

Contribution to the 7th Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VII) on the **Economies of Equality and Care**

# **Towards educating and caring cities:** (re)considering public spaces and facilities to bolster learning and community ties

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What do or can local governments do to promote policies that make educating and caring cities a reality? How can we ensure that the urban environment and public spaces increase opportunities to educate (ourselves) and care (for ourselves)? What role do and can educational, cultural and civic facilities play in bolstering the social fabric and community ties? These three questions are not rhetorical, secondary, or territory-specific. These are issues being faced by cities in many parts of the world because they are related to finding solutions to major challenges on a local and global scale: ever-growing urban and social inequalities, the climate emergency, social isolation and democratic fragility. As Yayo Herrero recalls in *City, Care and Education* (2023, 7-9), cities are deeply affected by this multidimensional crisis: cold spells or heatwaves, food and energy dependence, difficulty in accessing housing, pollution, individualism, lack of protection or abandonment are affecting growing sectors of the population.

Here we will be sharing some reflections and cases that highlight **the social importance of public spaces and facilities as learning environments and also as social infrastructures to make community life possible** from a vision of a caring city and an educating city (and vice versa). We will show how the level to which shared spaces in our neighbourhoods and cities can be educating and caring. And we will see their relevance in contributing to care based on social and environmental co-responsibility, facilitating spaces where people can live together, find support and weave community ties. We know that all this is essential to build cities that are fairer, more inclusive and proudly diverse, and more sustainable and resilient in the midst of an eco-social transition.

# 1. Local policies: what do or can local governments do to promote policies that make educating cities and co-responsibility in care a reality?

## 1.1. Care and education go hand in hand

Care and education are not the same thing, but when they go hand in hand we make headway as educating and caring cities. The **sympiosis between education and care** is clearly expressed with the premise that **"the educating city must recognise, enhance and stimulate care and make society as a whole jointly responsible for it"**. This fragment of the [Charter of Educating Cities](#), which more than five hundred cities around the world have signed, is also complemented by the concepts of interdependence and the life cycle: "people are interdependent. Without care we cannot survive. Throughout life, but especially at certain moments of the life cycle such as early childhood, old age, periods of illness, and for people with functional diversity, we need to receive care on which our survival and physical and mental wellness depend".

When we talk about care, we do so not just thinking about care services. We do so with a broader vision, at least, with three **complementary dimensions: self-care, caring for other people and caring for the environment and the planet**. What's more, talking about care from a feminist approach implies reflecting on its recognition and redistribution (Fraser and Honneth, 2006). In other words, to claim that **there are vital needs to receive care and that this is an essential task that cannot be solved only by families or only by the market**. Making headway in the democratisation of care tasks calls for a bolstered collective organisation and public support in order to recognise them and distribute them better, so that they do not fall unjustly and invisibly on women, as if it were a moral obligation.

Women take on not just the most unprotected and precarious jobs, but also a disproportionate responsibility in terms of unpaid care tasks, which ultimately hinders their entry into the labour market and exerts huge pressure on those who have to maintain the living conditions of the family nucleus in increasingly precarious societies. **The fragility of the social state and the feminisation of the responsibility for care in urban societies are linked, triggering a care crisis that brings about new inequalities** in terms of the quantity and quality of care received by the population that cannot afford care in the market (Herrero, 2023).

For all these reasons, "**care cannot be just another sector of municipal policy or a peripheral issue of women and their issues**. Care should act as a moving force to challenge the world we live in and as a guiding force in the eco-social transition policy based on the sustainability of life" (Orozco, 2023).

When we talk about education, we do so thinking beyond the school walls and classroom time. We understand it as the lifelong educational opportunities offered by cities, neighbourhoods and educating communities. **For citizens to take advantage of this diversity of educational opportunities with equity, we need to place the emphasis not only on learning, but also on well-being and, therefore, on care**. This involves schools because it is increasingly obvious that they are not just spaces for education, but also spaces for life, harmonious living and community creation.

What's more, education (inside and outside the classrooms) has the duty to incorporate a perspective of educating for the sustainability of life, fostering ecological literacy, nurturing values of cooperation and care, and **educating citizens capable of imagining and building desirable futures with social and environmental justice, instead of reproducing unsustainable models that endanger the viability of life on the planet** (Herrero, 2022).

## 1.2. Learning how to care for others and for ourselves

Beyond the transfer of academic knowledge, **many schools and cultural, civic or community centres are focusing more on social and gender equity, intergenerational ties or empathy, i.e., key values related to care as a shared goal**. A more human and supportive approach stimulates emotional education, engagement in caring for the environment and democratic participation, with the goal of creating a critical citizenship committed to collective well-being and the common good from childhood.

Likewise, there are more and more proposals that are promoting the **co-creation of learning experiences in non-segregated settings, with a social mix and with an inclusive view of diversities**: ages, origins, functional ability, gender, etc. In increasingly diverse cities and communities, openness is making it possible to incorporate plural knowledge and recognise experiences that have usually been made invisible in formal teaching spaces. Intergenerational and intercultural educational and cultural proposals are boosting dialogue between different generations and cultures and are key to preventing forms of racism or ageism or other overly common forms of discrimination and violence. In short, **more**

**cohesive communities that remind us that caring and educating are deeply intertwined practices.**

### 1.3. Care for caregivers (too)

To illustrate these practices and policies, it is worth highlighting some interesting cases with a holistic vision of a caring and an educating city to respond publicly to these vital needs. Due to its size and scope, it is worth mentioning the [Manzanas del Cuidado](#) policy in Bogotá (Colombia), which **provides caregivers with time and free services of all kinds (legal, psychological, employment, community laundry, etc.), leisure options (sports, cultural, etc.) and training**, all in areas with public services such as schools and parks within a thirty-minute walk. The major goal is for caregivers to **"fulfil the dreams they put on hold due to the burden of care work"**, such as education and lifelong learning. In the meantime, their sons or daughters can share an educational and collective care environment.

Along these lines, the medium-sized city of Villa Carlos Paz (Argentina) is moving forward with the [Co-caring, the right to care in equality](#) strategy. Here, they also propose policies to seek the **holistic well-being of both care receivers and caregivers, fostering access to services, resources and time with an emphasis on situations of social isolation and poverty**, trying to dissipate these situations with training opportunities.

### 1.4. Caring for the environment

Aside from these policies focused on caregivers, as we said, we shouldn't forget the dimension of caring for the environment. In this sense, programmes such as [Pimp My Yard](#) in Katowice (Poland) provide examples of how to **educate citizens about the care of community spaces**, with ecological solutions and stimulating interpersonal relationships between neighbours. Or also [the humanisation and naturalisation of outdoor school spaces](#) in Cascais (Portugal), with participatory processes and training for educational communities on "Natural Learning" to bolster education for the sustainability of life.

## 2. Public spaces: how can we ensure that the urban environment increases opportunities to educate (ourselves) and care (for ourselves)?

With the pandemic and lockdowns still a recent memory, we can easily understand – from our own experience – **how important face-to-face contact is and that there are many special things that only happen when we are physically sharing space together**. These are seemingly small but very important interactions in social terms that take place in the urban environment, outdoors, in public spaces. In this sense, **there are three key concepts: versatility, liveability and gameplay**.

### 2.1. Versatility and liveability to create community

Promoting the use of public spaces, in streets, squares and parks, is a way of generating a sense of belonging and ownership by citizens and, therefore, better **ways of caring for, stimulating and diversifying uses beyond the original ones**. Versatility refers to the versatility of functions and the ability of spaces to seamlessly adapt to different uses and needs. The liveability of spaces is the characteristic that makes them pleasant, safe and suitable for the needs of people: spaces to be lived in and settings to enjoy (which require shade, greenery, benches, fountains, etc.) and not just spaces for transit and mobility.

We know that urban planning and mobility are not gender-neutral (Muxí 2019). The design and the male-heavy narrative of urban space have generated spatial and temporal segregation where streets and public spaces were associated with productive work, cars and men, while the home, reproduction and family life were associated with women (Kail, 2023). Therefore, from a gender and care perspective, it is urgent to rethink urban models so that they respond to the diversity of human needs and facilitate daily life when organising the criteria for sharing public spaces. **A more inclusive and less segregated environment is a necessary for it to be more democratic**. It's not about making cities just for women or for children or for the challenge of demographic ageing, but thinking about and (re)designing inclusive urban environments for everyone throughout their lives and for their ever-changing, individual, social and ecological needs.

In the words of Francesco Tonucci, "if a city is hostile to childhood, it is hostile to all its inhabitants. Therefore, **if we develop accessible public spaces that meet the needs of children, they will also be accessible and suitable for everyone**." (1996).

In this sense, the project "[Bicycles with a Gender Focus](#)" in León (Mexico) was created with the aim of offering girls, young females and women **tools that contribute to their independence and that allow them to embrace public spaces**. This is an educational proposal with a human rights approach, which also hopes to promote the use of the bicycle as a sustainable, healthy, fun and necessary means of transport for the transformation of the city.

Likewise, with the aim of promoting safe urban spaces, the "[Night Picnics](#)" initiative was created in Rosario (Argentina) so that **citizens can make different outdoor environments (and moments) their own with open cultural proposals**. This initiative consists of a picnic on summer nights accompanied by live music in the background, each time held in a different public park in the city.

Other policies that involve **powerful urban transformations with the purpose of overturning unsustainable pro-car and anti-people urban models** have taken place in the cities of Paris and Barcelona. Paris has promoted the model of "**the fifteen-minute city**", where **citizens can meet their basic needs (housing, work, healthcare, education, leisure and shopping) just fifteen minutes on foot or by bicycle from their homes**. This idea aims to reduce travel, improve the quality of urban life and tackle challenges such as climate change based on three ideas: a calmer urban life (chrono-urbanism), a flexible use of spaces (chronotopy or versatility) and an emotional link with places (topophilia). In the case of Barcelona, the strategy is known as [Supermanzanas](#) (Superblock) and, **with the same philosophy, also aims to create a city of proximity, active and sustainable mobility, with the pedestrianisation and naturalisation of streets and a more equitable use of public spaces** as a place for meeting with others and social interaction where people take precedence over cars.

## 2.2. A caring and educating city must be playable

Among the educating cities linked to the IAEC, we can find interesting practices that aim for **more and better opportunities for care and outdoor education in urban spaces, especially in terms of gameplay**. We can highlight the case of Córdoba (Argentina), where "[neighbourhood squares](#)" are created as spaces for children and adolescents to play and interact, while the so-called "learning pathways in the public square" integrate educational workshops, urban gardens and open cultural initiatives for residents to enjoy.

Barcelona (Spain) has also rolled out the [Game Plan in Public Spaces by 2030](#) project to **expand and diversify the opportunities to exercise the right to play,**

**enhance the city's recreational infrastructure and nurture gameplay and outdoor meet-ups.** It includes more than sixty actions ranging from the naturalisation and opening of school playgrounds to the neighbourhood (including kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools), to the transformation of school settings to gain an open space for each school ([Let's Protect Schools](#)), or new criteria for the design of play areas to be more inclusive and stimulating, both for children and for playground monitors.

In the case of [Parque de la Amistad](#) (The Friendship Park) in Montevideo (Uruguay), the stimulation of play includes the mobilisation of volunteers to "play and learn without barriers." Here, family members, teachers and professionals are mentored to **care for the need for inclusive play and raise awareness about universal accessibility in the physical space.**

### 3. Facilities: what role do and can public facilities play in bolstering the social fabric and community ties?

Many cities have an impressive range of amenities that are often not used to their full potential because they are seen as providers of a single service: libraries only for books or schools only for teaching classes. But, as we said above, **the complex, ever-changing, unequal and diverse reality, together with ever-limited resources, forces many local governments towards creative strategies of harnessing public spaces in an innovative, more agile and more versatile way to respond to social needs and citizen demands.**

When we talk about infrastructure, we usually refer to amenities linked to transport, energy and communications, but the truth is that to live, coexist and survive better it is also necessary to create another type of infrastructure. We are talking about **social infrastructure, which refers to spaces that nurture the creation of a community network and social cohesion.** Therefore, it is important to understand the potential of social infrastructure, prioritise it and make enough social investment so that schools, libraries or spaces for play and sport are dignified, attractive and open to the neighbourhood as driving forces behind community life (Klinenberg, 2022).

However, not all social infrastructure has the same democratic potential: we should consider the difference between an **infrastructure that attracts heterogeneous people** and an infrastructure that brings together similar people, of the same social class and interests. Opening schools to the community or



building a park where diverse people gather and interact is also a good way to **prevent both social isolation and the polarisation that weakens democracy.**

In addition to social infrastructure, we also need to distinguish **infrastructures from the care that emanates from these physical and social settings to all the resources, services and policies that foster the collective well-being and the care-related needs of the people who require them (children, elderly people, people with functional diversity, or sick people), without forgetting the needs of caregivers.** This infrastructure covers a wide range of practices and interventions that include both hard components (parks, care centres, healthcare centres, infant schools, accessible transport or community facilities) and soft components such as training programmes for caregivers, community and support networks, public policies and regulatory frameworks that recognise care and foster gender justice and co-responsibility in these tasks to achieve more collective solutions.

In this sense, **the transformation of schools, civic centres or cultural centres into more community-focused, more open and more inclusive spaces with more versatile social uses is happening across the world.** Multipurpose facilities for multiple care-related functions that can host arts workshops or academic support sessions, emotional or digital support services, cultural events, soup kitchens, book clubs, language exchange groups or citizen assemblies, among others. If we look at the IAEC cities, we can highlight several cases that illustrate how this idea can be materialised with different approaches:

Andong (South Korea) launched the so-called Happy Learning Centres that do not just provide education, but also social and professional opportunities that can lead to new life projects and bolster self-esteem, with special emphasis on migrant women. This resource also exists **within hospitals so that patients and their families can have access to key educational and cultural activities to improve their physical and emotional health.** (IAEC, 2023). Also interesting in Andong is the solution to the needs of reconciliation through [out-of-school childcare services at senior citizen centres](#), which in addition to being a way to collectively solve care-related tasks, also fosters a sense of community and intergenerational shared learning.

Meanwhile, Mexico City launched the [PILARES](#) (Points of Innovation, Freedom, Art, Education and Knowledge) network, with **twenty free community centres in areas with high rates of poverty and social exclusion.** These centres **inform citizens about education, well-being, healthcare and community spirit.** They also offer cyber-schools for people to complete studies, craft and digital

workshops, and arts and sports activities to tackle poor educational performance, bolster the social fabric and foster equality and holistic development.

Another interesting case for new neighbourhoods is in the city of Espoo (Finland) with the [Opinmäki Learning Centre](#) to **create community feeling and social ties where there were no previous ties**. This is a multi-service place of lifelong education, cultures and sports organised by various institutions, clubs and associations.

In Medellín (Colombia), the so-called [Articulated Life Units](#) are used to create spaces for public use that stimulate culture, sport and recreation with a view to building community spirit. These units **feature a mix of libraries, sports courts, healthcare services, culture and recreation into a single community facility**. Citizens have warmly welcomed these units and now enjoy and care for these places that are part of everyday urban life.

Back in Europe, the case of the [Biblioteca Archimede](#) in Settimo Torinese (Italy) shows how it is possible to create a hub for the enjoyment of cultural rights featuring meeting spaces and permanent training at a library. The projects that take place at Archimede have revitalised the local area by rethinking the concept of a library to make it more inclusive.

Meanwhile, the [Municipal School of Sustainability in Curitiba](#) (Brazil) is an innovative space in a reclaimed natural setting that provides environmental training activities **aimed at raising awareness among all citizens about the need to build a society committed to care, the environment and sustainable living conditions**.

## 4. In conclusion

It is paramount to have specific support and meeting places to share experiences, community life and time in order to build a community, engage in co-responsibility and dream of possible futures based around harmony and care. The clearer the importance of this goal, the more local policies we will find to co-create and enjoy educating and caring spaces that foster mutual care and social and environmental co-responsibility. Public policies that also embrace care infrastructure, social infrastructure, recreational and educational infrastructure and green infrastructure. Meanwhile, **when these supportive practices and shared community places do not exist or are scarce, we lose quality of life, miss**

**out on the sense of community and multiply distances and social fractures, meaning that democratic life and values suffer.**

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