



Building Healthier and Better Socially Connected Communities Through Nature

RECETAS is a transdisciplinary research project uniting 13 partners across 6 pilot cities worldwide (European Horizon 2020 programme). It tests and evaluates **nature-based social prescribing (NBSP)** to reduce loneliness and improve quality of life of urban residents. Loneliness, a major public health crisis, is addressed by NBSP, which combines nature and social connection in an inclusive, adaptable approach suitable for all communities

In Cuenca, a team working with older adults implemented **Friends in Nature interventions**: group sessions in urban natural environments (parks, rivers, heritage and cultural sites) benefiting approximately 100 participants. The results? A **significant reduction in loneliness scores from 6.59 to 4.02 over six months**, an improvement in health-related quality of life from 0.88 to 0.91, and a drop in social isolation risk from 40% to 26%. Discover evidence-based recommendations for healthier, more connected urban communities, grounded in the RECETAS project and aligned with a cross-sectoral approach linking health systems, community organisations, and urban nature.

Embedding Loneliness and Nature-Based Social Prescribing into the Local Public Agenda

- #1 Institutionalise Nature-Based Social Prescribing (NBSP) as a structural response within the local public agenda.** This includes conducting a comprehensive mapping of services and health assets through a participatory approach, disseminating a dynamic asset map to facilitate social referrals, and periodically developing a situational report integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to guide decision-making and resource allocation.
- #2 Assess and dimension the scope of loneliness within the Cuenca canton.** Create an Observatory of Loneliness in association with universities, social organisations, NGOs, and the Council for the Protection of Rights, to conduct periodic studies, evaluate care strategies, disseminate data, and guide future interventions that articulate territorial perspectives with the social determinants of health.
- #3 Implement a capacity-building process for health and social care professionals in the application of NBSP.** Establish an inter-institutional training centre for Nature-Based Social Prescribing linked to the municipal health and wellness offerings, guaranteeing continuous training, standardisation of competencies, and the long-term sustainability of the model at the local level.
- #4 Consolidate a care service network to reduce loneliness and other mental health challenges.** Progressively implement a comprehensive care model for loneliness — covering promotion, prevention, care, and rehabilitation — within a municipal service guided by health professionals, incorporating a registration and follow-up system for individuals linked to NBSP, and establishing a specific budgetary allocation to guarantee financial sustainability.

Designing Urban Environments that Reconnect People with Nature

- #5 Promote the design, management, and protection of urban environments that integrate nature as a structural component of physical, mental, and social well-being.** Ensure that urban planning incorporates non-exclusionary public spaces with ergonomic furniture, accessible infrastructure — seating, shaded areas, safe walkways — and participatory co-design workshops as a mandatory requirement within urban planning processes, to eliminate barriers for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers.
- #6 Prioritise the creation and strengthening of green spaces in proximity to care centres and meeting points for vulnerable groups.** This includes designing healthy microclimates through native trees and wildlife protection, fostering biocultural circuits that integrate cultural and heritage sites with natural settings, and transforming public spaces into therapeutic environments that promote restorative experiences and psychosocial well-being.

- #7 Advance a municipal regulatory framework that formally recognises natural environments as legitimate settings for social and cultural intervention**, formalising their role in citizen well-being and embedding urban nature into local health and social policy as a determinant of health rather than an optional amenity.

Integrating Nature into Social and Cultural Policy Agendas

- #8 Transversally integrate nature as a strategic social, cultural, and public health asset within the Cuenca canton.** Implement training programmes for municipal staff and community promoters working with priority groups — older adults, persons with disabilities, and people in vulnerable conditions — specialising them in NBSP and nature-based facilitation.
- #9 Promote the adaptation of existing cultural and social programmes to natural settings through participatory planning and alignment across municipal departments.** Foster joint intersectoral and interdepartmental actions in natural environments for the protection of well-being, health, and the mitigation of population loneliness.

Building Sustainable Governance for the Effective Implementation of Nature-Based Social Prescribing

- #10 Establish a Local Policy Committee as a formal space for intersectoral decision-making, bringing together public, private, and community actors to ensure that loneliness is addressed through a unified strategy.** Responsibilities should be distributed across municipal entities for operational implementation, community organisations for culturally relevant facilitation, and academia for scientific support and methodological validation.
- #11 Develop an integrated monitoring and evaluation system designed to track referrals, engagement levels, and mental health outcomes.** This data-driven approach allows for real-time adjustments, ensures transparency, and provides the necessary evidence for continued investment and scaling of the model across different social groups and sectors of the canton.

Taken together, these 11 recommendations form a coherent and actionable roadmap to make Cuenca a pioneer in nature-based public health in Latin America.

By institutionalising NBSP within local governance, transforming urban environments into salutogenic and inclusive spaces, integrating nature transversally into social and cultural policies, and building sustainable cross-sector governance, the city has both the evidence and the local network to scale these interventions — ensuring that social connection becomes a fundamental, equitable, and cost-effective component of comprehensive public health policy.

More information about

- RECETAS in Cuenca:
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