The role of private green spaces in urban greening plans and policies: Evidence from Italy

Chiara Parretta [(1)] - Chiara Cortinovis [(1)] - Davide Geneletti [(1)]

[(1)] University Of Trento, Civil, Environmental And Mechanical Engineering, Trento, Italy

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Abstract Urban nature is increasingly recognised as essential for biodiversity and ecosystem service (ES) provision. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 calls on cities with over 20,000 inhabitants to develop Urban Nature Plans to integrate nature into urban environments, improve ecological connectivity and limit biodiversity-harmful practices, ideally providing a strategic framework to align ecological objectives with mobility, building, and climate policies. Moreover, the EU Nature Restoration Regulation sets targets to increase the total national area of urban green space and the tree canopy cover of all European cities. Such targets include both public and private green spaces, such as residential yards, private parks, and green areas associated with commercial properties. Local policies and regulations in several cities already acknowledge the importance of private green spaces as a key component of urban green infrastructure and their role in ES provision. For example, Berlin, Helsinki, and Vienna have introduced binding ecological standards that target private plots, requiring minimum green coverage, species selection, and de-sealing measures as part of the building permit process. However, besides single policy instruments, there is no systematic evidence on how private green spaces are incorporated into urban greening strategies and green regulation frameworks. This study investigates how private green spaces are addressed in urban greening plans and policies by focusing on (i) what objectives, strategies, and actions are included; and (ii) what data and indicators are used to define the baseline and to monitor the implementation. A sample of Italian cities was selected as the unit of analysis. For each city, we considered a broad set of documents related to urban green planning and management, from the more strategic ones such as urban green plans, biodiversity, and urban forestation strategies, to the more operational ones such as guidelines on public space and tree management and regulations for public and private green areas. We also considered documents not strictly focused on urban green spaces but addressing them as part of broader planning provisions, such as general/comprehensive urban plans and building regulations. Through a content analysis of the documents, we assessed to what extent they acknowledge the biodiversity and ES contributions of private spaces, whether targets and actions specific to private green spaces are formulated (and if they align with the Nature Restoration Regulation targets), and how their implementation is going to be monitored. Results are discussed in terms of how cities can adapt their greening plans and policies to systematically incorporate private green spaces, thereby supporting effective urban nature strategies to achieve biodiversity and restoration goals.