

Balancing Sustainability and Social Equity

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Abstract

Urban rezoning policies are increasingly designed to promote environmental sustainability, yet they often inadvertently exacerbate social inequalities. This paper examines the unintended consequences of New York City's 2023 "City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality" initiative, which, while addressing climate change, risks accelerating gentrification and displacing low-income Black communities. Drawing from the works of Joseph Stiglitz, Po Chu-I, and urban policy scholars, this study explores the broader ethical and socioeconomic tensions between green development and social equity. Findings indicate that urban sustainability initiatives frequently drive up property values, disproportionately benefiting affluent stakeholders while marginalizing vulnerable populations. This paper further evaluates potential solutions, including Community Land Trusts (CLTs), inclusive zoning policies, and Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs), assessing their effectiveness in mitigating displacement. The research underscores the urgent need for comprehensive policy approaches that balance environmental goals with social justice to create equitable and sustainable urban development.

Keywords: Urban rezoning, Sustainability, Social Equity, Gentrification, Displacement, Green Development, Environmental Justice, Affordable Housing, Community Land Trusts, Inclusive Zoning, Community Benefit Agreements, Urban Policy, Rent-Seeking, Property Values, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Urban rezoning policies have historically been used as tools for reshaping cities to meet changing economic, social, and environmental goals. Through these policies, governments can influence where housing, businesses, and industrial activities will be located, often with the aim of increasing economic development or addressing pressing social issues, such as environmental sustainability. In recent years, these policies have increasingly been formatted to combat climate change, as cities recognize their role as major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. However, urban rezoning policies, while often established as solutions to these pressing social issues, can unintentionally increase long-standing inequalities. For example, urban rezoning policies formatted to combat climate change often incorporate green construction and renewable energy infrastructure, which inadvertently increase property values in the specific regions they affect, thus driving out low-income communities that these policies should be protecting. In New York City, the 2023 "City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality" zoning initiative aims to combat climate change through sustainable urban development and urban rezoning policies. However, initiatives like these often come with unintended social consequences. Joseph Stiglitz, a public policy analyst, highlights how public policies frequently favor the rich by increasing the value of resources they already control, leaving vulnerable populations at a disadvantage (Stiglitz, 2020, p. 425). Similarly, Po Chu-I, a Chinese poet in the Tang Dynasty, demonstrates the human tendency to prioritize short term gains over long term stability and community well-being (Po Chu, 2020, p. 390). Together, these works show a recurring pattern:

policies designed for the public good can unintentionally increase inequalities. Additionally, both sources illustrate how influential actors, policy-makers or market participants, manipulate systems for personal profit, neglecting long-term social equity and sustainability. This theme of consequences raises a critical question: to what extent does the “City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality” initiative, while addressing environmental concerns, risk increasing gentrification and displacement in low-income Black communities? At its core, urban zoning policies reflect the challenges Joseph Stiglitz associates with rent-seeking behavior, where the wealthy disproportionately benefit from policies designed to increase property values. Policymakers often craft zoning initiatives that favor affluent stakeholders, prioritizing immediate economic gains while neglecting long-term social equity. Similarly, Po Chu’s narrative shows the dangers of favoring short-term gains over long term stability, mirroring the way rezoning efforts displace vulnerable communities (Po Chu, 2020, p. 390). These initiatives prioritize financial gain over preserving the cultural and social fabric of the neighborhoods they affect. This issue is particularly pressing to society right now as cities worldwide grapple with the dual challenges of reducing climate change and ensuring equitable development. For example, according to research cited in *Green Gentrification* by Gould and Lewis, cities that implemented urban greening projects to combat climate change have already seen property value increases of 30% in those areas, affecting not only the common residents of these areas, but also the low-income, marginalized groups that get displaced due to these effects. Furthermore, when New York’s High Line Park was implemented, an 85% increase in surrounding property values between 2003 and 2013 was observed, showing the correlation between zoning policies and increasing property values, thus displacing low-income communities (Gould and Lewis, 2016). Without proper safeguards, rezoning policies risk increasing displacement and increasing systemic inequalities over time, leaving vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by the drive for urban sustainability. Although the 2023 “City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality” initiative strives to combat climate change, its approach risks increasing gentrification and displacement, which outweigh its environmental benefits and necessitate community benefit agreements to balance sustainability with social justice.

Ethical Implications

Urban zoning policies, such as New York City’s “City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality” initiative, prioritize environmental sustainability but often undermine social equity, disproportionately displacing low-income Black communities with rising rents. This issue reflects broader global tensions between achieving environmental goals and ensuring socio economic justice. Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize-winning economist renowned for his analysis of inequality and market failures, criticizes rent-seeking behaviors as mechanisms that enrich developers while marginalizing vulnerable populations. Stiglitz shows that urban zoning reforms can disproportionately benefit affluent developers while marginalizing vulnerable populations. As policy makers and real estate developers design initiatives to inflate property values and stimulate economic growth, they displace low-income residents, reducing community ties and resilience (Stiglitz, 2020, p. 425). His insights align with those of Elvin Wyly, a leading scholar in urban geography and housing studies at the University of British Columbia, who shows how green zoning laws increase gentrification and displacement. For example, Wyly’s research shows that green projects often inflate property values, displacing long-term residents. Green developments often come with high upfront costs that are passed onto tenants through increased rent (Wyly, 2010, p. 2602). Similarly, Gould and Lewis, respected sociologists specializing in environmental justice, show in *Green Gentrification* that urban greening projects, such as New York’s High Line Park, increased surrounding property values by 85%,

pricing out working-class residents and low-income communities (Gould & Lewis, 2016). David Ley, a distinguished urban sociologist and expert in housing markets, uses the metaphor of the “pinball wizard” to illustrate the chaotic ripple effects of urban redevelopment. In his analysis, Ley argues that urban redevelopment initiatives, including those with goals of environmental sustainability, often trigger chaotic ripple effects, driving up rents and displacing vulnerable residents (Ley, 2023, p. 93). His work complements Pearsall’s findings, which show a racial disparity in displacement: neighborhoods with higher proportions of Black and Latino residents experience displacement rates 12% to 15% higher than predominantly white neighborhoods undergoing similar greening projects (Pearsall, 2012, p. 1013). Overall, as Po Chu-I, a Chinese poet in the Tang Dynasty states, there is a recurring theme across all issues of urban green projects and displacement: the human tendency to prioritize short term gains over long term stability and community well-being. These analyses reveal an ethical conflict in urban zoning policies that prioritize financial gains and environmental sustainability over social equity. Stiglitz critique shows policymakers’ tendencies to inflate property values for affluent investors, harming low-income communities. The commodification of housing under initiatives like “City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality” intensifies socioeconomic disparities, treating shelter as a profit-driven asset, and not a basic right. By neglecting safeguards for vulnerable populations, these policies increase inequality, raising critical ethical concerns about balancing environmental progress with social justice.

Cultural Identity

The issue of gentrification tied to environmental zoning initiatives, such as New York City’s “City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality,” is particularly troubling through the lens of cultural identity. Urban greening projects, while mainly aimed at improving environmental sustainability, displace long-standing, low-income, and minority communities, eroding cultural heritage and weakening social networks critical to resilience. Anguelovski, a renowned researcher in environmental justice, illustrates how green redevelopment inflates property values, forcing residents to relocate. In East Harlem, for example, property values increased by 300% after green zoning initiatives, disproportionately impacting Latino and Black residents, as they were forced to reallocate (Anguelovski 2014). Maantay and Maroko, leading experts in urban health and environmental science, found that 70% of green redevelopment projects in New York City occurred in historically low-income, minority areas, often without meaningful community input (Maantay & Maroko, 2018, p. 2233). The displacement that occurs from increased property values eliminates the cultural and historical narratives tied to these neighborhoods, creating a dual loss: physical space and cultural identity. This literary work shows how space is not just a physical entity but also a canvas for collective identity and memory. Both Anguelovski and Maantay emphasize that green redevelopment perpetuates systemic inequality by displacing marginalizing communities. Yet, they differ in their focus: while Anguelovski shows economic inequities, Maantay and Maroko show cultural erasure. Synthesizing these perspectives shows a compelling argument: sustainable urban policies must consider not only environmental goals but also the preservation of cultural identity. Without this balance, green zoning policies risk reinforcing disparities, fracturing communities, and eroding the diverse cultural fabric that defines cities like New York. This shows the urgent need for reform, as the loss of cultural identity is not just a local issue but a global threat to the social cohesion and heritage of urban centers.

Community Land Trusts

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are an increasingly popular strategy designed to combat displacement

caused by green gentrification. By transferring land ownership to non profit organizations that manage it for community benefit, CLTs can secure affordable housing and preserve cultural identity in rapidly developing neighborhoods. DeFilippis, a professor at Rutgers University, states that cities with CLTs, such as Burlington, Vermont, have seen a 58% reduction in displacement rates for low-income residents. The model's strength lies in its ability to ensure permanent affordability, allowing residents to remain in their neighborhoods regardless of rising property values (DeFilippis & Williams, 2019). Moreover, CLTs foster collective ownership, increasing social capital by engaging residents in decision-making processes. However, Yesim Sungu from Boston University presents an opposing viewpoint to CLTs, as she explains that the implementation of CLTs faces significant limitations. First, acquiring land in urban areas with high real estate demand is very expensive, often requiring substantial public subsidies or philanthropic investments. Additionally, CLTs require long-term management and maintenance, which can strain the financial and organizational resources of community groups (Yesim Sungu-Eryilmaz and Greenstein, 2007). While CLTs are effective in small-scale applications, scaling this model across major urban areas like New York City, where gentrification is very prominent, presents many logistical challenges.

Inclusive zoning policies

Inclusive zoning policies, which require developers to designate a portion of housing units as affordable in exchange for building rights, represent another potential approach to mitigating the negative effects of gentrification. Paired with green redevelopment initiatives, these policies could ensure that low-income residents benefit from eco-friendly infrastructure without being priced out of their neighborhoods. Gabbe, an associate professor at Santa Clara University, revealed that inclusive zoning laws increased affordable housing availability by 18% in regions like San Francisco and Boston (Gabbe, 2019). This solution's strength is in its scalability, as zoning laws can be easily incorporated into urban planning frameworks. To further, these policies can be altered to local contexts, ensuring cultural and economic sensitivity. However, the limitations of inclusive zoning should not be overlooked. Critics, such as Nico Calavita, a professor at San Diego University, argue that these policies usually fail to provide enough affordable housing units, as developers usually choose to just pay fees rather than comply with mandates (Calavita & Mallach, 2010). Jenny Schuetz, a professor from New York University, complement's Calavita and Mallach's work by explaining that these inclusive zoning laws alone cannot combat the underlying forces of gentrification, as they do not address rising property taxes or rents for existing residents (Schuetz, 2009).

Community Benefit Agreements

Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) are a strong solution for ensuring that green development projects benefit the entire population and communities equally, thus helping to reduce the negative impacts of green gentrification. Amanda Lee, an assistant city manager for the city of La Mesa, explains that CBA's strengths lie in their legally binding nature, which allows community coalitions to negotiate tangible commitments from developers for affordable housing, local job creation, and environmental safeguards (Lee, 2022). However, Nicholas Robinson, a well-renowned researcher on distributive justice, explains that the limitations of CBAs should not be overlooked. CBAs may face limitations such as unequal bargaining power, vague language, and challenges in enforcement, which can be addressed through increased community organizing, transparent contracts with clear terms, and independent monitoring mechanisms (Robinson, 2023). The long-term effects of successful CBAs can lead to enhanced community resilience, equitable access to green spaces, and improved social equity by ensuring that

development adapts to the needs of existing residents rather than displacing them. Unlike CLTs and inclusionary zoning policies, which can be constrained through funding and political will, CBAs are adaptable to different contexts and provide immediate benefits from specific projects, creating a platform for ongoing community engagement and influence over development outcomes. This dynamic allows CBAs to effectively balance development goals with the needs of marginalized communities, making them a strong tool for advancing equity in urban settings facing gentrification pressures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the “City of Yes for Carbon Neutrality” initiative in New York City shows the complex interaction between environmental goals and social equity. While urban rezoning policies aim to reduce climate change through sustainable development, they often risk increasing gentrification and displacement, disproportionately impacting low-income and minority communities. As analyzed, rent-seeking behavior, rising property values, and cultural erasure shows the unintended consequences of these policies. Both Joseph Stiglitz and Po Chu illustrate how influential actors manipulate systems for personal profit, neglecting long-term equity and sustainability. While some solutions, such as CLTs and inclusive zoning policies offer protections against displacement, they are often limited by scalability, insufficient funding, and political resistance, which can reduce their overall effectiveness. In contrast, CBAs directly address the negative effects of urban rezoning projects by requiring developers to commit to specific community-oriented improvements. A comprehensive approach that integrates many strategies, safeguards cultural identity, and prioritizes affordable housing is essential to ensure that urban sustainability initiatives serve all residents equally, fostering both environmental progress and social justice.

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