

# Co-producing Salud Colectiva: Re-embedding Nature into Care Policy

## Co-Learning for Action: Nurturing Environmental Justice in Bogotá

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### Key messages

- The city of Bogota has proposed innovative strategies to promote 'care', but the ecological sphere is not included as a critical object of care.
- Social Organizations are using popular education to produce a critical vocabulary for action. This has created a holistic sense of socio-ecological care and fomented political will amongst the community.
- The state and social organizations can co-produce ways to establish trust between institutions and citizens. Such collaborative relationship respects the sphere of action and distinct responsibilities of each actor, and ensures the critical insights of communities are considered when developing policy.
- There is potential to expand conceptions of care to harness a more transformative framework of 'Salud Colectiva'. Mending the rupture of care and ecology creates the critical basis through which Bogota can more profoundly realize its proposed goals.

### Introduction

Bogota stands out as a global leader in constructing a city built around principles of 'care'. This is evidenced in the Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial (POT), a comprehensive policy planning document for urban and rural development in the city, where 'care' is included as a principle tenet (POT, 2021, p.109). Introduced initially as a mechanism to alleviate gender inequality from unremunerated care work, the novel District Care System (DCS), a critical component of the POT, is beginning to scratch the surface of how care can be harnessed. While these policies have provided an important framework to address social ills, key components of environmental well-being are currently isolated from measures that address care. This fracturing of policy is a manifestation of a dominant narrative whereby the ecological sphere is perceived as being distinct from the social sphere. With the 'territorialization of care' as a clear goal outlined within the POT, it is critical that the government recognize alternative perspectives of socio-ecological care which are emerging from 'territorios' (Ibid., 2021). A lack of comprehensive understanding of the spatial and demographic realities within territories has meant that the DCS does not reach those it is intended to serve, leaving social organizations to fill the role of the state in care service provision. Through processes of just co-production between the state and social organizations, nature can be 're-embedded' into a more expansive vision of 'care' that aligns with the needs of Bogota's citizens. This policy brief argues territorially based social organizations have developed a critical vocabulary for action which provides a compelling framework for the government to adopt a more transformative vision of care: 'Salud Colectiva'.

# 1. Context

In 2020, to address gender inequality in care work, the former mayor of Bogota, Claudia Lopez launched the first-ever city-wide District Care System (DCS). The DCS is a set of services and institutional actions that seek to reduce the burden of care work (UN, n.d.). The Manzanas del Cuidado (Care Blocks), a principal feature of this system, offer services such as psychological support, educational opportunities, and recreational activities for caretakers (Rodríguez Franco, 2022). This policy is critical for a number of reasons, particularly that it aims to encourage political participation through the alleviation of time poverty. The establishment of these 'manzanas' is based on four main indicators that measure demand for care, population density of caregivers, poverty levels, and allocation of the municipal participatory budget (Ibid., 2022). Spatial analyses are carried out through a local planning unit structure (UPL) that divides the city into 33 delineated areas based on the particular social contexts of territories. While this framework is intended to ensure that services reach the most marginalized, territories are often more complex than city maps indicate. The concept of the Main Ecological Structure (EEP) underlies all of the POT's policies related to environmental protection (Interlace Hub, 2023). Defined as the biotic and abiotic elements that sustain the essential ecological processes of each territory, the EEP is recognized in the planning document as a critical component of socioeconomic development (POT, 2021). Amongst the environmental dimensions of the POT are the policies aimed at re-greening, a process working to expand and protect the EEP in recognition of its important role in planning. Initially, these policies appear sound, however, they perpetuate a narrative whereby nature is not recognized for its intrinsic value, but rather as a resource intended to be utilized for human development. This discourse exacerbates the disconnect between nature and care, leading to a failure to actualize policy that encourages healthy relationality between social and environmental elements.

Due to the isolation of 'care' policies from those concerning the ecological dimensions of the city, the conceptualization of a 'caregiver' is narrowly depicted. In territories, care manifests in a variety of ways, extending far beyond the DCS's one-dimensional perception. Despite a lack of institutional recognition, practitioners of care are engaging in transformative work throughout their territories that aim to meet the particular needs of barrio residents which are sidelined by current policy. Examples of social organizations mending the government's shortcomings abound and are particularly evident in Kennedy, a borough of 1 million people who have yet to receive the services promised to them by the DCS (Secretaría Distrital de Planeación, 2017).

addressed basic questions such as the services they provide as well as more profound discussions of the theoretical underpinnings of their programmes. Further informal interviews with community members illustrated how the members of the territory understand and engage with their work (see Appendix 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5).

- Social, spatial, and temporal mapping to understand the relationships between social organizations operating within the territory as well as the historical timeline of the organization's work in relation to the physical boundaries of the neighborhood (see Appendix 2).

# 3. Case Study

This policy brief draws from desk-based research and fieldwork conducted in Bogota's Kennedy district. Working closely with Guaches y Guarichas we conducted:

- Transect walks at La Vaca North and South which enabled dialogue with local actors, observations, photography, and note-taking as means of data collection. Experiencing these spaces allowed for feeling-thinking about the realities they presented, which amounts to a deeper form of knowing in line with our partners' work.
- An in-depth focus group with five members of the community affiliated with Guaches y Guarichas. These young adults detailed the depth of care provided by the organization. Interactive mapping was utilized as a means to develop an understanding of the organization's spatial reach through pinpointing the wetland in relation to students' households. The students' perspectives were testament to the organization's success achieved through popular knowledge production (see Appendix 3.4).
- In-depth hour-long interviews with the four principal leaders of Guaches y Guarichas as well as four leaders from their partner organizations. Interviews

Escuela de EducAcción Popular Ambiental Guaches y Guarichas X Bacatá are redefining how care can be conceptualized in a way that surpasses the DCS' limited definitions. A focal point of such efforts is the northern portion of the La Vaca wetland, located in the Kennedy district. Declared a 'district ecological wetland park' after a successful community-led restoration programme (Decree 190 of 2004), this ecosystem is a vibrant oasis located within a region rife with profoundly complex social dynamics. Regardless of physical boundaries, efforts to preserve La Vaca North are a constant battle. As a neighbor to Corabastos market, wastewater finds its way into the wetland whilst micro-traffickers use it as a corridor for illicit activity (Guaches y Guarichas, 2024). Transformed into an 'aula' by Guaches y Guarichas, La Vaca North has become a sanctuary where an autonomous structure of care is being constructed through dialogue with Kennedy residents.

In 2021, the Kennedy Manzana del Cuidado was established in the Bella Vista neighborhood. Despite the initial success, the underlying social tensions within the UPL were left out of consideration. This created a condition whereby residents of other neighborhoods within the UPL were not able to access the facility. For residents of Amparo, where Guaches y Guarichas are based, crossing

### Image 01

Satellite image of the territory. Visible is La Vaca South (bottom left, yellow), La Vaca North (middle top, red) and Corabastos Market (top right, blue). (Google Earth, 2024)



### Image 02

Corabastos boundary wall, the importance of art in these spaces is paramount (Brookes, 2024)



the 'invisible barriers' that delineate zones of control by various organized crime groups puts them at serious risk of violence. Individuals who have attempted to access these state-provisioned care facilities in Bella Vista have expressed the continual risk to their safety (Garzón, 2024). Acknowledging the pressing needs within their neighborhood, Guaches y Guarichas have assumed the responsibility of the state in care service provision. Their work emphasizes the wetland's influence on the historical and social realities of their community.

Through their popular education practices, Guaches y Guarichas are transforming the culture of their barrio into one that centers spiritual, emotional, and ecological healing as fundamental tenets of territorial identity. Constructed from lived experiences, community-based understanding of social complexities, and an expansive anti-colonial framework, they engage in processes of re-territorialization where care is a critical virtue. Guaches y Guarichas' educational model is founded on the Latin American School of Thought as an act of resistance to dominant western narratives. This theoretical framework gave way to their cosmological vision where the social and ecological spheres are interconnected.

The organization exists in a constant dialectical relationship with its community members to develop strategies that target evolving social dilemmas. Beginning with an emphasis on wetland conservation, they later expanded their objectives to address youth drug addiction through a health lens as opposed to one of criminality. The organization's leaders utilize their own home, the 'listening center', as a space to facilitate workshops and create a sense of emotional safety where drug users are freed from the stigmas imposed upon them. After realizing the need for more disability inclusive third spaces in the community, the leaders initiated an organizational shift to celebrate deaf members by including sign language in the popular education curriculum. Through this work, they illustrate a microcosmic example of what a profoundly caring society can look like. The social leaders responsible for Guaches y Guarichas are practitioners of care in the most profound way.

Through processes of reclamation and autogestion, social organizers have realized the power of territorialised education as a mechanism for social transformation.

Our fieldwork findings highlighted the success of the organization in fulfilling their outlined goals. Through focus groups with students of the school, we found that their sense of belonging, political agency, and overall emotional well-being and affective responsibility improved drastically as a result of their time spent with Guaches y Guarichas. Students also expressed an understanding of the importance of ecological preservation through daily tasks such as recycling, and an overall growing sense of attachment to the wetland which they now see as being a source of life within their community.

#### **Image 03**

Communal gardening in the aula, (Marsh, 2024)



Most critically, a crucial sense of hope was reignited in these young adults.

### **3.1. Re-embedding Nature into Care Policy**

Led by the City Hall of Bogota, the EEP concept has been fundamental to the development of environmental policy for the city. This proposition acknowledges the way social processes depend on natural processes, however it does not explicitly make the link between care policy and the environment. The POT explicitly mentions the importance of protecting Bogota's landscapes for improving the quality of life of its inhabitants, making clear allusion to a biocentric ideology (POT, 2021). However, the remainder

of the POT's environmental policy focuses extensively on the economic benefits of beautifying the city through greening. This policy brief is therefore aimed at highlighting the importance of actualizing the biocentric narratives that are pre-existing within the POT, through reclaiming nature as an object of care.

The current fracturing of care and environmental policy into separate spheres creates the conditions whereby the state is addressing these issues in isolation. The provision of care services and the implementation of Manzanas del Cuidado is overseen by the District Secretary of Women's affairs (Rodríguez Pinzón, 2023). A completely separate government department, the District Secretary of the Environment, is responsible for overseeing policy related to environmental preservation. While the gendered dimension should remain a key component of the care policy framework, ecological aspects also profoundly impact women and these interlinkages should not be overlooked. Unremunerated caregivers, most predominantly impoverished women, are also often living in conditions where they are victims of environmental injustice (Andersen et al., 2016). Provisioning a more holistic approach to care necessitates an understanding of the ways these marginal identities intersect with broader environmental conditions.

### **3.2. Constructing a Critical Vocabulary for Action**

Throughout Bogota, territorially based popular education projects have emerged as a mechanism to foment a greater political will amongst citizens and cultivate alternative paradigms of socio-ecological care. Foundational principles of interconnectedness and Senti-pensar (Feeling-Thinking), underlie their success in cultivating a collective political consciousness which is critical of the current social conditions. In de-centering western epistemologies and re-centering the Latin American school of thought, social leaders are collectively developing new ways of knowing. They work to deconstruct a number of reductionist binaries



**Image 04**

La Vaca North viewed from above with Corabastos market visible behind (Brookes, 2024)

which have come to define normative politics, namely the separation of the human and ecological spheres. Through understanding their own diverse subaltern identities, social organizations critically analyze the ways in which nature has also been deemed a marginal actor in the current system. Their work highlights the importance of rebuilding a relationship with their ecological surroundings. In a Freirean method, popular education schools teach objective historical and social realities while simultaneously expressing the importance of the subjective experience of the individual (Freire, 1970). All marginal identities

and experiences are seen as valuable and worthy of care. The success of communities enacting these pedagogical strategies to produce an empowered citizenry with clear political goals, should not be overlooked by the state. For policy to function effectively and democratically, the political will of the people must be aligned with policy goals, highlighting that citizen participation is a precursor to territorial development. Without this, state policies that aim to establish a culture of care risk becoming obsolete. This form of place-based knowledge production, derived from lived experiences, entrenches the 'territorio', and the ecological structure

which encompasses it, as the principle object of care. This systemic view of territorial well-being inherently marries ecological dimensions with the emotional, spiritual, and embodied dimensions of the human experience. Through this work, communities are producing a critical vocabulary for action; one that informs new pluriversal ways of perceiving the world and thus, new modes of care practice. Importantly, it provides an invaluable framework which should be centered in processes of just co-production between social organizations and state actors to reimagine how care can be cultivated in order to mend the existing socio-ecological rift.

**Image 05**

Co-production in action - spatial mapping with Hugo (Sepúlveda, 2024)



### 3.3. Just Co-Production

The state can work to achieve its goal of establishing citizen's trust in institutions through developing explicit processes of just co-production with social organizations (POT, 2021). To truly territorialize the district care system, social organizations must be deemed critical actors in the process of adapting the DCS to meet the needs of their barrios. Establishing mutual co-responsibility means that the state recognises the importance

of preserving popular control over territories without alleviating itself of its responsibilities to provide citizens of every barrio with the services necessary to ensure quality of life. In response, citizens should recognise their role as political agents who are responsible for partaking in democratic processes. Successful examples of state-civil society co-production are present within Bogota already. The 'Plan de Manejo Ambiental del Humedal La Vaca', or Environmental Management Plan for La Vaca Wetland, is produced yearly through collaboration of social leaders, the district secretary of the environment, as well as other private actors. These 'Mesas', involving diverse stakeholders, were recognised by the city as critical planning instruments that allowed for the recognition and implementation of knowledge and experiences from within the territory to be central in the production of the document (PMALV). Scaling these existing processes of direct democracy in the future development of the district care system is crucial.

### 3.4. Salud Colectiva

There is untapped potential for Bogota's care policy framework to become truly transformative. Through the aforementioned strategies of just co-production with social organizations who have already constructed the necessary pillars of knowledge, Bogota is capable of enacting a new vision of care: Salud Colectiva. This 'collective health' framework is one that goes beyond normative binary perceptions of health as merely the opposite of sickness and instead promotes health as a holistic experience of overall wellbeing. Reiterating the concepts central to popular education in Bogota, the needs of any one individual cannot be extricated from those of their broader social or ecological environment as they are constituents of one entity. A collective health framework takes into account the ways in which sickness is a byproduct of complex social realities, expanding on the existing 'social determinants of health' which are widely recognized by academics and policymakers (Vinje et al., 2017; WHO, 2024). In breaking from western

perceptions of health, Salud Colectiva has emerged as an expansive Latin American concept which takes into consideration all of the historical and social realities that define life in a territory. Ecological health and human health cannot be divorced from each other. Thus, the ecological structure of the city, a critical component of life in Bogota, must be re-embedded into broader conceptualizations of care in order to holistically address social needs.

#### Image 06

The wetland is the aula (Guaches y Guarichas, 2024)



## 4. Recommendations:

### 4.1. Utilize 'Popular Indicators' to measure success

- The care services that social organizations provide to their community often yield intangible, or more qualitative, benefits that extend beyond traditional quantitative measurements of success. These can include increased emotional and affective intelligence, sense of belongingness, hope, ecological care, trust, and spiritual wellbeing.
- To territorialize 'care', policymakers can consider these critical popular indicators in future iterations of the District Care System.
- The government should create a pilot program to determine the effectiveness of popular indicators in including the cities' most vulnerable populations and forefronting under-researched issues

### 4.2. Promote Popular Education as a mechanism to develop a culture of holistic care

- Place-based educational models have proved useful in developing environmental awareness amongst residents. Policymakers should support existing popular education projects that center environmentalism as a key principle.

#### Image 07

Le Lausque, 2024

- Popular education should also be seen as a critical mechanism through which to further inform pilot programmes for popular indicators and a means through which to disseminate critical information.

### 4.3. Formally recognise social organizations as critical practitioners of care within their territories

- Policymakers should recognize the work of social organizations who have autonomously developed comprehensive structures of care which meet the particular needs of their territories
- Local government should extend assistance and funding to social organizations who are currently fulfilling the responsibilities of the state through care service provision
- Policymakers from the District Secretary of Women's Affairs can initiate a pilot program to establish a 'Mesa' where social organizations are key stakeholders in developing Manzanas del Cuidado. This program can be modeled after the framework used to develop the annual Environmental Management Plan for La Vaca wetland.

### 4.4. Expand upon the existing District Care System to construct a more comprehensive socio-ecological conception of 'care'

- Policymakers in the city of Bogota should develop a care system framework whose targets and services encompass the needs of the city's ecological structure.

- The focus on gender inequality is critical, but the care system should also be adapted to support additional vulnerable populations to aid in supporting the well-being of Bogota's citizens in a more holistic manner.

## 5. Conclusion

Just as Ecuador pioneered 'Buen Vivir' to harness territorial cosmologies of biocentrism, Bogotá has the potential to construct something equally as transformative. Latin America at large has already accepted the need for alternative visions of development that highlight the richness of Latin American thought. Bogota should take immense pride in initiating a movement where a holistic and intersectional conception of 'care' is centered in policymaking. Amongst the greatest riches of the nation is its ecological biodiversity, giving life to its citizens.

If Bogotá is truly committed to constructing a Colombian culture of Care, one which is aspirational, society's interdependence with nature must be recognized as indisputable.



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