

# CHALLENGES RELATED TO URBAN PUBLIC GREEN SPACE IN GEORGIA





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## INTRODUCTION

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Today, more than half of the world's population lives in cities, and the UN predicts that by 2050, the number of people living in cities will reach 75%. However, in the middle of the twentieth century, this figure was only 30%. At that time, the rate of urbanization started to accelerate, and cities began to dramatically increase in size. Cities are currently trying to cope with a high level of migration to urban areas resulting from socioeconomic changes that began during industrialization and the subsequent period of technological advancement. These processes were also facilitated by developments in transportation, especially road transport. Today, cities around the world are the main driving forces of the economy and have become scientific, cultural, educational, and economic centers. Over time, they have expanded and become overcrowded with noise and air pollution increasing and green spaces decreasing in number and becoming more inaccessible to the population.

As cities grow, the need for green spaces becomes even more significant. As cities expand and their populations grow, they must develop appropriate recreational spaces. Urban areas in western countries are the best at managing these spaces and pay a great deal of attention to environmental policy and human health.

Street landscaping, gardens, garden squares, parks, and the surrounding natural landscape are vital to cities and their inhabitants. Today, as we face the challenges of climate change and air pollution, such green spaces require special attention in terms of care, maintenance, and development. It is widely known that green spaces help purify the air and generate oxygen. Air pollution causes many life-threatening diseases, and in this regard, children are at an especially high risk. Harmful substances emitted through exhaust cause the deaths of millions of people every year, and that problem is especially acute in Georgia's cities. The population's high disease rates create significant financial and human resource strains on the health-care system and reduce its effectiveness while diminishing the country's labor force and creative capacity.





## PROBLEM ANALYSIS

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Georgia found itself in a tough political and economic situation after gaining independence. State institutions were dismantled as corruption flourished. At the municipal governance level, there was complete chaos. In the new sociopolitical reality, there was no knowledge of or experience in urban management. Even professional circles were completely unprepared to design a viable urban development strategy.

The circumstances under which privatization took place led to massive amounts of infrastructure, buildings, and land being transferred from state to private ownership. Municipalities did not have the resources to maintain parks, garden squares, and other green spaces. At the same time, these areas were taken away from the government for personal financial gain through corrupt deals, leading to green cover being destroyed and buildings later emerging in its place.

The creation of such an environment was also facilitated by the fact that legislative frameworks to protect public green spaces from destruction were either lacking or incomplete. There was also a significant problem with upholding and enforcing the law in general, especially with respect to green spaces.

After the Rose Revolution, a push to change the status quo emerged. Relevant state institutions were established, and numerous laws and regulations were adopted in the field of environmental protection and urban development. However, developing complex approaches and a vision for urban development remained an unresolved problem. Policies that favored the private business sector over public interest continued, and one of the most important components of that public interest was, and still remains, public green spaces. Under the pretext of developing the economy, the privatization of green spaces and the issuance of construction permits on the site of green cover continued. Despite preexisting urban zoning and relevant regulations, the status of recreational and green zones was continuously changing at the municipal level in favor of additional construction development.

These approaches did not change after the 2012 election. Despite the rehabilitation and renovation of several large parks in Georgia's major cities, the issuance of



construction permits in different types of recreational zones continued to be a problem. According to the 2019 State Audit Report, from 2011 to 2018, in the capital alone, that status of a total of 55 hectares of recreational areas was changed to allow construction development.

It is superfluous to talk about the importance of the natural landscape. However, when discussing and making decisions about city development, for many years priority has been given to other infrastructural, economic, and social issues. Resolving them is undoubtedly crucial, but discussing each issue in isolation is detrimental to both the issues themselves and the overall wellbeing of cities and their inhabitants. The construction sector represents a large share of the country's economy, especially in large cities. Over the years, green spaces ranging from individual trees on construction plots to entire recreational areas have been sacrificed to construction.

## IMPORTANCE OF GREEN SPACES IN THE CITY

### Health and social cohesion



Green space of any kind, even if it's just trees or shrubs, is much more than just a nice view and beautiful scenery. A green urban environment improves quality of life. Patients with various health conditions recover better in a green environment. People who live near green spaces are less likely to experience health issues, and those who work in a green environment feel much better. Parks and municipal gardens encourage residents to spend more time in green space exercising or relaxing, and this in turn benefits their health.

Children grow up more harmoniously and achieve better results in school when they grow up in the vicinity of nature. It is therefore critical for schools to focus more on landscaping their grounds.

Many problems jeopardize residents' ability to live healthy lives in modern cities. In our daily lives, whether at home or at work, we must remain in a sitting position for



lengthy periods of time. We are less physically active and have numerous sources of stress. Living in a congested urban environment can cause irreparable health damage. Air pollution is one of the most serious threats. Today, small-particle pollution is the most harmful component of the urban atmosphere.

Trees, shrubs, plants, grass, and even moss help clean the air of harmful small particles, which is why green spaces promote a healthy lifestyle. Encircling parks, playgrounds, schools, and kindergartens by green belts in noisy and crowded cities would make it possible to protect crowded places from air pollution.

The green urban environment is one of the main factors needed to improve residents' quality of life. People feel happier and healthier in a green environment. In addition, landscaped public spaces such as parks and gardens facilitate the formation and development of social connections and physical activity. People interact with one another more frequently as they converse, walk, and take care of the shared space as a group. As studies confirm, greenery also provides a safer and more pleasant living environment.

## Climate and biodiversity



Trees, plants, and green cover in general can help prevent local and worldwide atmospheric damage. Climate change causes temperatures to rise and droughts, often followed by heavy precipitation, to occur. Such harmful consequences pose great challenges to the urban environment.

During heat waves, greenery has a cooling effect. Tree branches cast shade on the sidewalk, and entering a green space in the summer heat is enough to feel a refreshing breeze. Cities are referred to as “heat islands” because the paved streets, concrete, and glass surfaces of buildings absorb or reflect the sun’s rays, returning the heat to the air rather than absorbing it. This kind of heat exchange continues even after sunset, which explains why the temperatures in cities remain so high. Of course, this is harmful to the population’s health, particularly the elderly. In green areas, temperatures are a few degrees lower due to the open surface of the land. It is therefore preferable not to cover most sidewalks or walkways in parks and gardens with paving materials.



Open surfaces also absorb precipitation which helps plants and reduces strain on the sewage system. It is well known that during excessive precipitation, the high percentage of dense surfaces in cities can exacerbate flooding. During heavy rains, soil covered with green cover has a higher level of water absorption, which cannot be said about concrete and asphalt. Floods in cities can be avoided by creating and maintaining more open natural surfaces. In addition, public green spaces such as parks and gardens improve cities' climates.

Citizens can make a substantial contribution to the process of fighting climate change by maintaining more non-covered surfaces in front of their homes and in their yards. "Green roofs" also perform especially important functions. These are subsidized in some cities and mandatory in others.

Biodiversity refers to the variety of flora and fauna. This multiplicity of species maintains the natural balance. Trees, shrubs, and plants provide the city with biodiversity. The diversity of greenery attracts more living organisms. For example, different species of insects help pollinate plants and can be used as food by birds or other small animals. They are an integral part of the ecosystem and vital for biodiversity.

## Economics



We need to consider the energy that cooling building interiors consumes in cities during periods of high air temperatures. This is a huge expense and causes great damage to the environment.

Destruction of the green landscape has a severe negative impact on both the environment and the population's health. Degraded urban living spaces are unattractive for living, tourism, and investment. The healthier the living environment in the city, the more viable and therefore economically attractive it is for people and investors. It is known that cities with a lot of greenery have the best quality of life, and there is even a ranking of such places. Real estate located in the vicinity of green spaces is also more valuable. The difference in price can range from four to thirty percent.





Areas and company offices rich in greenery create a more pleasant work environment, which is reflected in high employee productivity and a positive work attitude.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Unsystematic approaches to greenery issues in the city and a lack of long-term vision remain an unresolved problem at the central and municipal government levels in Georgia. Despite the rehabilitation of parks and garden squares in some cities, in general, no greenery policy that could be an action plan for the whole municipality has been developed. Strategies that set priorities and outline various types of measures to develop greenery in urban areas are either nonexistent or sporadic.

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- » In 2018, the World Bank developed recommendations for Tbilisi City Hall on how to develop green spaces in the city. It included a study of the different green areas in Tbilisi in terms of their physical condition and development potential. They also analyzed the intensity of citizens' use of green spaces. They categorized green spaces into neighborhood sports fields, garden squares, and city parks. Their approach assessed the quality of access to these areas. Based on their results, they developed recommendations about which parts of the city and which public green spaces should be prioritized, which spaces were the best to focus on in the short and long term, and where completely new public green spaces should be created.



- » In recent years, several parks and green spaces mentioned in this document have indeed been rehabilitated, but some areas, especially large and open landscape areas, remain problematic. Even when parks and garden square rehabilitation has been completed or planned, inappropriate methods are employed such as so-called “soft” (natural-surface landscaping) and “solid” (cladding, park furniture, lighting, etc.) methods of landscape design that don’t take into account the peculiarities of each specific place. Non-systemic approaches are obvious, which is why work is planned and completed without taking into consideration urban green space typologies. There are no standardized approaches to using green public spaces for different purposes, different beneficiaries, or different types of parks and gardens.
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- » Engaging interested population groups in the process of planning and rehabilitating urban green space is also important. Frequently, rehabilitation projects are carried out without such engagement, which is why locals are often dissatisfied with the final outcomes. Citizen participation in the planning and rehabilitation process and considering their visions and wishes for green spaces is a prerequisite for creating a successful recreational space. Sometimes these consultations are held only with individuals or small groups who do not have access to the full range of issues. Surveys need to be conducted with focus groups, specialists, and representatives of the population about how they want to use these parks and squares. They need to be introduced to the different stages of the ongoing work process.
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- » Studies need to be conducted to explore recreational and green spaces within municipal boundaries, their condition, and potential. Ideas should be developed on how to develop public green spaces, in what order, and with what priorities. Certain approaches and standards need to be developed for rehabilitation and landscaping work, and this requires multidisciplinary collaboration.





- » It is also necessary to categorize different types of greenery and recreational spaces. The goal should be to get closer to international standards with respect to the number of square meters per capita of recommended green space in the city and walking-distance access to green spaces for pedestrians throughout the city. We do not have accurate data for Georgian municipalities and cities since proper studies have not been conducted. According to the World Health Organization's recommendations, there should be at least nine square meters of green space per capita in the city, with 50 square meters of urban green space being desirable (UGS – Urban Green Space). According to official information, this figure for the capital of Georgia was highest during the Soviet period in 1983, with 13 square meters per capita. According to Tbilisi City Hall, in 2001, this number was 5.5 square meters per capita. However, as previously stated, an accurate accounting has not been carried out since then, and the report also fails to distinguish between different types of landscapes within the municipality's boundaries. For example, there is no indication of how many of these are suburban forests, meadows, neighborhood gardens, garden squares, or city parks. As a result, it's impossible to build a complete picture of the situation.
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- » The essential issue is the protection of green spaces at the legislative level and the strict enforcement of such regulations. It should be complicated or impossible to cancel or change the status of recreational and green spaces by legal or procedural means for construction use. Every action should serve to protect such spaces and improve their quality.
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- » It is important to have a relevant and properly functioning service at the municipal level responsible for landscaping issues, policy development, and improving public green spaces. It is crucial for this service to coordinate with other agencies and services involved in urban planning and development, health, infrastructure, and monitoring.



- » Georgian cities should study international best practices in the field of landscaping, join international treaties and charters at the central or municipal levels, and make implementing them a priority. Sharing international experience and engaging in various programs with the support of international organizations to attract financial resources and gain expertise would be extremely beneficial.

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- » In developed countries, many cities create so-called “green belts” around city limits. This involves creating strips of natural and artificial greenery around the urban environment that serve as a green wall to protect cities from unnecessary expansion and, at the same time, encircle them with “green lungs.” The Green Belt policy in the United Kingdom implemented in the mid-twentieth century is a good example. Its purpose was to protect cities from urban sprawl by restricting suburban settlements and preserving the natural landscape around cities for recreational, agricultural, or landscape use. The Green Belt boundaries are subject to periodic revision. Over the last 20 years, their area has sometimes been increased or even reduced based on clearly proven urban growth needs.

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- » Also noteworthy is the updated General Land Use Plan of Tbilisi approved in 2019. The motto of the conceptual part of the General Plan is “Tbilisi - Green City,” and it has become the capital’s main urban-planning document. One of its essential principles is to halt suburbanization since it causes many serious problems and contradicts the principles of sustainable urban development. For this purpose, development restrictions in significant recreational areas were imposed until more detailed studies were conducted to determine the future of these areas. Through a tender issued by Tbilisi City Hall, a survey was launched exploring areas such as the land around Lisi Lake. The very





first phase of the study revealed the high landscape value of the area around the lake and determined that this land needed to be protected and used only for recreational purposes. Unfortunately, after that stage of the study, the project was suspended, and construction development on the land around the Lisi Lake has continued since then. The land around the Tbilisi Sea, which, like Lisi Lake, had been regulated by the master plan and assessed as an important natural recreational area for the city, is likewise threatened by the development of privately held land plots. Restrictions had applied to a total of 11 areas, but City Hall lifted these restrictions, presumably in the interests of private owners. It is essential to demonstrate a stronger political will to protect recreational landscapes surrounding cities and preserve them for their intended purposes. Public interest should be given a priority.

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- » Modern urban planning attempts to connect urban green spaces both with each other and with the natural landscape beyond the city limits to ensure biodiversity. Today, city planners, landscape architects, and environmentalists are trying to bring nature into the city and back to the people. Everybody can clearly see that distancing ourselves from nature has a negative impact on the vitality of cities and people. This is one of the key principles of sustainable urban development - the city should be a healthy environment with healthy living opportunities and, as a result, attractive social and economic conditions.

The following steps need to be taken to develop green spaces in Georgia's urban centers:



## AT THE CENTRAL LEVEL:

- » Promoting sustainable approaches in urban development at the regional and local levels.
- » Increasing public awareness of the value of green spaces and improving the urban climate and its ecological functions.
- » Finding new financial resources to protect and develop urban green spaces.
- » Facilitating the development, adoption, and monitoring of green strategies in urban centers.
- » Facilitating experience sharing among different institutions across the country and internationally.
- » Developing registration, categorization, and data collection initiatives for green spaces using Geographic Information Systems.





## AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL:

- » Developing, adopting, and monitoring a green strategy and adopting this strategy in spatial planning and urban development documents.
- » Engaging different municipal services in the development of a green strategy and employing specialists, professionals, organizations, and social groups from these and related fields to ensure on social cohesion.
- » Ensuring a participatory and engaging process to build collaboration and trust in caring for public green spaces.
- » Creating quality and accessibility standards for different categories of people who use green spaces.
- » Establishing appropriate municipal services for planning, maintaining, and managing public green spaces in the municipality and providing them with financial, human, and technical resources.
- » Coordinating with neighboring cities and regions in implementing green strategies.
- » Creating an international cooperation and engagement network to share experiences and information.



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