

## NEIGHBORHOODS FOR LIVING



**PUBLIC SPACE**  
**MANAGEMENT** **CULTURE**  
**EMPOWERMENT**  
**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**  
**CAPACITY LEADERSHIP**  
**IDENTITY COMMUNITY**

### 1. Background

Escazú has a population of 56,509 (INEC 2011) and is located on the outskirts of San José, the capital of Costa Rica. In recent years, this traditionally rural canton has seen significant urban expansion and population growth, which has led to the emergence of new areas inhabited by an upper-middle class population in its northeast part. Escazú is characterized by its social and geographical heterogeneity. It has communities whose social cohesion is evidenced by the people who live there, in that they know and interact with each other. However, there are also communities where there is much less interaction. This is the result of modern lifestyles and the perceived lack of safety in certain areas that drives people to remain in their homes. Additionally, there is a significant need to strengthen the organizational and community structures of neighbourhoods and civil society, particularly in newer or more marginalized areas that lack them.

Hence, the characteristics of the communities where the Neighbourhoods For Living [*Barrios para Convivir (BpC)*] programme has been developed are also quite varied. There are communities close to the city centre, rural communities, newer areas that have emerged as a result of urban relocation, urbanized neighbourhoods, and territories that are plagued with vulnerable social and economic conditions. These include poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, crime, lack of community infrastructure, or simply the fact that some areas are classified as high-risk.



## 2. Objective

The goal of the BpC programme is to co-manage the meeting, participation, and organization of neighbourhood groups to strengthen coexistence, aid in the appropriation of spaces, and develop the cultural wealth of the communities throughout the area.

**THE STRENGTH AND ORIGINALITY OF THIS PROJECT LIE IN ITS ABILITY TO ORGANIZE COMMUNITIES SO THAT THEY CAN BEST CONSIDER WAYS TO BUILD INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD IDENTITY.**

## 3. Project Origin

The BpC programme was implemented by the Cultural Management Office for Municipality of Escazú to encourage residents to meet and occupy their communities. Its aim is to create the kind of social fabric that is often absent in places where community members do not make use of space or recognize themselves as part of the same group.

The strength and originality of this project lie in its ability to organize communities so that they can best consider ways to build individual and collective neighbourhood identity.

The inherent risk was that people from communities would not get involved in the activity. It was for this reason that the following recommendations were made:

- Regular community meetings
- Active community involvement in coordinating activities
- Making community agreements when scheduling activities
- The creation of organizational committees by the community group
- Feedback after an activity





## 4. Content and Development

BpC has been carried out since 2013, but in 2017 the objective of the programme was re-organized so that it focused on community co-management and the social construction of neighbourhood spaces.

It has been implemented in communities with varied circumstances of social and economic vulnerability. Some of these are located in high-risk areas, some do not have community infrastructure in place, and still others are urbanized communities where residents do not know each other, or face unsafe conditions.

Throughout the programme, the “Open<sup>1</sup> Alleys” policy has been developed, which involves creating a path through the community. Residents open up their homes and organize different shared experiences such as art presentations, stories, workshops, traditional meals, neighbourhood tales, old photographs, and much more.

The BpC has been organized in a flexible way, adapting to the context and resources of each community, in a planned and concerted manner by the organizing group. The intervention methodology tries to empower community groups to self-organize activities, with the support of municipal services. As a result, it employs the following approaches:

1. At least 3 meetings with the community for planning and organization a month and a half before the day of the activity
2. Community coordination of Open Alleys
3. The community agrees to a programme, accompanied by the Cultural Management Office, which is open from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm. This involves activities around sports, education, and the arts. Some of the communities sell food to fully or partially finance specific group projects.
4. On the day of the activity, the community is taken to each stop along the tour guided by a group of local Maroon peoples.<sup>2</sup>
5. A feedback session after the activity.

In this way, community co-management of the BpC programme helps ensure a day full of art, education, and recreation, which become tools for strengthening neighbourhood participation, organization, and coexistence.

<sup>1</sup> Open spaces in private homes and combined with public spaces. In some cases this may be a porch, terrace, or veranda.

<sup>2</sup> Gathering of people that play percussion and wind instruments, who perform the traditional Cumbia, merengue, and others. Maroon music accompanies the masquerade dance, a group of people who wear masks and costumes, with large headdresses of characters such as a giant, death, the police, the devil, and others.

## 5. Primary Stakeholders

The Cultural Management Office of the Municipality of Escazú and community members are the main actors.

The Municipality of Escazú provides 100% of the budget for majority of the BpC programme, with support from the Cultural Management Office.

The community contributes by organizing and scheduling events. People also actively participate by preparing spaces, and most importantly, opening up their homes for the "Open Alleys" events.

**THE GOAL OF THE BPC PROGRAMME IS TO CO-MANAGE THE MEETING, PARTICIPATION AND ORGANIZATION OF NEIGHBOURHOOD GROUPS TO STRENGTHEN COEXISTENCE, AID IN THE APPROPRIATION OF SPACES, AND DEVELOP THE CULTURAL WEALTH OF THE COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT THE AREA.**

## 6. Assessment

From 2017 to 2019, the Neighbourhoods For Living programme was set up in 13 communities throughout the canton, each with different characteristics and needs that were based on the social, geographical, economic, and cultural contexts of each area.

The widespread participation of the neighbourhood and its involvement in each of the BpC initiatives underscored both a need and eagerness for these types of processes and spaces at the community level.

The projects and programmes that are developed by the Cultural Management Office are always subject to an assessment process. This year, the evaluation tool was modified to better meet the needs of the BpC goals.

Based on qualitative assessments from people in these communities, some of the following approaches emerged:

- To increase knowledge about others with whom people share the physical neighbourhood
- To strengthen the organizational capacities of people in the communities
- To value the cultural richness of their communities
- To activate or reactivate community groups to work toward shared goals that improve neighbourhoods.

## 7. Recommendations

At the beginning of 2019, the 2019-2029 Municipal Culture Policy of Escazú was approved, which considers the BpC programme to be one of its actions. This ensures that it will continue for the next 10 years.

Since BpC is an ongoing programme, it has allowed improvements to be made throughout its development. Each community provides a different perspective for learning, moving forward, and improving. Given the flexibility of the programme, and the fact that it lends a voice to participants while also giving them final decision-making authority are the main reasons to replicate this practice.

It would be beneficial to start with a more extensive co-management process, which would help enshrine existing authorities or strengthen others. The BpC is the culmination of such a process, and of implementing acquired capacities.

It was noted that traditional music and food were motivating factors for community members, and it became a point around which people would gather. If any other city wishes to reproduce this project, these must be considered essential.



## 8. Further Information

This article was written by Freddy Montero Mora, Head of Social Economic Management, Municipality of Escazú

Contact: [j.gestioncultural@escazu.go.cr](mailto:j.gestioncultural@escazu.go.cr)