

# Cultivating Environmental Citizenship: Connecting People and Nature Through Collective Spaces

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

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### Key messages

- The influx of migrants and the rapid urbanisation in Bogotá's periphery generate tensions, arising from different notions of how space is to be used, managed and controlled.
- This social discord not only affects human relations but also has profound environmental ramifications, as evidenced by the Bogotá River, now transformed into an informal dumping ground.
- Marginalized groups face challenges in utilizing spaces. Women, for instance, face increased vulnerability to violence and crime, while migrants often experience xenophobia.
- While government initiatives attempt to "improve" neighbourhoods in Bogotá's periphery, they have often failed to address underlying social tensions and to foster a genuine sense of community belonging.
- We advocate for maximising the potential of existing community-led initiatives to nurture collective responsibility for the neighbourhood's well-being.

### Introduction

More than a third of Bogotá is occupied by barrios (neighbourhoods) of informal origin (Tovar & García, 2011; Camargo & Hurtado, 2013). These are home to approximately 2 million residents, and are primarily located in the peripheral and marginal regions of the city (UN-Habitat, 2003; López Borbón, 2023). Bogotá has experienced significant population growth in recent decades, driven by factors such as internal displacement, as well as international migration resulting from political instability in neighbouring countries, such as Venezuela (Sarmiento, 2018; Carrizosa, 2021). This rapid growth has caused the demand for housing to outpace the city's ability to provide formal, regulated housing options (Ramos, 2008; Cuervo & Jaramillo, 2009). As a result, many low-income individuals and families have resorted to informal, self-building practices in illegal settlements which are often located in the riskiest topographies of the city, such as along hills and near water sources, making them vulnerable to landslides and floods (Ward et al., 2015; Sarmiento, 2018). The increase in population and the extensive urban sprawl in Bogotá have been accompanied by the emergence of Juntas de Acción Comunal (JAC) (Community Action Boards) and local initiatives, urging authorities to improve living conditions (Carrillo, 1999). Governed by national law 743 of 2002, JACs are non-profit civic organisations composed of residents voluntarily working together to pursue "integral and sustainable development based on the exercise of participatory democracy" (Congreso de Colombia, 2002: Article 8a). Each barrio has at least one salon communal (community centre) organised by the JAC, which is a space where "residents can gather to conduct activities, participate in political discussions, and planning of neighbourhood projects" (Hernández García, 2013a). Such collective spaces play a key role in defining the social and physical character of the communities which develop and utilize them (Hernández García, 2013b). Additionally, they serve as hubs for cultural exchange and the cultivation of values (Viviescas, 1997; Niño & Chaparro, 1997; Segovia & Oviedo, 2000; Hernandez Bonilla, 2001). This policy brief explores the role of collective spaces in nurturing a sense of environmental citizenship and shared responsibility among members of a community.

# 1. Key Definitions

## 1.1. Collective Space

Collective spaces are areas within a community that are used and managed collectively by its members, such as roads, parks, playgrounds, community centres, and gardens. These spaces, whether indoor or outdoor, large or small, intimate or exposed, explicitly or implicitly defined, serve to spatialize and reinforce social relationships and foster a sense of belonging among residents (Scheerlinck, 2013; Jacoby, 2019).

## 1.2. Environmental Citizenship

Environmental citizenship is defined as the responsible and proactive engagement of individuals or collectives in addressing environmental challenges, preventing the emergence of new environmental challenges, and fostering a healthy and sustainable relationship with nature (Levinson et al., 2020; Hadjichambis et al., 2022).

# 2. Methodology

Our research centres on Santa Rita, located in the Suba locality on the northern edge of Bogotá. Serving as a representative case study, this barrio offers insights into the common challenges faced by peripheral barrios in Bogotá and potential strategies for addressing them.

In collaboration with the JAC, our team sought to understand the complex issues affecting the residents and natural environment of Santa Rita, as well as past and current initiatives that the JAC have implemented to tackle these challenges. We began with desk-based research in January 2024, followed by primary data collection from April to May 2024 in Bogotá, Colombia.

Our 10-day fieldwork involved:

- 2 transect walks with JAC board members and residents.
- 3 focus groups with JAC members, with social leaders from surrounding neighbourhoods (Santa Cecilia and Lisboa),

residents, and El Gufo library workers.

- 20 semi-structured interviews with residents, informal recyclers, waste collectors, and street vendors.
- Participant observations throughout the fieldwork period.
- A co-production workshop on the final day which involved residents, street vendors, social leaders, and JAC members. The workshop included a scenario planning activity to imagine the future of Santa Rita, the construction of a timeline of key moments in the neighbourhood's history, a mind mapping exercise of prevalent challenges and their interconnections, and a mapping activity to spatialize issues.

# 3. Case Study: Santa Rita

## 3.1. Geographical Context

Santa Rita is part of a collection of neighbourhoods known as Sector Los Gavilanes (Micro Territorio SE9), which also includes Lisboa, Santa Cecilia, Villa Cindy, Bilbao, and Berlín, among others (Figure 1). Geographically, Sector Los Gavilanes is bordered by the Bogotá River and the municipality of Cota in Cundinamarca to the north and west. To the east, it is bordered by various neighbourhoods within the Tibabuyes UPZ (Zonal Planning Unit), and to the south it is bordered by the

Engativá locality. Additionally, the Juan Amarillo River runs along the southern edge of the sector, creating a water boundary together with the Bogotá River that encases most of Sector Los Gavilanes.

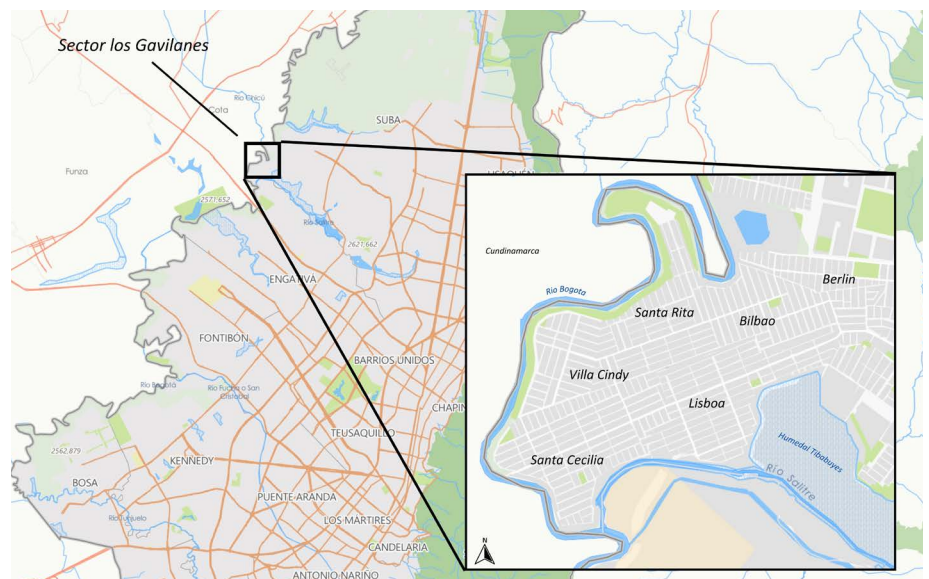
## 3.2. Historic Urban Development

Santa Rita, much like the rest of Suba, was originally inhabited by the Muisca Indigenous people. Insights from a member of SOS Humedal Tibabuyes Colombia reveal that near the river and wetlands, they constructed raised fields known as camellones which facilitated crop cultivation by ensuring proper irrigation and fertile soil. With the onset of colonisation, the landscape underwent significant changes, transitioning into vast estates known as fincas. According to the president of the JAC, Santa Rita was among these, eventually falling into the hands of two brothers, the last heirs, who subdivided the land into plots and sold them to individuals in dire need of housing in 1988.

The initial development of Santa Rita was characterised by informal "self-built" homes, primarily by those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the majority of whom were migrating internally within Colombia. This process gradually led to densification, with many households adding additional floors not only to accommodate growing families, but also to generate supplementary income streams. According to the JAC leader of Lisboa, this informal

**Image 01**

Map of Sector los Gavilanes by Authors (Source of Base Map: Infraestructura de Datos Espaciales para el Distrito Capital, 2024)



## Image 02

Street of Santa Rita, featuring self-built structures and unpaved dirt path. Source: Authors.



expansion intersected with the emergence of informal developers in the 90s, colloquially referred to as *tirreros* or “pirate” developers. These actors acquired land, mostly along the riverbank, through methods such as land invasions, parcelling and land reclamation (drying out the river).

However, houses built along the river faced heightened risks from flooding, exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure, substandard construction, and overcrowded conditions. In response to two severe floods in 1992 and 1995, local residents claim that they began building a *jarillón* (embankment) along the river between 1995 and 1999 to mitigate future flood risks. The embankment was subsequently completed by the government in 2004, aiming to provide better protection and stability for the community. The area was declared an emergency zone in 1998 and in 2017 resettlement orders were issued for 706 properties in Santa Rita and the adjacent neighbourhoods due to the continued risk of floods (Caja de la Vivienda Popular, 2018).

Despite its legalisation in 1993, Santa Rita continues to grapple with various challenges. Presently, the landscape primarily comprises self-built structures spanning two to four stories, interconnected by narrow, single-lane streets, with many remaining as unpaved dirt paths (Figure 2). While essential services such as access to the city’s electrical grid, sewage, and water are available, the absence of adequate urban planning has led to a dearth of green areas. Additionally, issues such as

solid waste pollution, social tensions, and high crime rates contribute to the area’s ongoing struggles, which will be further discussed below. To counteract these issues, the JAC of Santa Rita, established in 1995, has been actively engaged in reclaiming and revitalising collective spaces across the neighbourhood.

## 4. Problem Diagnosis & Current Strategies

### 4.1. Solid Waste Pollution and Environmental Impact

One of the primary concerns in Santa Rita is the accumulation of solid waste in the streets and particularly in the area around the river and its embankment (Figure 3). The high concentration of waste along the river is attributed to the presence of informal recyclers who reside nearby and sort waste in these areas.

During our first transect walk in the neighbourhood, a local resident expressed that solid waste pollution affects residents both physically and mentally, underscoring the health risks associated with the waste. Another resident and JAC board member, echoed this sentiment, noting that “pollution takes away life,” referring to how the build-up of waste has adversely impacted the community’s livelihoods and social well-being.

The high number of informal recyclers has created what locals refer to as a *guerra por centavos* (war for pennies) in Santa Rita—an expression reflecting how dozens of people are working strenuously for very little profit. During an interview with three Venezuelan informal recyclers, it was revealed that many external migrants take on this kind of work due to their lack of residency or citizenship status. They highlighted a spectrum of behaviours within the informal waste sector, ranging from environmentally conscious practices to rummaging through bags on the street in search of recyclable materials.

Inaccessible formal waste services further exacerbate the waste problem. Interviews and focus groups revealed that the formal waste service company imposes steep fees for waste collection. For instance, one shopkeeper pays a business rate of COP 95,000 (USD 22,85) to have their waste collected three times a week. Although household rates are somewhat lower, they still pose a financial burden for the majority of Santa Rita residents. Additionally, one of the co-managers of the local El Gufo library, explained that there are five different coloured bags that correspond to different kinds of waste. However, the cost associated with acquiring these bags renders it inaccessible to some residents.

Furthermore, some residents link the prevalence of poor waste sorting practices to the lack of educational opportunities in the neighbourhood. One resident emphasized that the responsibility for teaching proper



Image 03

Solid waste pollution along the river’s embankment and near plant pots. Source: Authors.

**Image 04**

Community garden by the local church. Source: Authors.



waste management lies not only with the education system but also with parents and landlords, highlighting the importance of instilling waste education at home. Another interviewee supported this notion and suggested that the JAC use their space to educate residents on waste management to mitigate the accumulation of waste in the streets.

In response to the waste challenges in Santa Rita, the JAC has implemented several initiatives. In 2019, board members mobilised to establish a community garden next to the church in collaboration with the priest and Fundación Ambiental para el Desarrollo Sostenible (FUNAD) (Figure 4). Previously, the vacant lot served as an informal landfill. Today, the fenced off garden grows a range of local herbs, vegetables, and plants, with two members responsible for selling the produce to re-invest into the garden. The garden also serves as an educational platform for youth, offering workshops and activities focused on gardening practices and environmental stewardship.

Additionally, former Suba mayor Julien Moreno supplied Santa Rita with plant pots, placed in the garden and along the new path by the river, as an effort to ‘beautify’ the neighbourhood and foster a stronger connection to nature (Figure 3). However, interviews revealed that the pots are used to hide weapons and drugs, and some have even been destroyed by the neighbourhood youth. While the JAC

views these interventions positively, some residents feel that their lack of maintenance has led to their misuse.

## **4.2. Diverse Demographics and Social Tensions**

Santa Rita is made up of diverse demographics including internal and external migrants, Venezuelans, Colombians, and individuals across all age groups. As the population continues to grow with the influx of newcomers, maintaining social cohesion becomes increasingly challenging. For instance, during a focus group, the JAC leader from Lisboa lamented that the rising population deepens the strain on local resources and services, which are already diminishing due to limited financial and social support from the government. This has led to heightened tensions between residents, as they are forced to compete for the scarce jobs, resources, and support available.

Since 2018, Colombia has taken in nearly 3 million Venezuelans, and as the government continues to provide support to these refugees, xenophobia continues to grow across the country (Gamba, 2024). This xenophobia is apparent in Santa Rita, where assumptions and blame are placed on migrants for the neighbourhood’s problems. Statements made by residents such as “Security is the worst because of people coming from

Venezuela,” “The government puts Venezuelans first,” and “Venezuelans take all the resources,” reflect this hostility. The vilification of migrants as the cause of resource constraints adds to an environment of instability and breeds a sense of alienation among migrants. Additionally, many residents that we spoke with during interviews and focus groups expressed how security issues and crime intensified in 2015, coinciding with one of the initial waves of Venezuelan migrants to Santa Rita.

The prevalent hostile and xenophobic sentiments in Santa Rita have marginalized specific demographics, further isolating them and eroding their sense of belonging in the community. Consequently, they exhibit minimal involvement and openness to participating in community initiatives and maintaining collective spaces. Compounding this issue is the transient nature of Santa Rita, with many residents viewing the neighbourhood as a temporary stop rather than a home. Furthermore, approximately half of the people living in the neighbourhood are tenants. Because tenants do not have the same long-term investment in the community as homeowners might, they feel less inclined to actively participate in initiatives aimed at improving the neighbourhood.

Moreover, interviews and focus groups revealed that the lack of recreational programming and distant schools have driven some youth to turn to crime (including drug use, homicide, and theft) rather than seeking formal education or employment. While this insight was predominantly shared by older residents, the International Crisis Group (2022) corroborates a correlation between migrants, youth, and criminal activity, since it is the most easily available form of employment and does not require one to have legal status. The high crime rates in Santa Rita have significantly impacted community cohesion and engagement, with many residents choosing to avoid interacting within the community and preferring to stay at home instead.

On the other hand, the JAC has worked diligently to transform and reclaim collective spaces within the neighbourhood for positive community interaction. One notable success is the

**Image 05**

River embankment with reduced visibility, known as a hotspot for drug use, crime, and sexual assault. Source: Authors.



revitalization of the green space near the Bogotá River. Through gardening and the donation of flowerpots, this area that was once a hotspot for criminal activity and drug use, has been significantly improved. As a result of the JAC's efforts, such negative activities have decreased, creating a safer and more inviting space.

### 4.3. Women's Safety and Social Struggles

A central theme that emerged in our research is the role of women, both as leaders of change and as those bearing the brunt of social inequities. In Santa Rita and other barrios within and outside Suba, women shoulder compounded burdens of poverty, violence, and care responsibilities.

Interviews and focus groups with women in the community revealed a stark reality: there is no space in Santa Rita where women feel completely safe. Many avoid public spaces and interactions with other residents, opting to isolate themselves in their homes to ensure their safety. One mother of three daughters disclosed that she minimizes her outings with her children due to safety concerns, feeling secure only in large groups.

Particularly near the river embankment, where visibility is obstructed, the fear of violence and

sexual assault looms large among women, resulting in their limited use of these spaces and confining them to certain areas of the neighbourhood (Figure 5). Although attempts were made to enhance safety by the river through band-aid solutions like barbed wire and fencing, illegal and violent activities persist.

At the locality level, initiatives like *Mujeres Libres, Seguras y sin Miedo*, seek to combat violence against women, prevent femicide, and foster active citizenship. However, participation in these initiatives, as observed in Santa Rita, is often hindered by women's limited time and capacity. This constraint primarily stems from women's triple burden of labour which refers to the simultaneous reproductive, productive, and community managing roles that women undertake (Intepe & Williams, 2021). This burden is further exacerbated by the lack of resources and aid provided by the government for older and pregnant women. The leader of the JAC in Lisboa shared her concerns about older women not receiving pensions or aid, making it difficult for them to manage their burdens effectively.

Furthermore, those who have taken on leadership roles within the community

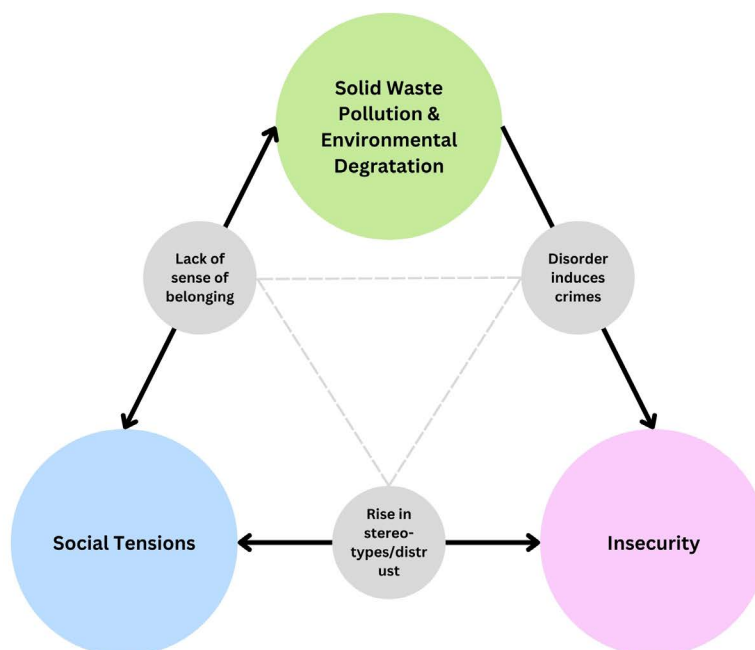
are predominantly elderly women. The Santa Rita JAC is led by a woman, and its board is majority women. This highlights the crucial role women play in the community and their efforts to nurture collective responsibility within the neighbourhood. However, the lack of support and resources makes the burden of responsibility extremely high for the JAC women. For example, the limited funding and financial aid often compel the JAC president to cover certain costs out of her own pocket, creating significant barriers to effectively creating change in the neighbourhood.

#### 4.3.1 A Complex Web of Issues

The key thematic areas identified in our problem diagnosis are intricately intertwined, revealing a complex network of challenges within Santa Rita (Figure 6). Social tensions, stemming from the rich diversity of Santa Rita's population, contribute to feelings of exclusion and alienation among certain groups, diminishing their sense of belonging to the community. Consequently, they feel less inclined to participate in community activities or take ownership of collective spaces, resulting in poor waste management practices and heightened littering in public areas. Particularly affected are areas along

**Image 06**

Diagram showing the interconnections between the key thematic areas.



the riverbank, where environmental pollution poses health and safety risks. A disorderly space with garbage produces an environment more conducive to social disorder and crime. As expressed by a JAC member, “For criminals, this type of disorder suggests that crimes will not be reported or controlled, in other words, that no one is in charge.” Women, particularly young Venezuelan women, bear a disproportionate burden of these adverse conditions, facing heightened vulnerabilities to violence and harm. Moreover, the increased crime in the area contributes to the rise in stereotypes and distrust among residents, further undermining community cohesion.

## 5. Recommendations

In our recommendations, we are adopting an acupuncture approach, strategically targeting areas where interventions can yield profound transformative effects in healing the Santa Rita neighbourhood. Although these interventions may seem isolated at first glance, their selection is purposeful. The strategies presented herein have been developed collaboratively with the JAC and community members. They are specifically designed to address the root causes of the identified issues and to trigger knock-on effects that permeate throughout the community.

### Image 07

An AI generated illustration of community gardens and kitchens by the riverbank of Santa Rita. Source: Authors.



### 5.1. Expanding Community

Community gardens play a crucial role in fostering social inclusion and environmental citizenship. Currently, there is only one operational community garden in Santa Rita, which highlights a significant opportunity for expansion. The strategic reclamation of neglected and waste-filled spaces, such as the banks of the Bogotá River, can serve as the next step in this initiative (Figure 7).

By participating in the care of these green spaces, residents can reconnect with nature, fostering a deeper appreciation for the environment and a sense of stewardship for its preservation (McClintock, 2010; Turner, 2011). These gardens also function as educational hubs, offering hands-on learning experiences in composting, water conservation, and organic gardening techniques. Through active involvement in these activities, community members of all ages not only acquire practical skills but also internalize the values of environmental responsibility (Turner, 2011).

Furthermore, well-maintained green spaces can enhance neighbourhood safety by discouraging criminal activities and providing safe gathering spots for residents (McCabe, 2014). The presence of engaged community members in these areas creates “eyes on the street,” a concept that enhances safety through increased visibility and community oversight.

Moreover, by engaging residents from diverse backgrounds, including migrants, in the creation and maintenance of these gardens, a greater sense of belonging can be fostered, thereby promoting social inclusion and reducing feelings of isolation (Hinton & Schnurr, 2021).

### 5.2. Community Kitchens and Cultural Exchanges

Community kitchens are often used in Latin America as a space for education and collective action in urban settings (Ortiz and Millan, 2022). We recommend establishing community kitchens adjacent to community gardens, where residents can gather to prepare and share meals using locally grown produce. By gathering people around the communal table, community kitchens nurture a sense of belonging and connection, transcending cultural differences and fostering unity among neighbours (Veen et al., 2016).

Moreover, community kitchens serve as platforms for celebrating cultural diversity within the neighbourhood (Edres, 2020). Through cultural events, festivals, and workshops, residents can showcase their cuisine, heritage, music, and art. By encouraging appreciation for different cultures and promoting social interaction, these initiatives contribute to the reduction of prejudice and the promotion of inclusivity within the community. Additionally, these spaces can serve as hubs for information spreading about various community initiatives and programs.

### 5.3. Implementing Youth Outreach Programs

The absence of a public school in Santa Rita has led many youths to turn to criminal activities such as drug-use and gang involvement, creating an unsafe environment, particularly for women. Implementing youth outreach programs can offer alternative activities and opportunities for at-risk youth. The Suba Social Innovation Laboratory (SubaLab) runs several youth outreach programs, including bike trips to local community gardens, football tournaments, and other sports events in public parks. These programs present a significant

opportunity for the youth in Santa Rita to engage in constructive activities, providing pathways away from criminal involvement and fostering a safer community.

#### **5.4. Community-led Mapping of Risk Hotspots**

The JAC has the opportunity to adopt a participatory approach to address safety concerns, empowering local community members to contribute to the creation of a map detailing risk hotspots based on their unique perspectives, needs, and insights. They could take advantage of existing tools in the city such as the SafetiPin app which provides real-time safety scores and maps based on user generated audits and reports (Leao et al., 2019). For instance, women can use the app to find safer routes, avoid unsafe areas, and share their live location with trusted contacts. The JAC could promote this app in Santa Rita through partnership with Secretariat for Women and Gender Equality (SDMujer) and Women's Security Council who first initiated SafetiPin in Bogotá in 2014 (Serge, 2022). Providing training on how to use the SafetiPin app will be necessary as many residents were unfamiliar with the app. This collaborative effort holds the potential to empower the community, improve safety, and foster a sense of collective responsibility for creating a safer urban environment.

#### **5.5. Collaborative Initiatives at Different Scales**

Currently, each JAC in Los Gavilanes operates somewhat independently, with their own set of initiatives and projects. However, there is considerable potential in encouraging collaboration among these boards. By transcending individual boundaries and fostering a spirit of cooperation, JACs can achieve a more significant and far-reaching impact. One effective strategy to promote collaboration is through monthly meetings that rotate among neighbourhoods. This approach offers numerous benefits. Firstly, it facilitates the pooling of resources and knowledge sharing

among JACs. For example, one JAC may have expertise in a particular area or access to specific resources that could benefit another JAC's projects. Moreover, collaborative efforts enable JACs to learn from each other's experiences, both successes and failures. As such, JACs can avoid repeating mistakes and adopt proven strategies tailored to the context of each neighbourhood. Ultimately, this collaborative approach not only expands the reach of JAC programs but also fosters a sense of solidarity and unity among residents.

To address the lack of visibility of JAC's work, especially among young people in Santa Rita, efforts are needed to make their initiatives more visible. For instance, they could utilize different forms of social media to promote their initiatives and recruit more members. Additionally, considering alternative communication channels such as newsletters for individuals without access to phones and radio broadcasts for those who may face literacy challenges can further broaden their outreach and ensure inclusivity within the community.

On a larger scale, fostering deeper relationships between the JACs and the Alcaldía Local de Suba is crucial. The Alcaldía has implemented several initiatives, such as leading a public space recovery event on Bogotá River Day where they planted 60 trees, organized painting activities to improve the look of public spaces and conducted educational campaigns about proper waste sorting (Alcaldía Local de Suba, 2022). Another example is the Pact of Appropriation of Public Space of the Bogotá River in September 2021, which included commitments to beautify the area through decorative gardening, recreational events, and grass planting (Alcaldía Local de Suba 2022). Additionally, in July 2018, they led a cleanup campaign for the Bogotá River.

However, these initiatives are often perceived as superficial and not tailored to the specific needs and context of Santa Rita. Residents express a desire for more meaningful engagement from government officials, emphasizing the need for them to "leave the desk" and

come to listen and see the unique challenges faced by the community. This underscores the importance of a more collaborative and responsive approach, where local authorities work closely with JACs to develop context specific solutions that truly address the underlying issues.

### **6. Conclusion**

Santa Rita exemplifies the broader challenges of Bogotá's peripheral barrios, including rapid urbanization, inadequate formal housing, and simmering social tensions. The convergence of issues like solid waste pollution, prejudice towards migrants, and safety issues, especially for women, highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions. Revitalizing collective spaces, such as through community gardens and kitchens, plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges by fostering social inclusion, environmental citizenship, and cultural exchange. While JACs stand at the forefront of this transformative endeavour, there is a pressing need for enhanced collaboration from barrio to barrio and with local government entities. By fostering stronger partnerships and synergies, JACs can effectively leverage their grassroots networks to drive meaningful change and amplify the impact of community led initiatives. Ultimately, embracing a participatory ethos ensures that interventions are finely tailored to the unique dynamics of the barrio, laying the groundwork for sustainable and enduring transformations across the cityscape.

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