

## Rethinking environmental justice from the post-socialist city context: The case of informal green areas

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### Abstract

Environmental justice theory has largely been developed in Western contexts, resulting in blind spots when applying it to the unfinished planning project of socialist modernity, which left behind vast informal green areas now subjected to neoliberal urbanization processes. Combining sociological fieldwork with a critical evaluation of the literature on environmental justice, the paper focuses on informal green areas in Estonia's capital, Tallinn. While former studies convey a rather positive picture of green space provision and access in post-socialist cities, the common focus on distributive justice conceals inequalities and challenges to the inclusive creation of a fair city "on the ground." By rethinking environmental justice approaches in urban, green space research in the post-socialist context, we explore the experiences and perspectives of vulnerable groups who are less mobile and more dependent on nearby green areas, specifically the informal green area of Kurepõllu in the Lasnamäe district. One result of the study has been to uncover the complexities of evaluating the quality of informal green areas in terms of environmental justice. In Kurepõllu, the often discussed issue of neglect is locally seen as an enabler of informal practices that create(d) a place for humans to care, produce, meet or enjoy solitude, whereas attempts to develop these green areas, which could solve maintenance issues, generated concern about losing such benefits. We thus urge the careful recognition and inclusion of local needs and experiences to mitigate problems in the field of environmental justice in a way that is meaningful to vulnerable groups and species.

**KEYWORDS:** environmental justice, informal green areas, post-socialist city, green space quality

## Introduction

Ongoing climate and environmental changes are experienced in a socio-spatially diverse way. While the climate and environmental crisis is global, its consequences are primarily felt locally (Annist et al., 2022). Against the backdrop of accelerating global urbanization, the ecological, climatic, and social challenges that accompany this crisis tend to concentrate in urban areas, leading to a renewed discourse on urban sustainability (Davidson, 2010; Plüschke-Altöf & Sooväli-Sepping, 2022). UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 even sets the provision of “safe, inclusive and accessible green and public space” as a central objective, highlighting vulnerable groups in particular (UN, 2015), which places a specific focus on environmental justice.

Addressing this focus on environmental justice concerns, this paper discusses the case of the informal green area of Kurepõllu in Estonia’s capital Tallinn. As a relic of the unfinished modernist planning project of the socialist past, informal green areas, such as residential courtyards, wastelands or vacant lots, are widely distributed in post-socialist cities (cf. Sikorska et al., 2020; Sechi et al., 2022). Despite often lacking official recognition, they fulfill a crucial role in reducing inequalities in nearby green space availability and in mitigating the effects of climate and environmental change (cf. Sikorska et al., 2020; Sechi et al., 2022), which is particularly relevant for groups with limited mobility. In the case of Tallinn’s Lasnamäe socialist housing estate, the location of the green area of Kurepõllu, there is considerable dependence on publicly owned and accessible green areas for social and spatial reasons. On the one hand, the mobility of local residents is often limited for economic (cf. limited car ownership and access to private land) or other reasons (e.g. small children, old age or disability). On the other hand, the district is relatively vulnerable to the consequences of climate change, due to a combination of environmental factors that intensify urban heat island effects and hinder rainwater infiltration and felt as health or accessibility issues, which green areas help to mitigate (Tallinn City, 2021c; Sagris & Sepp, 2021).

The case of Kurepõllu is analyzed using an environmental justice lens. In its current reading, environmental justice theory examines urban green areas through four dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice and capabilities (Anguelovski et al., 2020). The intent is to explore, map and analyse how and to what extent environmental benefits and vulnerabilities are (un)equally endured or enjoyed, by whom, why and with what effects (Walker, 2009). Environmental justice theory has long focused particularly on distributive justice (Schlosberg, 2004), hence, on how environmental risks and benefits are unevenly distributed among social groups and across

space (Walker, 2009). Utilizing a distributive justice frame, the question of who can or cannot benefit from nature's amenities has also been at the core of environmental justice studies of urban green areas (Anguelovski et al., 2020; Plüschke-Altöf & Sooväli-Seping, 2022). However, the very procedures that lead to distributive (in)justices are also relevant—that is, the fairness of, and participation in environmental decision-making (Boone & Fragkias, 2013; Anguelovski et al., 2020)—which requires consideration of three dimensions. First, procedural justice addresses (un)equal access to environmental planning and management processes (Schlosberg, 2004; Walker, 2009). Second, interactional justice critically questions whether the full diversity of experiences, needs and values is recognized in distributive and procedural justice (Anguelovski et al., 2020). Third, it is acknowledged that inequalities emerge in terms of capabilities, with people having different capacities to change unjust situations (Anguelovski et al., 2020).

While the focus and research tools provided by environmental justice studies help to understand different experiences of, and vulnerabilities to climate and environmental change, recent studies indicate challenges in applying these to the post-socialist context. Green areas are oftentimes in high abundance in post-socialist urban spaces, as a result of both twentieth-century modernist planning practices and non-capitalist production of space under state socialism, when green areas were part of an interconnected system of welfare infrastructures (Biernacka & Kronenberg, 2018; Haase et al., 2019; Kronenberg et al., 2020; Pikner, 2022; Sechi et al., 2020). These mainly comprise spaces, such as courtyards, vacant lots, wastelands (or brownfields) and recreational areas, that remained undeveloped and are currently not recognized or legally protected, leaving them as “informal green areas” (Rupprecht & Byrne, 2014; Pietrzyk-Kaszynska et al., 2017; Kronenberg et al., 2020;). Informal green areas frequently “elude formal classifications” (Pietrzyk-Kaszynska et al., 2017, p. 86) as parks or reserves, for example, due to their temporary and transitory character, as well as uncertainty around land tenure or changing governance settings. In the case of Tallinn, Pikner (2022) and Unt (2014) also showed that the collapse of the militarized border regime and the dismantling of industrial areas left behind voids that can be characterized as informal green areas.

Given such an abundance of green spaces, the quantitative approach prevalent in environmental (distributive) justice and green space research alike can only display a superficial picture. In Tallinn, for example, more than 80% of residents live within 300 m of a green space of over 5,000 m<sup>2</sup>, which counts as a central criterion for measuring green space provision (Tallinn City, 2015), indicating a relatively fair situation that, however, ignores the complexities “on the ground.” This challenge in focusing on quantitative cri-

teria in the post-socialist context is used as an opportunity to shift the focus of research to subjective qualities (see Kronenberg et al., 2020, Sechi et al., 2022).

Until now, the quality of informal green areas has been rather critically assessed in the post-socialist urban context (cf. Sechi et al., 2022). However, by zooming in with a sociological case study, we could investigate if and how established measuring standards fit the life worlds of different groups (cf. Anguelovski et al., 2020). While we agree with the multiple challenges discussed, especially the neglect in maintenance, our research indicates that informal green areas may be locally experienced as highly attractive and actively used by vulnerable groups. As a result, attempts to raise the quality of informal green areas through their development might be experienced by local residents as causing, rather than solving, environmental justice problems, as it removes the informality that has hitherto defined the quality of places like Kurepõllu in the eyes of the locals.

In the following, we introduce the Kurepõllu case study and the research design. After that, the results are discussed and used to rethink environmental justice research from the post-socialist context as well as to propose solutions for just developments of urban green areas that accommodate current sustainability challenges while considering the perspective of those most dependent on them.

### **Kurepõllu green area**

Kurepõllu is a wasteland of 15 ha, with a self-constructed pigeon-coop, built at the beginning of the 2000s, as its main landmark (see Figure 1). Like other wastelands in Lasnamäe, Kurepõllu has been identified as an urban biodiversity hub due to its diverse habitats, the richness of its range of species (OÜ Nordic Botanical, 2019; Rannap & Soomets, Jürivete, 2021; Vacht et al., 2019) and its centrality to ecological connectivity (Brun & Pietro, 2021). Its vegetation includes various grasses, perennials, shrubs, bushes and deciduous trees.

The area is situated on the eastern side of Estonia's capital Tallinn, in the district of Lasnamäe, which has a population of 118,261 (Tallinn City, 2022b) spread over approximately 27 km<sup>2</sup>, making it one of the city's biggest and most populated districts. It resembles any of the many mass housing estates of the socialist era, the development of which started in the late 1950s to address a structural housing shortage. This type of residential housing dominated both Estonia and the whole of the USSR until the early 1990s and saw a progressive improvement in materials, living space and architectural ambitions over time (Measure & Zadorin, 2016). The construction of Lasnamäe started in the late

1970s. Consisting mainly of five to twelve-story panel buildings, the district was supposed to have many connected parks, but these plans were never realized due to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Sild, 2014). The panel buildings were organized into complexes, so-called micro-districts, which included courtyards with playgrounds, greenery and—in many cases, unrealized—educational, cultural and health services. Green areas in these micro-districts include parks, forest parks and many informal green areas, that is, courtyards or wastelands such as Kurepõllu.



Figure 1: Case study area (photo by Paco Ulman)

Today, Lasnamäe faces multiple challenges including its high degree of segregation (Marcinčzak et al., 2017). Populated mostly by ethnic Russians (59% in 2022), it also has a higher number of ethnic Ukrainians and Belarusians than any other district in Tallinn (Tallinn City, 2022b), and the smallest percentage of Estonian speakers (27%). Furthermore, it includes vulnerable mobility groups such as children, the elderly and people with disabilities (Tallinn City, 2022b), while the household income is lower than other districts in Tallinn and below the Estonian average (Eesti Statistika, 2020).

The general situation of green space provision in Tallinn is fair (see above) and there are noticeable investments in Lasnamäe's green infrastructure, in particular the Tondiraba park development, courtyard renovation projects and participation in EU-funded Na-

ture-based Solution projects (Tallinn City, 2015, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a). Yet the district still has the smallest number of green areas, both formal and informal, in relation to its total area (Tallinn City, 2021c, Figure 2).

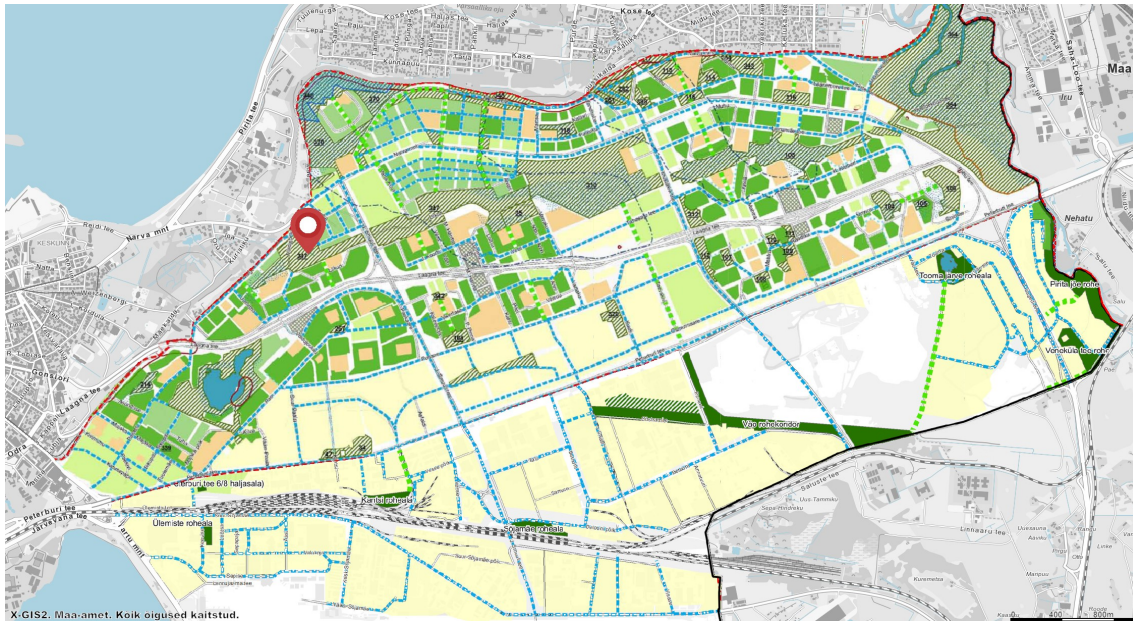


Figure 2: Map of green areas in Lasnamäe including Kurepõllu (red pin); protected areas and informal green spaces are marked in narrow-striped pattern; shades green through yellow without pattern represent a gradient from areas with most green spaces (dark green) to the least (light yellow) (Estonian Land Board, 2022)

This makes its residents more vulnerable to the consequences of climate change, as the tall concrete buildings create an urban heat island effect (Sagris & Sepp, 2017) and the proliferation of impervious surfaces hinders rainwater infiltration (Tallinn City 2021c). As these phenomena will become more pronounced with climate change and can at the same time be less mitigated due to the relative lack of green areas, they are felt most in Lasnamäe. In this light, the question of protecting green areas as well as their quality becomes very important in the district. This is even more relevant for vulnerable population groups such as children, the elderly or the Russian-speaking inhabitants who are more dependent on public green areas in the city due to limited access to car or private land ownership (see also Pungas et al., 2022). Kurepõllu is just such a nearby green area.

To better understand the subjective experiences of locals coming to Kurepõllu, we utilized sociological fieldwork. Our first visits to Kurepõllu took place in 2018 and 2019, with more structured fieldwork between September 2020 and May 2021. Participant observation included informal conversations at the site. Some of these took place near famous area landmarks such as the pigeon-coop and shelter (described in detail below), while others were conducted while walking, in accordance with the idea of the go-along

interview (Kusenbach, 2003). This helped people on the site to point out what is important to them in the landscape. Additionally, seven in-depth interviews were held with local residents from different backgrounds, and one expert interview with a representative of the city district. To study the visual material posted on the field site in social media, netnography was used (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography is an ethnographic method of observation that is applied to the online world where people nowadays leave a lot of traces. In this case study the focus was on analyzing what people most attend to and value in the area. For this, the tags *#kurepõllu* (the area's name) and *#tuvila* (Estonian for pigeon coop) and the location search were applied in Instagram and Facebook search engines. The resulting qualitative data were structured in line with repeating patterns and topics from observation, interviews and netnography. The first analysis was presented as part of Karina Vabson's Master's thesis at Tallinn University (Vabson, 2021).

### **The subjective experience of informal green areas**

The case study conveys that for residents spending time in Kurepõllu, environmental justice issues arise in terms of its accessibility and vulnerability to neglect, as well as the potential loss of the green area; however, the way these environmental justice categories are subjectively experienced varies from the discussions in the literature. In fact, for many residents the neglect is experienced as a form of informality that has unlocked usage practices that define the quality of the area for them. In the following we discuss accessibility, neglect and the potential loss of the green area from the perspective of residents living nearby Kurepõllu.

### **A place to care, produce, meet and enjoy solitude**

From an environmental justice perspective, access to green areas has physical, social and psychological aspects (cf. Dahlberg et al., 2022). In Kurepõllu, the main challenges arise in terms of physical accessibility due to the lack of paved roads and maintenance, which makes the area hard to access for people with limited mobility for most of the year, especially in rainy and snowy seasons. For example, large puddles appear in certain weather conditions—either because of rain or from snow melting (Figure 3). This increases a risk of falling—a concern that elderly people in particular have voiced about Lasnamäe's informal green areas (Tallinn City, 2022a). However, there is also one asphalted pedestrian road that runs around the fringes of Kurepõllu and, as the only road enabling access throughout the seasons, it is intensively used. Numerous young mothers, for example, walk back and forth along it with their prams. As Kurepõllu is some

distance away from car traffic and the panel buildings, it offers a quiet environment for getting a baby to sleep while still being nearby people's homes.



Figure 3: Muddling through a puddle (photo by Karina Vabson)

Next to physical accessibility, the lack of municipal maintenance and the neglect of the area also influences social and psychological accessibility by enabling a set of more uncontrolled practices, which are not comfortable for all users. Some interlocutors mentioned vandalism and the consumption of alcohol or drugs. For one local woman, people walking their mostly unleashed dogs was “very disturbing,” causing feelings of fear and insecurity.

At the same time, the lack of maintenance resulted in an informality that provides opportunities for alternative usage practices and human-nature relations which are more limited in official parks and other formal green areas. In fact, Lasnamäe is known and praised by locals for its informal green areas, which form an important part of the landscape (Rotar, 2016; Bogatyryov, 2012). Residents have been actively using these “undeveloped” green areas since the Soviet plans to create a green network were abolished after the collapse of the Soviet Union and put on hold for decades. As a result, various practices have emerged over the past 30 years, such as hiking in the wetlands, exercising, birdwatching, flower and wild herb picking, ice-skating or playing ice-hockey, sunbathing, children's play, dog-walking, barbecuing and mushroom and berry foraging. During fieldwork, an elderly woman living close by told us about her hobby of making



flower bouquets. She collects field flowers that grow wild in the informal green space, many of which are alvar plants, puts them into a plastic bottle with water and decorates her home with them (Figure 4). In winter, the bushes and trees of Kurepõllu and other Lasnamäe informal green spaces are filled with home-made bird feeders where residents bring grains and fat for the birds.



Figure 4: Engaging in seasonal activities: flower picking (photo by Marta Giaccone)

Public discourse often frames informal green areas as “empty spaces” in need of development, either for profit (real estate, parking lots, infrastructure) or with focus on green development to enhance city climate and residential health. Yet, for the inhabitants of Lasnamäe who come to Kurepõllu, the aspect of “wilderness” stemming from its informality and non-development is the focus of their attention. Resembling Cronon’s (1996, p. 8) idea of the social construction of “wildness” as antipode to a civilization defined by “very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history,” in Kurepõllu “wild nature” is defined as rich, beautiful and healthy, in opposition to curated nature and formal parks. One woman in her thirties, who regularly visits the area,

describes Kurepõllu as a place that is “wild” and rich in nature, where a variety of plants and animals can be observed. She explains:

Wild nature is very important. Parks are good on their own, but it is here where there are a *lot of animals*.... I walk here with my children, and we know which birds are singing and who they communicate to. With my children we have learnt about *a lot of plants* and have observed animals. There are a lot of hares and hedgehogs here. (Woman, 31, authors’ emphasis)

It is in this non-curated quality that our interlocutors see the “beauty” of nature. A man in his forties, who had helped to build a roofed shelter, showed us his favorite tree—a hawthorn—and said that it was “the most *beautiful* tree in the whole world” (authors’ emphasis). With netnography, an Instagram account was found of a woman living nearby who posts photos of the flowers, plants and landscapes of Kurepõllu on a weekly basis, thereby presenting the richness of non-human species and the changes throughout the seasons. Other interlocutors also admire the picturesque landscape: “There are a lot of apple and cherry trees [left from old farms]. I have even had photo sessions with my customers here. Over there is a beautiful dandelion field. Very picturesque” (woman, 39).

Next to the beauty and richness, the smaller human imprint on nature in Kurepõllu is also seen as comparatively healthier. There are, for example, apple trees, cherry trees and raspberry bushes whose fruit are popular with pickers, both amongst the young and the elderly. One of the teenagers believed that the apples from Kurepõllu are healthier because they are cleaner and have not been sprayed with chemicals “like the ones in the shops.” Another interviewee also collects birch juice in the area.

Despite the neglect of Kurepõllu by the municipality, which resonates with the discussions in the literature (cf. Sechi et al., 2022), people living nearby show considerable commitment to practices of care and stewardship. Over the years, several informal objects have been built, such as a pigeon coop, an urban garden, seating furniture and flower beds, a roofed shelter and a playground. The pigeon coop was the first of these constructions and has since become an important landmark in the area and a place where local children like to spend their free time, observing the pigeons, feeding them grain and learning about the different breeds from the man who developed this “playground” (Figure 5).

All of these landmarks serve as meeting places for small groups of friends and families and each is strongly associated with a certain community although they are open to

everyone. We argue that it is the informality in Kurepõllu that offers opportunities to engage in these practices of constructing, producing and care, which are in contrast to the prominence of place- and nature-consumption in more formalized green areas. The best example is the pigeon coop itself, where the pigeon-breeders have created an area not only to practice their own hobby, but also to shelter and take care of other animal species. Part of the land close to the pigeon coop has also been cultivated by local women growing edible plants.



Figure 5: Learning about nature; children at the pigeon coop (photo by Jelena Rudi)

Families enjoy the opportunities for play and environmental education. One of the mothers was teaching her children about nature and different species in the area. The mobility of parents with small children is often limited, especially if the family does not own a car:

I don't own a car, and last autumn we started organizing these expeditions with my children in the evenings. We went [down] different paths, memorized some of the routes, and discovered different places. We found old stairs here. It's very interesting to explore and imagine together with the children what could have been here before. Without children I had no interest in coming here. But with small children, you cannot go far. (Woman, 31)

Our interlocutors emphasized their strong emotional connection with nature and their belief that they can only engage in most of their pastimes, such as walking, taking photos, birdwatching, growing plants and picking flowers and fruit, due to the fact that this area has wild, non-curated landscapes and is not controlled by the municipality. The strong emotional attachment also figures in recalled childhood memories of locals who sunbathed, ate apples and listened to concerts at the nearby outdoor Song Festival Grounds with their parents.

Next to caring, producing and social practices, the informality of Kurepõllu also provides opportunities for enjoying solitude. During fieldwork, our interlocutors stated that they value the peace of the area as well as the possibility to be on their own in Kurepõllu: for example, there was a man who came regularly to sit alone on the bench near the pigeon coop and did not want to engage in any conversation. This aligns with recent discussions on the need for places of solitude in the city to allow people respite from the profusion of information, events and multitasking in contemporary life, and prevent burnout and depression (Harro-Loit & Tooding, 2017; Vendik, 2020). This is also important for older children and teenagers for whom informal green areas offer a place where they can be without parental supervision, yet close to home. Research in Moscow shows that 90% of older children and teenagers prefer playing in informal green spaces, such as wastelands, to playgrounds (Yatsenko, 2012). Moreover, a recent study on natural affordances and children's mobility in Lasnamäe's green areas confirmed a less curated environment to be key to children's play, meanwhile ensuring physical accessibility and a degree of maintenance that reduces possible harm from, for example, glass or other waste (Parm, 2022). As fieldwork was conducted during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, teenaged interlocutors mentioned that they had nowhere else to go, as in spring 2021 visits to shopping centers or other indoor areas were not allowed. As they still needed space to socialize, Kurepõllu offered the opportunity to safely meet with peers away from parental supervision.

### **A place vulnerable to neglect and loss**

As with other informal green areas in Lasnamäe and elsewhere, Kurepõllu was neglected for many years. In fact, the area serves as an illegal dumping site for garbage, including toxic and biological waste. One local woman told that she frequently sees cars come to the area after dark and unload construction and other waste. As those who are dumping garbage arrive by car, she has concluded that they are not locals. This considerably affects the quality and safety of Kurepõllu and many other informal green areas in Las-

namäe, causing, for example, mild to moderate soil contamination from heavy metals (Soo, 2017), which raises questions in terms of environmental justice.

The scant attention municipalities and district managements paid to urban nature and green areas during the transformation period has been confirmed in other studies (cf. Pikner, 2022; Pungas et al., 2022; Sechi et al., 2022). In fact, public officials from the Environmental Department of Tallinn have critically scrutinized how greenery in urban politics was treated as “garnish” or a “teeny tiny thing” which could be dealt with after solving “real” problems (Pungas et al., 2022, p. 132). In recent years, local residents and students have, however, shown considerable care in initiatives such as community clean-ups (Liiviste, 2022), and, as outlined above, building places to spend time and nurture social ties and nature, such as the pigeon coop or the urban garden. At the same time, the lack of maintenance cannot be overcome by local care initiatives alone.

However, the district and the City of Tallinn has gradually started to become more aware of the value of informal green areas and wetlands. As a result, some are being transformed into parks, the most prominent example being the Tondiraba wetland in Lasnamäe, which has been developed into the biggest activity park in the Baltics (Viil, 2021). Other initiatives, co-funded by the European Union (Tallinn City, 2022a), are also investing in Lasnamäe’s green areas. While these investments in green infrastructure might increase maintenance and usability, in particular for groups with inhibited mobility, they can also lead to the formalization of green areas. Critical studies have pinpointed how green space development can lead to a standardization in terms of aesthetics and accepted usage practices (cf. Zalar & Pries, 2022; Pungas et al., 2022), as well as entailing the risk of green gentrification and displacement of user groups (cf. Rigolon & Nemeth, 2018). We argue that it also raises questions of procedural justice, that is, the extent to which already existing usage practices, such as those in Kurepõllu, are recognized and can continue to be practiced once a green area becomes more formalized.

Kurepõllu is scheduled for partial development into a park in the upcoming years. In light of this, the do-it-yourself constructions are under particular scrutiny. Shelters and benches are examples of local vernacular architecture that spread in the Soviet Union when workers were granted plots of land for growing food—a policy influenced by food insecurity and the increased availability of free time. As a result, parts of the city administration see food production and do-it-yourself activities, such as the construction of shelters or seating areas, as obsolete practices from the socialist past where “we still *had to* grow everything [and] there were potato fields even in the apple tree gardens” (Pungas et al., 2022, p. 132). The built objects and practices in Kurepõllu are in fact treated as

illegal by the municipality, receiving negative media attention alongside calls to rebuild the area (Delfi, 2017; Karro-Kalberg, 2021; Svet, 2021). The formalization of Kurepõllu's green area into a park thus entails the risk of excluding established usage practices that define its quality for the people most dependent on the benefits Kurepõllu can provide: the residents living nearby.

Moreover, the development and maintenance activities occurring during such a formalization often give priority to human preferences for landscape aesthetics and curated nature, including mowing, adding street lights and paving roads, which negatively affect the existing biodiversity (cf. Hale et al., 2015; Aronson et al., 2017). At the moment, a small part of Kurepõllu is mowed once or twice per year, and this can be seen as a positive example of this practice. While such moderate disturbance may prompt positive interactions and an increase in biodiversity (Chollet et al., 2018; Dial & Roughgarde, 1988; Sehrt et al., 2020), green space development, such as is planned in the area, usually coincides with higher rates of maintenance and disturbance.

Next to park development, housing development is increasingly taking place in informal green areas, causing a gradual decrease in green spaces in Estonia in general (Sepp & Poom, 2020). Reflecting the wider trend, there is also an interest in monetizing the "wasted" lands in Kurepõllu. In the past three years alone the area has been surrounded by at least 477 newly built homes (Vabson, 2021). According to the General Plan for Lasnamäe's residential areas, 110,610 m<sup>2</sup> of Kurepõllu could accommodate eight residential quarters with a maximum of 1,491 new apartments (Tallinn City Planning Department, 2010). While these plans also include the creation of a formal park, the risk of Kurepõllu being "built over" figures in the interviews, with people expressing concern about developments and casting doubt over whether they will continue to have access: "I've never been informed that someone is planning to build something here, but I am always afraid of it.... This land is empty. There are few real estate people who value the nice birds and animals there are here" (woman, 31).

### **Rethinking environmental justice *from* the post-socialist context**

Past research on the question of environmental justice in post-socialist cities (cf. Biernacka & Kronenberg, 2018; Haase et al., 2019; Kronenberg et al., 2020; Pikner, 2022; Sechi et al., 2022) conveys two central findings. First, on the theoretical level, there is a need to adjust environmental justice theory to the specifics of the post-socialist city context, where there tends to be an "abundance of public and green spaces" (Sechi et al., 2022, p. 59). Second, on an empirical level, there is a call to focus on the quality of green areas

instead of their quantity. While the provision of, and access to green areas is often relatively fair in post-socialist cities in comparison to the findings of most environmental justice studies situated in the US, the quality varies considerably (Kronenberg et al., 2020; Sechi et al., 2022), either as a result of unequal siting of green interventions (Wolch et al., 2010; Rigolon & Németh, 2018; Anguelovski et al., 2020) or a lack of maintenance and legal protection of green areas (Kronenberg et al., 2020; Pikner, 2022; Sechi et al., 2022). This calls into question the dominance of quantitative research approaches to distributive justice which seek to measure the fair provision of and access to urban green spaces.

The case study in Kurepõllu feeds into these discussions by focusing on the subjective quality of the area for the local residents. In the post-socialist context, the quality of abundant informal green areas is often rather negatively assessed in the literature, as they have been subject to degradation or alienation from their original function due to a lack of municipal maintenance and legal protection during post-socialist transformations in the 1990s, when green infrastructure was not a priority (Treija et al., 2012; Haase et al., 2019; Kronenberg et al., 2020; Sechi et al., 2022;). These views exacerbate environmental justice issues, especially considering that many of these informal green areas are located in socialist housing estates, where vulnerable residential groups are located and where the effects of climate change can be more intensely felt.

Our research indicates that in the evaluation of quality the subjective experiences of local residents might provide a more complex picture than discussed in the literature so far. On the one hand, as indicated in the existing literature, the lack of maintenance impedes the physical accessibility of the Kurepõllu green area for local residents and makes the site vulnerable to environmental pollution in the form of soil contamination due to its use as an unofficial dumping site. On the other hand, for the residents of Kurepõllu the quality of the area is defined by the informality resulting from municipal neglect. It was the suspension phase of green space development that resulted in Kurepõllu's status as an informal green area, leading to fewer restrictions on social activities than in formal, more regulated green areas such as parks. This has enabled alternative usage practices of construction, producing and caring, including the building of the pigeon coop and flower beds and, more recently, the organization of garbage clean-ups; the formation of places of solitude and quietness; opportunities for socializing such as those in the pigeon breeders' communal space; and the use of Kurepõllu as a safe place for teenagers to gather without parental supervision. Moreover, the status as an informal green area also enabled the development of a wilder and less curated nature, which

benefits non-human species by increasing biodiversity and ecological connectivity but also allows more direct human-nature interactions. This offers opportunities for observing animals, plants and various landscapes throughout the seasons, harvesting nature's fruits and flowers, engaging in environmental learning and free play with direct contact with nature.

The case study shows that environmental justice challenges experienced by residents coming to Kurepõllu go beyond the problem of (quantitative) green space provision or the municipal neglect which both challenges and benefits its quality. Instead the main concern of locals is the potential loss of the possibilities and usage practices enabled by the informality of the area as a result of urban development. As indicated in the literature, this loss can be caused by profit-oriented development activities. The risk of informal green spaces being "built over" is particularly high in the context of the neoliberalization of post-socialist politics, with Estonia being known as a particularly rapid and rigid example (Pungas et al., 2022). The reason lies in the neoliberal preference for spatial exchange value over use value, which often results in a situation where green commons are subordinated to more profitable land uses such as capital-intensive, commercial real-estate or parking lot developments (Peck et al., 2009). These processes were exacerbated during the post-socialist transformation when planning became subject to investment pressures, and municipalities had little capacity to utilize economic restructuring for the public benefit (Feldman, 2000). In Kurepõllu, residents living nearby were also concerned about the loss of their green space, and, as the recent plans for real-estate development show, this concern is justified.

However, parts of the plan also foresee the transformation of Kurepõllu from an informal green space into a formal park and recreational area. On the one hand, while possibly increasing physical accessibility (cf. Dahlberg et al., 2022), the formal development of informal green areas raises the question of social accessibility and affordability for different societal groups (cf. Zupan & Budenbender, 2019). This is also reflected in the growing literature on green gentrification (cf. Rigolon & Németh, 2018; Wolch et al., 2010), which indicates that restoring degraded urban environments, including informal green areas, might raise the property value of the surrounding area, thereby displacing vulnerable groups who will no longer be able to benefit from this very urban nature. On the other hand, as the case of Kurepõllu shows, it is informality that enables a wide range of usage practices and non-mediated human-nature relations, including forms of stewardship and care (Nassauer, 1995). As Unt et al. (2014) argue, such "derelict sites are the potential spaces where spatial disorder can lead to new spatial qualities" (p. 284).



There are more limitations in formally recognized green areas, which tend to be affected by commodification and standardization trends (Sechi et al., 2022). As a result, despite their lack of maintenance, informal green areas are often perceived as attractive (Pietrzyk-Kaszynska et al., 2017) and as reducing inequalities in nearby accessibility to nature in the city (Sikorska et al., 2020), particularly for less mobile groups.

Considering the fact that existing practices in Kurepõllu are not necessarily approved by public officials, there is a high risk that they would not be recognized during transformation into a formal green area, as these are often more oriented towards place-consumption than active practices of production (cf. Pungas et al., 2022; Zalar & Pries, 2022). It is the loss of the major appeal of the wide range of informal practices the area offers that is at stake for the people in Kurepõllu. While developing the green area might solve the problems of maintenance and accessibility, in particular for people with inhibited mobility—thereby combating existing environmental justice issues—Kurepõllu shows that it raises new challenges of green space loss, formalization and potential green gentrification (cf. Rigolon & Nemeth, 2018), all contributing to the risk of limiting usage practices and the human-nature relations that define the experienced quality of the area for the residents nearby.

While the post-socialist context is often not perceived as theory-generating (Jehlička, 2021), we argue that the case of Kurepõllu also speaks beyond its specific context, as it highlights the shortcomings of the dominant quantitative approaches to environmental justice. In line with the recent critical environmental justice research (Boone & Fragkias, 2013; Anguelovski et al., 2020;), the case of Kurepõllu conveys the need to acknowledge the complexities of environmental justice issues “on the ground.” In fact, while the overall situation of green space provision in Tallinn appears rather fair, a state acknowledged by the 2023 EU Green Capital Award, the prior focus on quantitative criteria for distributive justice, as is common in this field of study, leaves actual environmental justice issues beneath the surface. This highlights the need for more qualitative criteria. The case also conveys the subjectivity of environmental justice concerns; in other words, places that are seen as problematic, neglected and poorly maintained by outsiders, might be valued as places with non-curated nature, biodiversity hubs and more direct human-nature relations by local residents visiting the area. This complexity should not be ignored when applying an environmental justice approach in practical decision-making.

## **A plea for a balanced green space development and the acknowledgement of diverse subjective experiences**

Our findings from the case study of the Kurepõllu informal green area suggest that the complexity of environmental justice concerns “on the ground” should be acknowledged to avoid one-size-fits-all solutions to green developments. This indicates the need to (1) account for a wide range of subjective perspectives and experiences, and (2) to research and balance these carefully in order to recognize diverse needs, in line with the focus of interactional justice.

Along with these requirements, there is a desire and a (conditionally) justified need for green space development in order to make them more usable for vulnerable groups in times of environmental and climate change. We particularly stress the issue of neglect in maintenance and problems with physical accessibility. At the same time, development can result in a formalization of green areas or their (partial) loss due to profit-oriented developments, leading to the displacement of practices currently making these areas into places that people produce and care for, where they meet up with others or enjoy solitude—as well as causing the destructive disturbance of established ecosystems and biodiversity hubs.

In the case of Kurepõllu and other informal green areas, we thus propose a “less is more” solution that builds on the notion of care and “moderate disturbance.” Inspired by the wide range of practices that raise the quality of informal green areas in the eyes of local residents, the notion of moderate disturbance to support ecosystems (see Dial & Roughgarde, 1998) could be extended to human ecosystems as well. This might be a particularly helpful approach to green space development, one based on the premise of urban sustainability, where the goal is to elevate both biodiversity and the diversity of social groups engaging with the area. The idea of moderate disturbance takes into account the need to combat existing environmental justice issues while preventing the emergence of new issues related to social accessibility (distributive justice) and recognition (interactional justice) that often coincide with a more intense green space development—even when the intention is to raise the quality of green areas.

By exploring the complexities of evaluating environmental justice in terms of green space quality, this paper adds to the scholarship on critical environmental justice. In a context of the relatively high distributive justice common to post-socialist cities, we were able to zoom into the quality of informal green areas, thereby uncovering subjective experiences of injustice that go beyond the issue of neglect in maintenance that is at the forefront of environmental justice studies in the post-socialist context. In fact, it was

more the threat of a loss of the benefits informality provides to people and non-human species, which might result from attempts to develop these green areas (and thereby solve issues resulting from a lack of maintenance), that caused concern, rather than the current neglect itself. Only by understanding these local needs and experiences better can green space developments unfold their potential to mitigate problems in the field of environmental justice in a way that is meaningful to vulnerable groups and species, who often have less voice in decision-making and experience less recognition of their usage practices and needs. Engaging vulnerable groups is always challenging, but extremely important. In fact, there is evidence that the negative association between social inequality and environmental quality (Cushing et al., 2015) is smaller in countries with an egalitarian culture where inclusivity is prioritized. Actively engaging local residential groups in Kurepõllu green space development can enhance the sense of collective responsibility for the area which already drives initiatives of care and stewardship, thereby contributing to the minimization of more negative informal practices, such as dumping, that have hitherto had a negative effect on green space quality.

## **Conclusion**

The results of our case study have shown that even such informal green areas as Kurepõllu, although neglected by the municipalities, can contribute substantially to the quality of life of locals. Informality and unregulated green areas not only initiate diversity in people's practices and empower community care of the landscape, but they also create more diverse ecosystems. While neglected areas in the urban environment can become the sites of unwanted and dangerous practices, such as the dumping of illegal waste, any interventions in the development of such green areas must be thought through very carefully, using an environmental justice lens that accounts for the complexity of subjective experiences. Only then can green space developments be fully "safe, inclusive and accessible" (UN, 2015), thereby contributing to urban sustainability in times of intense environmental and climate change.

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### **Povzetek**

Teorija okoljske pravičnosti, ki se je v večji meri porajala v zahodno evropskem in ameriškem kontekstu, še dandanes povzroča slepe pege v poskusih njene uporabe na območjih postsocialistične vzhodne in jugovzhodne Evrope. Prav na teh območjih je socialistična dediščina za seboj pustila obsežne neformalne zelene površine, med katerimi so številne dandanes podvržene neoliberalnim procesom urbanizacije. Z združevanjem sociološkega terenskega dela in kritičnim pregledom študij okoljske pravičnosti, se dani članek osredinja na neformalna zelena območja v estonski prestolnici Talin. Medtem ko pretekle študije tovrstne problematike navajajo dokaj pozitivno sliko zagotavljanja zelenih površin in dostopa do njih, v postsocialističnih kontekstih tovrstni poskusi razgrinjajo številne probleme. Le ti, se naprimer na neformalnem zelenem območju Kurepõllu v okrožju Lasnamäe, v mestu Talin kažejo skozi problematiko distributivne pravičnosti, ki prikriva neenakosti in izzive za vključujoče oblikovanje pravičnega mesta. S ponovnim razmislekom o pristopih okoljske pravičnosti v urbanih raziskavah zelenih površin v postsocialističnem kontekstu, vsebina članka raziskuje izkušnje in poglede ranljivih skupin, ki so manj mobilne in bolj odvisne od bližnjih zelenih površin. Vsebina razkriva kompleksnost ocenjevanja kakovosti neformalnih zelenih površin v okviru okoljske pravičnosti. V Kurepõllu se formalno in obče vprašanje zanemarjanja, lokalno kaže kot del neformalnih praks, ki ustvarjajo prostor, kjer ljudje skrbijo, delujejo, se srečujejo ali uživajo v samoti. Članek ponazarja, da kakršnikoli "poskusi" razvoja imenovanih zelenih površin lokalnim prebivalcem sprožajo zaskrbljenost morebitne izgube zelenih površin in z njimi povezanih dejavnosti. Skrbno prepoznavanje in vključevanje potreb ter izkušenj ranljivih skupin so ključni procesi za blažitev težav na področju okoljske pravičnosti.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** okoljska pravičnost, neformalne zelene površine, postsocialistično mesto, kakovost zelenih površin.

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