Implementing urban greening transformations can yield vast benefits for local communities, but there are also risks to be considered

This policy brief highlights some key challenges that government partners may encounter when planning urban greening transformations and policies.

Background

Government members of multi-stakeholder partnerships experience unique challenges in undertaking urban greening projects to benefit both people and nature. Project dynamics and logistics, such as delays and budget changes, can challenge the achievement of outcomes that benefit humans, other species, and the environment. These challenges vary depending upon stakeholder capacity to facilitate healthy relationships between people and places, and to advocate on behalf of community stakeholders to ensure promised benefits are realised.

Whilst the benefits of increased provision of high amenity greenspaces are well-understood, standard approaches to urban renewal in complex geographical and social settings can jeopardise the distribution of these greening benefits. This policy brief offers some global reflections on urban greening practices, with reference to a case study in Melbourne’s western suburbs.

The Upper Stony Creek Transformation Project, sought to transform a section of Upper Stony Creek, an urban creek and drainage channel in Melbourne’s western growth corridor. It is a unique partnership of government and non-government agencies conceived to improve residents’ health and wellbeing through better greenspace provision.

Prior to the transformation, the site included a concrete drainage channel and an informal greenspace. Works commenced in early 2018 and were expected to be completed 12 months later. However, in July 2019 the discovery of significant asbestos contamination at the site put the project on hold. The cost of remediation consumed a large portion of the project budget. However, the partners maintained their commitment to complete the works and the project was able to continue with a modified design.

The concrete drainage channel that contained the Creek has not yet been able to be removed. However, a large-scale wetland and revitalised greenspace has been accomplished around the channel and retarding basin, in large part through the strength and effectiveness of the multi-stakeholder collaboration between project partners.
Sustained commitment from project partners and support for longitudinal research

Within the urban landscape, renewal projects are often made more complex by the variety of land tenure arrangements, responsibilities for ongoing maintenance and the range of deliverables sought by stakeholders. Clear and robust partnership frameworks are essential to the successful delivery of projects, but also to realising how outcomes develop over time and how their potential may be enhanced. A monitoring and evaluation programme, and management responsibility arrangements that outlast the implementation phase, are essential to understanding the net benefits.

Championing projects

Individual champions within organisations are often the key catalyst of urban greening projects and instrumental in driving the project to delivery. One major risk is that these champions shoulder the burden of the project and its delivery can rely upon their ongoing attention. When champions move on, this attention can wane. Urban greening projects require institutions that are bound by partnership commitments, to wholeheartedly champion projects beyond the tenure of individuals. This includes embracing projects that are often outside the realm of organisational core business, and incorporating new mandates and knowledge to ensure that successes may be replicated in future projects.

Contingency planning

When working on urban infill and renewal projects, or with former/current brownfield sites, it is imperative to ensure that the cost of any remediation does not risk the delivery of key project outcomes. Long-term work is needed to develop a protocol and funding framework to return lands back to project readiness, prior to wide scale implementation.

About the CAUL Hub

The Clean Air and Urban Landscapes Hub is part of the Australian Government’s National Environmental Science Programme. The remit of the CAUL Hub is to undertake “Research to support environmental quality in our urban areas”. This includes research on air quality, urban greening, liveability and biodiversity, with a focus on practical implementation of research findings, public engagement and Indigenous Australian participation. The CAUL Hub is a consortium of four universities: the University of Melbourne, RMIT University, the University of Western Australia and the University of Wollongong.

Further Reading

3. Upper Story Creek Transformation Project.

This Policy Brief was prepared by Dr David Kelly and Associate Professor Cecily Maller as part of Project 6: Social, cultural and biodiversity benefits of urban greening: An integrated network of sites.