

# *Promoting social well-being and psychophysical health through environmental restoration*

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## *Abstract*

Activist associations play a crucial role in promoting sustainability through initiatives focused on environmental, social, and cultural restoration and enhancement. These efforts not only contribute to the preservation of ecosystems and local heritage but also foster collective well-being by strengthening community bonds and social inclusion. Furthermore, by directly involving local communities, these associations empower individuals, and increase social capital. Additionally, related physical activities, such as environmental clean-ups or urban farming, enhance participants' psychophysical well-being by encouraging active lifestyles. This paper explores the impact of such initiatives on quality of life, highlighting the connection between sustainability, health, and social aspects.

*Keywords:* sustainability, environmental restoration, psychophysical wellbeing, social inclusion

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## **Introduction**

During recent decades has been observed wide activity of grassroots movements and activist associations that challenges and integrates traditional models of governance and development. These organizations operate based on the idea that sustainability is not only an environmental concern but multidimensional. Indeed, it encompasses many aspects such as

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social equity, cultural resilience, and individual well-being (Ariyon et al., 2024). One of the main issues faced by communities is the environmental degradation and socio-cultural fragmentation (Jeong & Seol, 2022). In this scenario, activist groups have stepped in to contribute with sustainable solutions that address both immediate local challenges and broader systemic issues. Their work, which ranges from urban farming to heritage restoration, demonstrates that collective action can yield tangible benefits for ecosystems and human health (Ihle et al., 2024). In Italy, the impact of such initiatives has been particularly notable and the Italian government acknowledged the importance of voluntary participation in green activities (Ministero dell'ambiente e della tutela del territorio e del mare, 2017). In fact, Italian activist associations have long been present in guiding community-led projects that integrate ecological restoration with social and cultural preservation. Over the past decade, numerous local groups have transformed abandoned urban spaces into renewed community gardens, revitalized historical sites, and organized environmental clean-ups that not only protect local biodiversity but also reinforce a sense of shared identity (Comune di Napoli, 2020; Ficocelli, 2022). Furthermore, in Italy, as in the rest of the world, a strong contribution to the initiation of such activities comes from deep-rooted cultural traditions, since the connection between the individuals and the land and local heritage is seen as a critical component of the individual and the collective identity.

One of the most significant dimensions of these initiatives is their effect on physical well-being. Participation in community-based activities such as urban farming, local clean-up drives, and heritage restoration projects offers opportunities for physical exercise and active engagement with the environment (Ihle et al., 2024). Studies have shown that involvement in urban gardening and other outdoor activities is associated with measurable improvements in cardiovascular health, muscle strength, and overall fitness (Hume et al., 2022). For instance, scientific literature reported that participants in community gardening projects experienced improvements in metabolic health markers and physiological wellness, including neuroendocrine and affective restoration from stress (Van Den Berg & Custers, 2011). Indeed, such physical activities, when combined with the social interaction inherent in community work, contribute to reduced stress levels and improved mental health, reinforcing the idea that sustainable practices can directly benefit individual well-being. Furthermore, the physical dimension of these activities is intricately linked to the broader concept of community health. The act of coming together to work on local projects not only promotes exercise but also fosters a supportive social environment (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014; Sugiyama et al., 2008).

Community initiatives often serve as hubs for intergenerational interaction, where knowledge is exchanged between older residents and younger community members, thereby enhancing social cohesion and reducing feelings of isolation. This sense of belonging and shared purpose has been associated with lower incidences of depression and anxiety, suggesting that the physical and mental health benefits of such activities are mutually reinforcing (Costa & Coimbra, 2024).

Furthermore, it should be noted that in addition to the direct health benefits, the role of activist associations can also enhance social capital (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014). The connections that can be created through these community engagements facilitate trust and reciprocity among residents, which are essential in times of economic or environmental crises. Social capital has been linked with improved local governance and resilience, and grassroots networks can be considered a safety net able to provide informal support systems that complement formal state interventions (Pretty, 2003). Several studies focused on documenting cases where communities with strong local ties were able to rapidly mobilize resources in response to emergencies, hence reducing the impacts of crises (Schobert et al., 2023). Moreover, the cultural implications of these initiatives should also be acknowledged. Historical and artistic heritage provides a unique context in which sustainability is interwoven with cultural preservation (Marzano & Castellini, 2024). Activist associations often collaborate with local historians, artists, and cultural institutions to restore historic sites and promote traditional practices. These cultural projects not only preserve the heritage of communities but also sustain and foster intangible assets such as community pride and identity (European Union, 2021). As a consequence, by revitalizing neglected spaces, these groups promote an environment that offers a deeper understanding of local history and traditions, that strengthens the sense of belonging and community. It is now globally clear that the concept of sustainability must be understood as a holistic paradigm. Institutions over the years have indeed been taking action to meet the demands of communities and recognizing the importance of volunteering and activism in this regard. National institutions, along with several regional authorities, activated programs to support these grassroots efforts, providing funding and technical assistance to projects that demonstrate significant social and environmental benefits. This policy shift underscores the importance of integrating bottom-up approaches with top-down governance to create more adaptive and resilient urban environments.

## Activism and Environmental Restoration

The main purpose of activist initiatives is the commitment to restoring and preserving natural environments, also including green spots within the cities. This corresponds to a goal that at the same time promotes sustainability and enhances human wellbeing. Activist associations mobilize community members to engage in activities such as environmental clean-ups, urban greening projects, tree planting, and waterway restorations (Hossain, 2018; McKinley et al., 2023). These efforts beyond mitigating pollution and fostering biodiversity in both urban and rural settings, also serve as vital contributors to sustainable development. These initiatives help integrate ecological restoration with social and cultural goals, and reduce carbon footprints, enhance local resilience, and create multifunctional landscapes that support both natural processes and community life. Sustainability in this context extends beyond environmental conservation; it includes the efficient use of resources, long-term planning, and the creation of systems that can cope with environmental stresses (Weber, 2000). Activist groups often promote sustainable practices by using local and natural materials, emphasizing low-impact techniques, and advocating for policies that support renewable energy and resource recycling. Urban greening projects, for example, contribute to the broader sustainability agenda by improving air quality, regulating urban temperatures, and offering spaces that encourage eco-friendly behaviors. This holistic approach takes into consideration the immediate environmental concerns and also builds the bases for long-term ecological health, aligning with global sustainability goals (European Union, 2021; Tzoulas et al., 2007). In addition to these environmental benefits, participation in restoration activities has a deep impact on physical activity and well-being too. Engaging in projects like environmental clean-ups and tree planting include moderate to vigorous physical activities that provide participants with regular exercise. Furthermore, several studies have shown that exposure to green spaces and nature-based activities is associated with improved cardiovascular health, reduced obesity rates, and better overall fitness (Maas et al., 2006; Sugiyama et al., 2008). In urban environments, even modest community gardening projects can result in significant health benefits. For example, research indicates that regular participation in such activities can lead to measurable reductions in blood pressure and improved metabolic health.

Related to these aspects, the Italian context provides characteristic evidence of these benefits. Including bigger and smaller towns, community-led urban greening initiatives have not only improved local air quality but have also fostered increased physical activity among residents. According to

data from the Istituto Superiore di Sanità, regions that have invested in urban green spaces have observed a correlation with lower rates of respiratory and cardiovascular issues (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2025). Furthermore, these initiatives serve as catalysts for social interaction, bringing together diverse community members, reinforcing local identity, and reducing social isolation. In Italy, where family and community ties have long been central to daily life, such projects have enhanced social cohesion and created informal support networks that contribute to both mental and physical health (European Commission, 2021). Beyond the direct benefits of physical exercise, environmental restoration activities create a positive feedback loop. The physical act of engaging with nature deepens an individual's connection to their surroundings, fostering a sense of responsibility and encouraging continued sustainable practices (Weber, 2000). This dynamic is even stronger in regions whose communities relate their identity with cultural heritage. Local initiatives often involve restoring historic sites or revitalizing abandoned urban spaces, transforming them into community hubs that support physical, mental, and social well-being (Auclair & Fairclough, 2015). These projects not only contribute to cleaner, greener cities but also help build a resilient and inclusive society that is better equipped to handle environmental and social challenges (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001; Wolch et al., 2014).

After analyzing this information we can state that activist associations largely contribute to environmental restoration by advancing sustainability, promoting physical activity, and enhancing overall wellbeing. Their initiatives bridge the gap between ecological conservation and human health, demonstrating that actions such as urban greening, community clean-ups, and heritage restoration can yield extensive benefits, from reducing urban pollution and mitigating climate change to improving cardiovascular health and fostering social inclusion.

## **Community Empowerment and Social Capital**

Beyond the physical improvements to their surroundings, activist associations also determine influence on the social structures of communities. By actively involving local residents in decision-making and direct action, these organizations create a sense of ownership and shared responsibility that transcends simple volunteerism (Graham & Howard, 2008). When community members contribute to local projects, they consolidate their commitment to collective wellbeing, and this results in a process that reinforces social capital, which is increasingly recognized as

essential for community resilience in the face of rapid social and environmental changes (Woolcock, 1998). This participatory approach to community empowerment generates numerous positive outcomes. Empowerment through engagement not only builds trust among neighbors but also facilitates the creation of robust networks capable of mobilizing support during times of crisis or change (Li et al., 2005). The inclusive nature of these initiatives encourages the exchange of ideas, skills, and resources, leading to enhanced problem-solving capacities at the grassroots level. Social scientists have found that when individuals are empowered to take an active role in their communities, the resulting social cohesion and mutual trust can lead to a more resilient and adaptive community cooperation (Nesterova & Spulber, 2020; Sommer, 2019). Such outcomes are fundamental in both urban and rural settings, where challenges demand collective action and rapid responses. To this regard, one key element is the notion of “bonding” and “bridging” social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the close connections among individuals within a community, while bridging social capital extends to relationships across diverse social groups. Activist associations often serve as platforms for both types: by working together on shared initiatives, participants forge strong intra-community ties, and by connecting with other groups, they also build networks that span social, cultural, and even geographic boundaries (Agnitsch et al., 2006). These networks have been shown to reduce isolation, improve access to resources, and enhance overall community well-being. The benefits of such social capital can affect many contexts. For instance, Robert Putnam's seminal work, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2001), illustrates how declines in community engagement can erode social cohesion, whereas renewed involvement in local activities helps rebuild this vital resource. Similarly, studies by Woolcock and Pretty underscore that higher levels of social capital are associated with improved collective management of resources and enhanced community resilience (Pretty, 2003; Woolcock, 1998). These insights are especially pertinent to communities facing modern challenges, where traditional institutions may no longer provide the necessary support structures.

Moreover, communities that experience high levels of empowerment and social capital are often better positioned to advocate for sustainable development and environmental justice (Selman, 2001). The act of engaging with local governance and decision-making democratizes the process and ensures environmental and social policies that are more reflective of local needs and values. In this way, the social networks built through activist associations can serve as a counterbalance to top-down approaches, fostering bottom-up innovations that are more adaptive and sustainable in the long run.

Empirical evidence also supports the link between community empowerment and health outcomes. Kawachi and Berkman highlight how social cohesion and trust within communities are closely linked to better health metrics, including lower rates of mental health issues and improved physical well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2014). Furthermore, in the aftermath of disasters, Aldrich has demonstrated that communities with strong social capital are more effective in their recovery processes, as the networks formed through local activism provide critical support systems (Aldrich, 2012). These findings suggest that empowering communities is not only beneficial for social and environmental outcomes but also for enhancing individual health and well-being. Hence, activist associations that promote community empowerment and build social capital create a ripple effect of positive change. They prove themselves to be able to improve the physical environment and also foster a sense of collective identity and mutual responsibility that is crucial for long-term resilience. Strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital, these initiatives enhance community capacity to respond to crises, advocate for sustainable practices, and ultimately improve overall quality of life.

### **Psychophysical Well-being and Active Lifestyles**

A further significant impact of activist associations is their ability to enhance the psychophysical health of their participants. The physical activities embedded in many sustainability initiatives, such as urban farming, community gardening, and environmental clean-ups, offer much more than a means to improve local environments (Sugiyama et al., 2008); they serve as vital opportunities for exercise, social engagement, and stress reduction. These activities are particularly effective in urban settings, where sedentary lifestyles and reduced access to natural spaces contribute to a range of chronic health issues (Van Den Berg & Custers, 2011). It should be stated that the structured nature of community gardening and urban farming requires regular, moderate physical activity that can help counteract the effects of modern sedentary living. For instance, studies have demonstrated that participation in gardening activities is associated with improved cardiovascular health, better metabolic profiles, and enhanced muscle strength (Armstrong, 2000; Litt et al., 2023). Regular physical exertion in these settings can improve physical fitness and also contribute to lower rates of obesity and chronic diseases. Beyond the physical exertion itself, the act of nurturing plants and managing green spaces has been linked to psychological benefits, including reduced symptoms of anxiety and

depression. In addition to improving physical health, these sustainability initiatives foster social interaction and community cohesion (Rogge et al., 2018). Active participation in environmental clean-ups and urban gardening projects creates a context for regular social engagement, which is known to improve mental wellbeing (Monteiro et al., 2024). The communal aspect of these projects helps build a support network among participants, reducing feelings of isolation and increasing the sense of belonging. These interactions often lead to improved self-esteem and a heightened sense of purpose which are factors that are often reported as fundamental in facing the stress and mental fatigue that many urban dwellers experience (Berto, 2014).

Research into the benefits of contact with nature reinforces these findings. A meta-analysis on gardening, for example, revealed that regular engagement in such activities is significantly correlated with better self-reported health outcomes and lower stress levels (Soga et al., 2016). Likewise, community-based studies have shown that individuals who participate in structured green space activities, such as those organized by activist associations, experience notable improvements in both mental and physical health. This dual benefit that enhances fitness and also reduces psychological stress, is able to create a comprehensive model for community development that aligns environmental stewardship with public health objectives (Albright & Hurd, 2023; Schwartz et al., 2023). Beyond physical health, the psychosocial benefits of these activities are profound. Regular interaction with nature and participation in communal activities have been shown to lower cortisol levels which is a biological marker of stress, and at the same time increasing feelings of relaxation and well-being (Van Den Berg & Custers, 2011). Such findings are reinforced by research that indicates that even minimal exposure to green environments can significantly improve mental health and overall quality of life (Maller et al., 2006). It should also be included that broader reviews have highlighted that public parks and other green spaces provide critical venues for physical activity and social engagement, ultimately contributing to reduced health inequalities. For example, Kaczynski and Henderson reviewed evidence suggesting that the availability of well-maintained parks is positively associated with higher levels of physical activity among residents (Kaczynski & Henderson, 2007). This can be considered a finding that underscores the public health importance of green space recovery through community activism.

## **Limitations and future perspective**

Although a substantial body of literature documents the diverse benefits



of social activism, which ranges from enhanced environmental quality to increased physical activity and improved mental health and reinforced social capital, there remains a significant gap in longitudinal research that systematically evaluates these outcomes over extended periods. While cross-sectional studies have effectively demonstrated that engagement in activities such as urban gardening, community clean-ups, and local environmental advocacy can lead to immediate improvements in both individual well-being and community resilience, few investigations have pursued the long-term trajectories of these benefits among participants who are consistently active over years or even decades. It is crucial to design and implement longitudinal studies that objectively measure the intensity, frequency, and depth of engagement in social activism practices. Such research should integrate multifaceted assessment tools that combines quantitative metrics such as physiological health indicators and frequency of participation with qualitative evaluations of social cohesion, psychological resilience, and community empowerment. By tracking these variables over time, researchers could elucidate the dynamic interplay between sustained activism and its cumulative impacts on individual health outcomes, group dynamics, and broader societal change. In doing so, we would gain critical insights into how continuous participation in community-based initiatives contributes to enduring transformations in social structures and public health, and how these changes might inform policy development and the strategic allocation of resources in support of sustainable community development.

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