

Interview

Multistakeholder governance and community engagement in urban greening

Inedit Interview with Simone Borelli

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Simone Borelli leads the Forestry Division at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO-ONU). He is one of the creators of the Tree Cities of the World Program and was invited to a conference at the “Congresso Brasileiro e Ibero-Americano de Arborização Urbana. Urban Forestry in the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration”, in sept-oct 2021. This event took place at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, and was promoted by the Graduate Program in Natural Resources (PGRN-UFMS), in partnership with the Graduate Program in Local Development, from the Catholic University D. Bosco (PGDL-UCDB) and the Brazilian Society of Urban Forestry (SBAU), the Brazil Chapter of International Society of Arboriculture (ISA). The interview was conducted after the event ended and reflects its commitment to the theme of green infrastructure and community involvement.

Guaraldo: What are, in your opinion, the main obstacles to including GI (green infrastructure) in city governance models and government agendas?

Borelli: A first important obstacle for a better integration of GI in governance models and agendas is the overall perception is that green infrastructure (e.g. urban forests, parks but also other types of GI) is a cost and not an investment. It is important therefore to build business cases for public investment demonstrating that GI is in many cases more efficient than gray infrastructure and has a wide range of co-benefits. Lack of dialogue among different departments and the different levels of administration is often also an obstacle and all efforts should be made to ensure that all the relevant stakeholders are sitting around the table. This dialogue should of course extend beyond the administration to encompass civil society. GI is a long-term investment, and it is also important to develop a long term vision to ensure that once established any type of intervention is properly maintained beyond the electoral cycle.

Guaraldo: What, in your analysis, have been the most efficient local policies in recent decades? What models can be adopted on a broader scale?

Borelli: Among the best-known cities for their effective local policies and vision, I would include Singapore, Melbourne, New York and Vancouver. All the cities have developed inclusive visions of how green infrastructure could improve the health and wellbeing of their citizens and have developed urban forestry plans accordingly. Of course there are many other cities that have developed very efficient plans. One size does not fit all and it important to foster exchanges through networks such as Tree Cities of the World to learn from each other and share knowledge on possible approaches that could be adapted to the local reality.

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Guaraldo: In developing countries, where we find situations of greater vulnerability and social inequality, how could green infrastructure be included and what would they have to respond to in terms of reducing these same problems (inequalities and vulnerabilities)?

Borelli: First of all, it is important to adopt innovative approaches to promote citizen engagement. Tools like Block by Block could be used to ensure that the most vulnerable can voice their concerns and are involved in co-design processes. An important emphasis should also be given to the distribution of green public spaces throughout the city to ensure that everybody has equal access to the ecosystem services provided. According to target 7 of SDG 11, by 2030 cities should provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, particularly for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities

Choice of species is also important and different groups might have interest in having different types of trees in their vicinity. For example it might be important to include a good percentage of fruit trees in areas with a more vulnerable population.

Guaraldo: How do you see the current role of universities in promoting action/reaction and protagonism in communities?

Borelli: Universities should be promoting Action Research around questions related to GI, within a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry, involving the researcher and organizational stakeholders, promoting organizational learning, systems' improvement, and generating valid knowledge.

This approach should also be used to establish the "real" value of green infrastructure including different social, economic and environmental values that are generated by the different interventions.

Transdisciplinary teams would also play an important role in supporting the planning, design and management of GI as well as support placemaking/placekeeping processes at the community level.

Finally, universities could play an important role in "packaging" the results of their research to provide clear and simple messages to decision makers.

Guaraldo: Which would be your recommendations for local policy makers and citizens to improve urban areas with green infrastructure?

Borelli: First, decision on GI should be fully integrated in urban planning and clear indication of where and how to preserve existing GI or new one developed should become an integral part of masterplans.

While zoning is probably already included in many of these plans, it is important to ensure that it is enforced to avoid encroachment on existing green areas and reduce land use conflicts.

In view of the limitations of public budgets, it is also important to explore possible public-private partnerships that could contribute to the creation and maintenance of green spaces and other GI.

Finally, as I already mentioned a few times, the dialogue between stakeholders should be continuous, with a view to ensure that decisions on the planning, design and management of GI intervention are shared and that the different parties fully understand why a decision is taken (e.g. cutting some trees in a neighbourhood), what the impact of that decision will be and how those impacts will be mitigated.

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