Part 2 - The Urban Nature Agenda with Cristina Gomez Garcia-...

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SPEAKERS

George Benson, Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes

G George Benson 00:00

Hello, and welcome to threesixtyCITY, a podcast delving into the future of urban life. I'm today's returning guest host George Benson. I'm the Co-Founder and Managing Director of the Climate Displacement Planning Initiative, as well as a member of the Global Commission on BiodiverseCities by 2030, which is an effort of the World Economic Forum, and the government of Colombia. I'm joined by my wonderful colleague, Christina, who we've been speaking to last week as well, about a report that the Forum and the Commission have released on the nature of cities, biodiversity and bringing a truly natural and integrated lens to how cities can develop in partnership with nature. So today's episode is part two of our series. In the first one, we've covered some questions around the inherent value of nature, how cities are using nature-based solutions to work towards climate goals, and the opportunities and the challenges of protecting and integrating nature going forward. So today, Christina and I are going to jump into some of the business cases and some of the recommendations for this work to really integrate nature into cities, and look a little bit ahead to some big moments, such as the Conference of Parties to the UN Convention on Biodiversity, COP 15, the less loves, less known COP, but a very important one. And we'll close with some of the big picture of what we can achieve if we do this work. So Christina, thank you so much for joining us again, it's a pleasure to have you.

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 01:42

Thank you so much for your invitation. It's a pleasure for me to be here talking about our project, our partners and our vision of the future of cities.

G George Benson 01:52

Okay, let's dive right in. This report that we've mentioned before is the Commission's BiodiverseCities by 2030, Transforming Cities Relationship with Nature. And again, that's put

together by the World Economic Forum, the government of Columbia, and the Alexander von Humboldt Institute with Arup and Alpha Beta. It's got lots of great stuff in there, myself and other commissioners were just so thrilled to see it come out with this really succinct business case for nature, $70 trillion of global GDP generated in cities, that's 80% of global GDP, millions of new people entering cities every day, we think that by 2050, about three quarters of humanity will live in cities. And yet the economic and the social risks of the decline of nature couldn't be clearer. We hear that 44% of global GDP in cities is estimated to be a risk from the disruption of nature. And we have billions upon billions of people around the world who live in precarious living circumstances, face natural hazards because of the decline of nature and other climate related risks in their cities. And so the time is now is the message that this report really makes clear. And the time is now and the good news is we know what to do, we have recommendations, we have clear elements of I would call a framework for addressing nature and cities. And there's three parts to that that have really been developed clearly in this report. And so Christina, I would like to, I'd like to turn to you now to succinctly explain what these three systemic shifts towards nature-positive urban development are laid out in the report. The opening to this is that the typical urban development paradigm has really put biodiversity and cities at odds with one another. We can't have nature-positive cities, because cities are built, they're gray, they're brown, they have smoke, they have cars, they have all of these elements, which are not considered to be nature, and are often thought to be antithetical, in fact, to nature. But that's not what this report says. It says that there is a pathway forward. And there's these three systemic shifts that are needed to make nature and cities act in alignment with one another. So can you outline for us what those three systemic shifts are?

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 03:55

Absolutely. Just to remind our audience this report is the result of a one year work with the Global Commission on BiodiverCities by 2030, which is a group of experts that brought their insights and input to analyze and better understand the urgency and the need to transform cities relationship with nature. Also, our work with innovators and analyzing through AI powered platforms of the World Economic Forum, such as strategic intelligence platform to bring up to date the knowledge, and understand what were the very latest figures and trends of urban development. So what this platform does is to compile minute by minute, again, powered by AI, any publication related with biodiversity and cities, the intersection between both concepts. So I also invite the audience to check out what we call the transformation map on biodivercities, you can find it in the strategic intelligence platform of the World Economic Forum and explore the latest content and figures around this nexus between cities and biodiversity. That said, we finalize our year with a knowledge product, which is this insight report. And this insight report, what it does is to call or translate the key insights of this work that has been developed for a year into a collaborative action plan so that cities can actually transform the way they are designing their development pathways, and in fact, start to live in harmony with nature. So the biodiverCities by 2030 vision sets a very ambitious paradigm for urban development. As you said, George is one that entails systemics shifts in how the built environment integrates nature. And by that how can we address today's urban development challenges such as mobility, social housing, environmental hazards, like heat, flood, etc? And how can we provide for the needs of an ever growing urban population through nature. So the evidence that we present in this report indicates that there is an opportunity for greater nature-based solutions in cities because it provides greater value than green infrastructure because it provides what we call co-benefits. It means that not only it helps to restore nature within cities as the backbone of cities, but also it helps to address other urban challenges such as health, pollution, inequity, or justice, and so on. If we focus now on the pathways for action, for us there are three main action fronts. First,

we talk about a systems approach to urban governance, if we don't address how decisions are made in terms of investing or not, or integrating or not, nature in urban development and how cities are planned, we are not addressing the complete problem or challenge around increasing or recovering this relationship of cities with nature. So the governance issue is super important. And for us, it has like three concrete action plans. One is to keep on promoting that the high level decision makers incorporate these into their governance models. And one example of this is the current movement of chief heat officers, I think this is a clear solution and pathway to understand and incorporate and steer direction from the top regarding the importance of addressing climate hazards through nature. So this is a new governance figure, is part of the public sector now is sitting within the high level decision makers of the city officials and is a figure that is particularly in charge of addressing the heat challenges in cities through increased nature-based solutions. So how are we cooling cities with more tree cover, with different pavements that are bio-based, and other strategies. So we have actually somebody from the top advocating for nature, increasing nature in cities. Coordination is another very relevant component of these systems approach to urban governance for us. And as the World Economic Forum, an organization that promotes and encourages increased public-private collaboration, this is fundamental. So how are we sitting at the same table, private sector, public sector, civil society, local and grassroots movements, to design the cities of the future, and fostering policy innovation, which is the third part of the system's approach to urban governance. And this has to do with new regulations and new policy frameworks that allow us to, one incentivize increased investment in nature-based solutions and nature based criteria whenever we design a master plan, but also to analyze with a critical mind, what are the policies that are in place that cost inertia that are allowing or are not permitting us to move forward in a more nature positive way, and try to get rid of them and to transform those policy frameworks into nature positive ones. So this I would say George is the first action front related with governance.

G George Benson 09:53

There's obviously a huge amount of things to consider in there, but it's something I want to tease out for the audience here speaking myself as an urban practitioner. It's striking to me how often we find questions of how to make a policy improvement, achieve a better outcome in our cities. It's striking to me how often we're looking for the silver bullet, right. And this is true in so many issue areas, it doesn't matter if it's climate change, technology, privacy, yada, yada, yada. We're always looking for, what's that one big thing we're going to do. But in fact, especially when it comes to these complex system to system interactions, your natural systems, human systems, there isn't one thing we can do. And the fact that we can even call this urban governance, a systems approach, to me it is the closest we can come to say, Okay, there's a clear thing we need to do here. But really, I think what you're describing is a mindset shift. It's a way of thinking about the world differently. And then governance, because it's so often about the interactions, whether that's speaking or legally, or the things we buy from each other. It's a very abstract, I guess, is my point, way of thinking about things. But clearly the abstractions we've used previously, which were GDP goes up, everything's great. The city's doing what it should. Those abstractions are too simple, and now we need to bring in some more integrated ways of working together. But it's just so interesting to me that, when I've spoken to many mayors and councilors, and others who really want to make cities better, they're saying, Okay, well, where do I plant all the trees? That's going to be what's going to fix this, right? Or how can I put this one conservation policy in place that's going to protect our natural areas, and then we're good, right? But what I take so much away from this, and I think why this is such an important starting point for this conversation is, there isn't one thing, and

it's really about the way that your systems operate day in and day out, unless they can really fully encompass the whole of the problem. And as you're saying, Christina, all of the stakeholders, the grassroots community members, the unions, the businesses, the academic institutions, the government, all the other layers of government, unless those are all at the table, then we're going to miss the kinds of integrated approaches that we need. So there's so much there that's key. But I love and I think it's very important that it starts with, in my mind, the way that we work together, it's not even necessarily the action that we take. So there's a really cool, call to action there. That's actually doable, right? Because if you're the mayor, or you're a city council, or the city manager, the way that you engage with your colleagues, is something you have direct control over, you can start with that. And I think that's a good news story for people that are feeling overwhelmed by this.

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 12:35

Absolutely, George and I would say mayors have a lot of questions. And if we are supporting organizations, be it the World Economic Forum, but be it also a grassroot organizations, or a Research Institute, we will support come closer and provide ready to implement solutions, ready to use data and science. And if we bridge that gap between data and decision-making solutions and implementation, we can accelerate the change. So it's a matter of bringing together the right people at the right place at the right moment. And it's not complex, it's just we have to keep on thinking in this systems approach because we don't have the right answers, we can have part of that answer. And if we come together, we can help to respond and to address the challenges that cities are living, because they're microcosms of the global challenges. And it's so complex to govern a city, that if we come with the right answers at the right place, I think that we can drive that change.

G George Benson 13:39

Yeah, I love that, Christina, because at the end of the day, we can achieve more co-benefits, right? If we bring all these different elements and all these people in the room together. And as you're saying, the mayor's have that power, these other actors have that power, we can start a conversation that's actually not that hard to do. But I think something else that you said that really sits with me is there's some humility in that too, we have to know that we as, I'm an urban planner by training, we might have mayor's who are financial officials, none of us have the single answer. But if we come together, we can get there. So let's pivot now to the second, let's get more tangible. So we've talked about the governance layer. The second layer is related to the spatial aspects. So can you walk us through that second systemic shift related to spatial planning?

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 14:18

Absolutely. And I love that aspect. Because we all want to see more nature in cities. I don't think that there's anyone in the world that doesn't like nature. Again, it's a matter of just being more close to nature. And once we are close to nature, we don't want to get outside or far from nature. So spatially reintegrating the natural layer of cities for us is a very important action front. So not only the decision making part of it, and how do we define priorities to do it, but actually, in practice on the ground, how can we, one conserve existing natural habitats of the

cities? So we need to define where are these remnants of nature, wetlands, urban forests that we often don't even see. So for example, in London, more than 25% of London's green areas are within the private areas and gardens. So if you see a spatial image from London, you can see it's a green city, right? But sometimes we just walk the streets and it's gray. What's interesting there is conserving natural habitats. It's not only a public responsibility and purpose but also a private responsibility and has to be a private purpose. For example, one of the innovators that was part of our cohort in Uplink, a fantastic movement in Mexico City that is called the Pollinator movement. What they do is to promote and encourage biodiversity balconies or biodiverse balconies. So how people that love ornamental flowers and beautiful plants in their gardens can connect better with the relationship, for example, or the symbiosis of this plant with pollinators? How can we instead of using a random flower, because it's nice, because it's purple. How can we define and select the plants that are helping to bring back pollinators into the cities. So there's this big program of preparing the people that are the ones who engage with the movement in terms of where to buy those plants, which plants are bringing which pollinators, hummingbirds or bees. So this is part of the movement, it's not only conserving existing natural habitats outside our houses, but also committing within our houses to restore and conserve the natural habitats that people have in their own gardens. The second bit of this, spatial reintegration of nature has to do with renaturing degraded or sub optimized land. By that we mean for example, I've been in North America recently, which we all know is a car based society because the cities are so dispersed, and this urban sprawl has been massive. And when I'm working in cities, like, for example, Toronto, or Los Angeles, and I see these massive car parks, the only thing that I can see there is an opportunity to renature this land or sub optimized land. It's big hectares of areas with cars, that could be easily transformed into city parks. We need to rethink about those places that are for us, obsolete. They are not part of the future of cities. And third, we talk about growing smart with infrastructure. So the new infrastructure that we are developing, we need to encourage that it incorporates environmental standards and nature-positive standards. We can talk later about embedded nature as the new thing after imbedded carbon movements, but also it's a matter of re greening roofs, walls, and using bio-based materials to build a new infrastructure that is required to host people that are coming to the city. So for example, in terms of growing with smart infrastructure, if we take a figure that 90%, for example of new urban inhabitants, for the next decade, will come to Asia and Africa and Latin American cities, we need to understand that it's not only about repurposing those lands, like car parks, repurposing buildings, and building new green roofs. But what are the materials that we're going to use to build those cities that have to host more than 90% of new urban inhabitants? Where are they located? And how are we influencing this urban growth in those places? So this is the third piece of our principle or action plan, around reintegrating nature in the built environment.

G George Benson 19:27

Thank you, Christina. The last part of what you were saying there, going back to your comment about embedded nature, that makes me think of some of the great work that the Donut Economics Action Lab group under Kate Raworth is doing, where the city of Amsterdam piloted it and pioneered it with their donut portrait, and they're thinking about both simultaneously, the local environmental and social impacts of policy decisions and consumption, but then also think about the global impacts. And you know, interesting case studies have shown both Amsterdam and Denmark for example, have pretty darn good local environmental impacts, particularly from a carbon perspective. But when you look at the consumption of they're quite wealthy citizens, well, golly, gee, they actually consume a lot. And it has a long tail of environmental impacts and social impacts around the world. And so this kind of sharper lens that we're taking

on our consumption, especially as we talk about the rapid expansion of the global built environment, those are critical, we can't ignore those questions any longer. And as we keep saying, if we address them head on the co-benefits we can achieve both locally and globally are immense. And I think that good news story is something we need to really, really keep hitting home.

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 20:36

I'm gonna add George here that actually, I love what you're saying. And this is kind of our next stake, because first, we wanted to build a clear message around bringing nature back to cities. But as I was telling you in our former episode, it's also a matter of measuring and understanding the impact that cities have outside their limits. And this is where a concept that I really like as telecoupling, which is the analysis of both the socio-economic and environmental impacts over distance systems needs to be addressed. So this embedded nature approach and the donut economics and experiment in Amsterdam, are super relevant. And this is where we can link now the importance of addressing the biodiversity loss agenda, together with the climate change agenda, right. So the climate change agenda has tracked very rightly, the impacts of the supply chain of key materials that have been brought to the built environment in cities. But we are not at the point of knowing, understanding, and measuring the same impact of the land use transformation to bring these materials to the cities in biodiversity hotspots.

G George Benson 21:55

Now, that's a great example, Christina. It makes me think of a company that I was engaging with recently that was trying to build verification systems for a supply of let's call it ethical sand. So whether you're using that for concrete, or using it for other silicates and glass, and so on. Their contention is that in a lot of cases, we're using sand from the ocean floor. And even though we think of sand as like the most inert, biologically unimportant thing you could possibly imagine, in fact, when you go to get that resource, there are massive disturbances to nature, particularly on the ocean floor. So these questions of like, the things we use and something as simple as sand in our concrete, they have environmental impact, and we're not bringing that yet into what we do. And so there's a bit of a pivot there that I think we can make to the final systemic shift that the report identifies, which is around the mobilisation of investment, how are we actually landing dollars into the kinds of projects and systems and infrastructure that we need, and that are going to respect and ideally, increase the health of nature? So Christina, can you talk to us about that third and final systemic shift?

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 23:00

Yeah, absolutely. So our report highlighted the big gap between funding available for nature based solutions for infrastructure in cities, which showed that of 100% of the investment in infrastructure in cities, just 0.3% goes for nature-based solutions or nature of positive interventions. And this is where we want to start, this is what we want to change, we want to increase investment in nature based solutions, we want to change the current market share of green infrastructure, versus green or gray green infrastructure, not all can be green, right? We're not pretending that cities are just 100% green, but we are advocating for a more equal share between green infrastructure. green-gray infrastructure, and the gray infrastructure that

is necessary sometimes and in some places. So what we are trying to show here beyond the lack of investment, is what are the key or available strategies to increase investment and the novel investment models that have worked in different parts of the world, and that will play a critical role in mobilizing capital and driving scale. So one of them for example, is catalytic capital. We have exchange listed funds, we have debt for nature swabs, we have carbon exchanges, nature exchanges, the World Economic Forum is pushing forward a new project on biodiversity credits and nature changes. So how can we build a market for biodiversity while avoiding some of the drawbacks of the carbon markets and adding a very relevant justice and equity piece? Indigenous perspective understanding where are those biodiversity rich areas, and really bringing to the center a notion on the importance of nature and the role of nature in economic terms. So we have been documenting not only in this report, but with new task forces of experts working in the financial areas and monetary systems, insurance models, de risking underwriting mechanisms for increasing investment in nature. These are tried and tested solutions, that have shown that it's just a matter of connecting the narratives, and the priorities of the financial system with the opportunities of conservation nature, in terms of not only reducing risks, but also generating co-benefits for the wellbeing and resilience of societies.

G George Benson 25:40

I was mentioning at the start of the first podcast, the work of the task force on nature related financial disclosures. As an urban planner, I love that we're having this conversation through your efforts, Christina, the similar focus on the economics or the business case of nature in cities, at the same time. There's a moment that we're amidst, right, where, whether you're talking about the Dasgupta review, or the IPBESs or the IPCC, there's a recognition that we are not including nature in our economic evaluations and systems, and we need to change that. And if we do, well, hey, you're talking about nature exchanges, carbon exchanges, these various markets that have been created, there's money to be made there, there's good green, sustainable, resilient jobs that people can get access to if we do that. And I think whether you're seeing that through the Global Green New Deal movement, green and just cities, if you like, is sort of the framing of that, it seems to be coming around. And as we start to close out here, let's talk a little bit more about that moment. Let's talk about where these conversations are coming to a head. And I think the one we've alluded to so far is COP 15. So in just a very short phrase, Christina, what is the COP process for the Convention on Biodiversity? And what is the moment right now for you and other advocates that are going into that conference, what is does moment look like of trying to shift those systems to better encourage and include a role for cities?

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 27:02

So yes, the COP 15 can be summarized as a chance for the countries to agree on the nature equivalent of the Paris Climate Agreement to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity at the global scale. As you said, George, probably this COP is the less known. When we talk about the COP, people think about the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. But let's remind our audience that there are three Rio conventions that were born in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It includes, one the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, but there is also a United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. So the Conference of Parties meet to talk about the biodiversity conservation challenges and the trends of biodiversity loss, and how through multilateralism, this biodiversity loss can be

addressed. And there's a third cup that wants to tackle land degradation, which is the part of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. And so this is important because each of these COP is discussing how can we not only address climate change, biodiversity, and land gradation and desertification, but also the importance of seeing this as an intertwined crisis between climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, and food security, social inequality, and lack of resilience. So to solve any one of them, we need solutions that address all of them. And it's important, that for us, biodiversity advocates, this nexus between these two COPs, and these milestones coming now in Sharm el Sheikh in Egypt in November and then in Montreal, first week of December, is fundamental. Understanding, aligning in targets, we as a society that is defining the political commitments, regulations, and targets needed to maintain and protect biological diversity in this beautiful planet Earth, we must be able also not only to define those targets, but also to define the hierarchies of influence and priorities within this complex world of targets, right? What's the first thing that we need to address. And I feel that key decision makers are justifying inaction by saying that nature is too complex and hard to measure, whereas carbon and climate change is easy, because you have just tons of carbon and that's it. And I really believe that there is no perfect agreement or a fully representative target, we must create an action plan that represents the broad and shared vision of reducing or avoiding biodiversity loss. But we also need to set concrete pathways that allow us to advance towards that vision without losing ambition and scope. And we have shown here and in our report that we do have solutions at hand that allows us to avoid further casualties related to this situation. And these solutions and these opportunities to reduce risk and increase resilience, reduce social inequality, have at their very core, the best technology ever developed, which is nature. So this is our inspiration. This is my inspiration to take forward an agenda with mayors and presidents, nature is the best technology we have in place. It is about working with nature to improve people's living conditions, and ensure what we call One Health. And this is also known as nature based solutions, what are the solutions that nature can provide to human challenges without fracturing this notion of humans slash nature, we are part of nature.

G George Benson 30:51

Christina, you have given us so much detail here and so many elements to this work. It is such a privilege to be able to talk with you about how these elements are coming together. As you said, there's sometimes this worry maybe or a skittishness that elected officials and others have about how complicated this stuff is. But I think the framing you're giving around nature being not only our best, but our oldest technology, that we are both a part of and can use. That's compelling. People get it, people know what a lot of these nature based solutions are, either they don't understand how they work together systemically. So as someone who's worked in climate change communications for many years, the tangibility of nature presents a really unique opportunity for us to tell more concrete stories and get the public excited about the better world, I think the picture of what you're painting for us. The last question I want to ask you just very quickly is, what do you think these cities look like? Once they've implemented these solutions? You know, we're in 2050, we've come out the other side of this, we have nature positive cities, what do they feel like?

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 31:52

I think that this first year of work has demonstrated that integrating nature into the built environment increases competitiveness, resilience, livability, but now we need to fill that. So

while the evidence is clear, and cities must act now to avoid putting themselves at greater risk and ensure long term prosperity, there is a long way to go. In our case, we will continue to work with our natural partners in Colombia, Latin America, and globally, to highlight and outline, and stress that decisions made today about urban development patterns and material consumption, as we were talking about, will determine the impact of cities on nature and in response, nature's capacity to provide minimum ecosystem services to citizens. So I think that we need to be patient, we need to avoid being, as I say, chrononarcissists, just thinking that the change is now and because we wanted now it has to be seen now. But understanding that this is a systems change. And we need to allow cities to incorporate this important literacy and to make actions that take us into the pathway of nature positive future for cities. So I just leave you today and invite you to contact us if you want to join this effort to reopen the space for nature in cities and to join this movement of feeling, living and measuring all the benefits that nature brings into our lives.

G George Benson 33:38

Thank you, Christina, this has been a total treat an absolute pleasure. The work of the Commission and your work in particular, are incredibly inspiring. So thank you so much for your time today. Thank you to new cities for this wonderful opportunity for me to have this conversation with Christina. You can learn more about the report at the bio diverse cities commission by 2030 through the World Economic Forum. And there's lots of other great resources there that Christina has mentioned, as well. New cities has a ton of wonderful resources on their website in this and other related issue areas. So I highly encourage you to check that out. My name is George Benson. It's been a pleasure to be your guest host today. Thank you so much. Have a wonderful day.