you both! What does Yes Innovation's role as strategic partner in CLEVER Cities entail?

Nicolás: Hello! Yes Innovation is an architectural and urban planning company based in Quito. We are working on an approach aimed at implementing NBS in the country's cities. Our work ranges from research like CLEVER Cities, with its international partners, right down to its local application in urban design and spatial planning projects.

Grace: The process has been a long one, ongoing since 2018 when we worked on a competition with them. There have been highs and lows, difficulties due to the pandemic. We were lucky to be able to implement different strategies for working with the local neighbourhood: workshops, street design, co-design with the children. It was interesting because it enabled us to reach a large number of people and understand how they experienced living in the neighbourhood. It was a complex process to produce the designs because there was no prospect of implementation and this meant the local people's interest was limited. But the quest to improve their neighbourhood nevertheless helped to imagine San Enrique de Velasco from a more advanced viewpoint.

Daniel: Thanks Grace. Based on your experience over the years, what parameters do you think need to be taken into account to ensure the effective implementation of a nature-based solutions project in Quito?

Grace: It is important to be able to bring different complementary disciplines together. To understand that spatial planning from a local solution-based design is now important. The fields of biology, the environmental sciences, as well as ecological engineering and urban planning can all also incorporate these social dimensions of awareness and the power of nature into their ecosystem services and contributions to the urban environment. The most important thing I've found, though, from this experience, is that effective implementation relies on the possibility of being able to put the projects into practice so that the people can see the results and can start to play an active role in these solutions, assessing the extent to which NBS is able to meet the challenges. These are the parameters for effective implementation.

Gabriela: The project has its origins in Europe. In fact, the European Commission is funding it, and Quito is the only city in Latin America to form part of CLEVER Cities. Nicolás, what has CLEVER Cities Europe contributed to project implementation in Quito?

Nicolás: Such projects are an interesting opportunity to learn, to exchange experiences, to observe one's own practices and compare them with those of other cities. And these practices are encouraged by the project itself, through its product chain, because it requires the creation of new processes, pushing the team into new fields. This is something we've learned from the last five years. The co-creation methods that were implemented in Thamesmead, London, were significant because they sought other alternatives, other practices, and these were hugely inspiring and gave rise to some very interesting results. We hope that these types of practice can be tested here in other projects in the future.

Gabriela: How can academia and research centres be involved as key actors in promoting nature-based solutions?

Grace: Academia's role is to generate knowledge, to measure, contrast and evaluate, and this is what we expect from universities. Scientific knowledge of NBS in our context is scarce, sometimes almost non-existent. We hope that academic research will be able to grasp this issue fully, especially in terms of evaluating

local solutions for adjusting the design. Academics need to create possibilities for exchanging what they know with the local people not only in terms of the knowledge they possess through NBS implementation projects but also through follow-up with the university and holding a databank of information that can facilitate decision-making in urban planning. And yet academia is not so good at generating these projects and it is perhaps timely to ask whether academia needs to revisit these interests in terms of its research because NBS require multidisciplinary research and the university should perhaps be working on these issues.

Daniel: Grace and Nicolás, I would like to close this discussion by asking each of you to share some lessons learned from the CLEVER Cities experience that could be applied to similar projects. Daniel: Thank you very much Grace and Nicolás for your contributions, which have helped us find out a little more about this commitment to care and conservation of the environment in the Metropolitan District of Quito (DMQ).

Nicolás: As we said earlier, the co-creation work was somewhat complicated in Quito because of a lack of prospects in the San Enrique de Velasco neighbourhood. This was a five-year project and this meant we had to constantly come up with new processes to interest the people, to be able to get them involved and achieve constructive processes. But we learned that the power of the community in a city like Quito is great; organised communities can be strong and very significant things can be achieved when there is the necessary ambition. We believe the municipal authorities are interested in working on projects born out of the community. Locally, community engagement is highly dependent on the strength of neighbourhood representation and this can form an obstacle because organisation and resources are sometimes lacking, resulting in weakness. In the case of CLEVER Cities, we undertook some more independent work with the representatives and neighbours of the San Enrique de Velasco neighbourhood and this bore interesting results. We hope that all this planning, design and co-design work will, in the end, result in concrete actions because the neighbourhood deserves it.

Grace: Co-creation only works when the projects are real and the end justifies convening the local people. This is something we have learned because simply co-creating plans doesn't help much but co-creating solutions that can actually be implemented makes a difference and really shows the power of co-creation in the planning of new cities.

Daniel: Thank you very much Grace and Nicolás for your contributions, which have helped us find out a little more about this commitment to care and conservation of the environment in the Metropolitan District of Quito (DMQ).

Gabriela: The San Enrique de Velasco neighbourhood is located in the northwest of Quito, in the Zonal Administration of La Delicia, and occupies an area of some 48 hectares. The San Enrique de Velasco neighbourhood is located in the northwest of Quito, in the Zonal Administration of La Delicia, and occupies an area of some 48 hectares. It borders the El Condado neighbourhood and is located in the foothills of the Pichincha mountain. It was chosen because it is representative of the typical hillside neighbourhoods that exist in Quito in terms of their geographic features, as well as their vulnerability to natural disasters such as landslides and floods. It is also bordered by two streams (the San Antonio and Quebrada Grande streams). That said, we wanted to give a voice to the people of the community, to Margot Salazar and Rolando Huilca, residents of San Enrique de Velasco, who are here to talk to us. Welcome, Margot, could you tell us about your experience of co-creation in San Enrique de Velasco during CLEVER Cities?

Margot: It was a very pleasant experience because my neighbours and I participated in this project and there was collaboration and a great deal of excitement as our street was being reforested as a way of improving the neighbourhood environment.

Daniel: Rolando, welcome to you, too. Could you tell us, based on this experience, what your vision of the neighbourhood is for the future? Do you think it is possible to think about parks? Trees? What would you like to see in your neighbourhood in terms of what you've learned through CLEVER Cities?

Rolando: Well, for example, I'd like to see more green spaces. I like nature, trees, parks; we still have dirt streets and it would be good if they could be paved, if there were kerbs.

Gabriela: It's clearly very important to involve local people and citizens in the decision-making for this type of project. It is also important to give value to the needs of the neighbourhoods. What recommendations do you have in terms of what other neighbourhoods should do if they are interested in this type of project?

Margot: My advice would be to find out more about the projects that CLEVER Cities is implementing because they are of benefit to the community. Sometimes people's lack of knowledge makes them unwilling to implement things that are of benefit to the community. In this case, protecting nature for the benefit of the community, as the main objective, is something we need to do in all neighbourhoods. It is beneficial for us all to mitigate risks.

Daniel: Thank you Margot and Rolando. I'd just like to draw a few conclusions from the discussions we have had today:

- 1) It is interesting to find out more about how citizens see nature, what they expect from it, and what benefits this symbiosis can bring, because taking care of nature means taking care of ourselves.
- 2) Nature-based solutions, while a new concept, are not complex and, indeed, are something that has been done in the city. But we need to place greater importance and value on the benefits of thinking beyond concrete and going back to nature a little more.
- 3) We need to continue promoting this message to citizens as it is important to re-engage with the importance of local knowledge in the neighbourhoods, knowledge of their reality, of their needs. They are the people who will benefit in the end if they take care of local nature and, without their support, no project – be it NBS or any other – will be successful.
- 4) The local authorities need to take a lead in promoting NBS as part of climate adaptation measures. As we have explained, these form part of the city's long-term plans, such as the Quito Climate Action Plan. In the long term, this will help us to improve our quality of life.

Gabriela: Thank you very much, Dani. And many thanks to everyone who has joined us, and to our interviewees. Dani, I'm going to hand the floor to you to close this discussion, our first "Urban Green" programme. For my part, can I just say that it has been a pleasure and I look forward to the next time.

Daniel: Thanks very much, Gaby! As this is the first programme, I think it's a very important experience and so great to be able to bring NBS closer to local people. Let's hope we will be able to talk about these issues again in the future and that Urban Green will provide a space in which to promote the work that CLEVER Cities and NBS are doing. Lovely to meet you, too, and see you next time.