Rolling out the Green Carpet:

How Vienna can become a champion in community greening

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Problem Statement

With a population of two million, Vienna is Austria's most populous city and capital, yet also the smallest state in the country (Ehrlich, 2025). The city is also home to a wide range of wildlife species including butterflies, bats, beavers, wild bees, fish and plants (Wien.info, n.d.). Both people and urban wildlife depend on urban green spaces for the benefits they provide (MA22, 2024; Walter et al., 2018).
Impermeable surfaces now account for 60% of Vienna's urbanized areas and green spaces are unevenly distributed (Schmidt et al., 2024). Some of the city's most densely built and populated districts, like the 6th or the 7th, offer less than the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended minimum of per capita Urban Green Space area (Hassan et al., 2024). Furthermore, tree cover within urbanized areas decreased by 3% between 2015 and 2021, while the total urban area grew by 4% (Schmidt et al., 2024). The resulting lack of vegetation exacerbates urban heat islands, reduces habitat provision, and limits recreational spaces, posing threats to both ecosystems and residents' well-being (Walter et al., 2018; Friesenecker et al., 2024). Urban green spaces, such as communal gardens, play a key role in supporting biodiversity as seen in a study on bee populations in Vienna (Lanner et al., 2019).

Social inequalities further shape environmental outcomes. Awareness and acceptance of greening initiatives are lower among people with lower Socio-Economic Status (SES), contributing to inequalities within and between districts. Community-based policies could improve awareness and self-efficacy around biodiversity and climate protection (GB* project reports; Zoderer & Wieser, 2024). Policy efforts in Vienna are fragmented across multiple agencies and stakeholders, slowing the implementation of micro-greening measures, despite the EU Nature Restoration Law incentive to integrate green spaces into urban planning (MA22, MA37, MA28; Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2025). The fragmentation in combination with unclear legal framework and strict security regulations, form an obstacle for community-based initiatives.

Primary actors affected by Vienna's unequal distribution of green spaces include residents in dense, heat-vulnerable districts and urban biodiversity (flora, fauna, pollinators). Highly influential stakeholders include MA22, MA42, district councils, MA28, MA37, private landlords, and housing cooperatives. Medium-power but high-interest actors include GB*, NGOs, community garden groups, and local institutions. Low-power/high-interest actors include residents, migrant communities, and citizen groups seeking to engage in greening but facing administrative barriers.

Within the City of Vienna several strategies address climate change, population growth and the unequal distribution of green spaces: e.g. Wien-Plan, STEP 2035, Smart City Strategy Vienna, Urban Heat Island Strategy Plan, Vienna Heat Action Plan, Vienna Climate Guide. Along with their subsequent policies, these strategies are carried out by different governmental departments (municipal departments, municipal district offices, City of Vienna, etc.), which usually plan projects independently of one another. This lack of a unified governance framework hinders efficient collaborative work, comprehensive understanding of planned and ongoing projects among citizens and citizen engagement due to the limited use of communication channels and exposure (Furchtlehner, 2023).

Multiple problem drivers have been identified. Firstly, the siloed administrative structures limit coordination across MA22, MA42, MA37, MA28, and district authorities (Mocca et al.,

2020). This fragmented multi-level governance creates slow, top-down procedures resulting in complex bureaucratic procedures that hinder local action. Secondly, civil society participation remains weak with environmental governance described as 'elitist' and excluding residents (Mocca et al., 2020). Lastly, communication of existing programs remains largely monolingual, limiting participation among migrant and lower-income communities (Buijs et al., 2016). Also noteworthy, there is almost no systematic monitoring or evaluation on the efficacy of current greening initiatives.

The increasing urban heat island effect disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, further exacerbating existing social and spatial inequalities between districts and social groups. Furthermore, the alarming difference in the acceptance of climate-protection measures between people with high and low SES will further increase, causing potential social and spatial conflicts. Overall, the acceptance of climate-protection measures will likely decrease due to a lack of perceived self-efficacy.
Missed opportunities for low-cost, community-led climate adaptation may result in an impending failure to meet local and EU climate requirements for cities, leading to more cost-intensive measures and potential EU fines in the future. This would widen the gap between Vienna's climate goals, on-the-ground implementation and social harmony.

Vienna already has strong foundations, but existing tools and initiatives are poorly connected, due to the lack of a centralized one-stop platform. Such a platform would allow for a more comprehensive and easier navigation of policy using the same resources. Together with strategic communication, community-driven protection of the greening infrastructure is empowered, which in turn lowers maintenance costs for the city government. (Benedict and McMahon 2012)

Appendix

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- Overview of Vienna's urban greening strategies, emphasizing iconic projects like the Gasometer.

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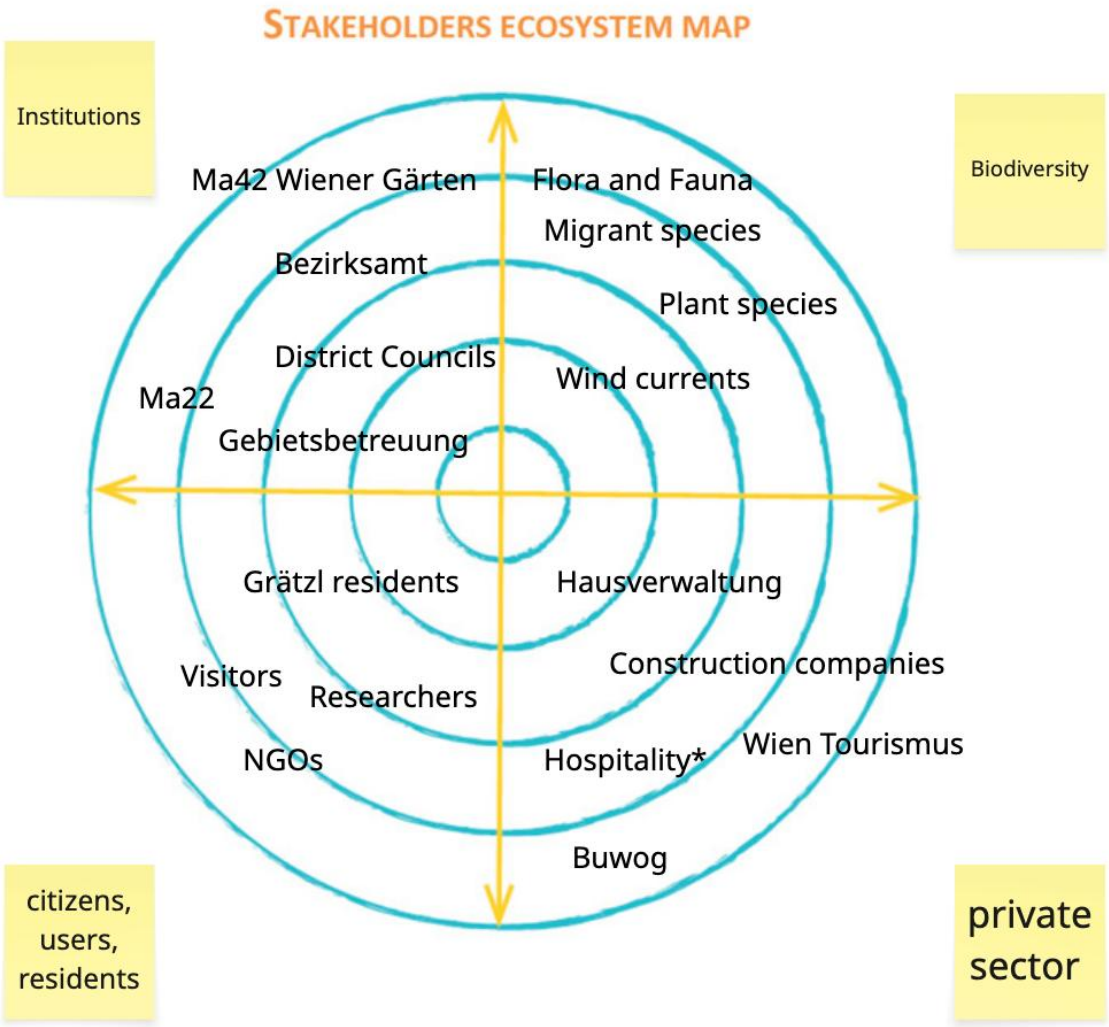
Stakeholder Analysis



Institutions such as district councils and city departments hold the decision-making power and shape policies, motivated by their responsibilities to manage land, protect citizen well-being, and meet environmental goals.

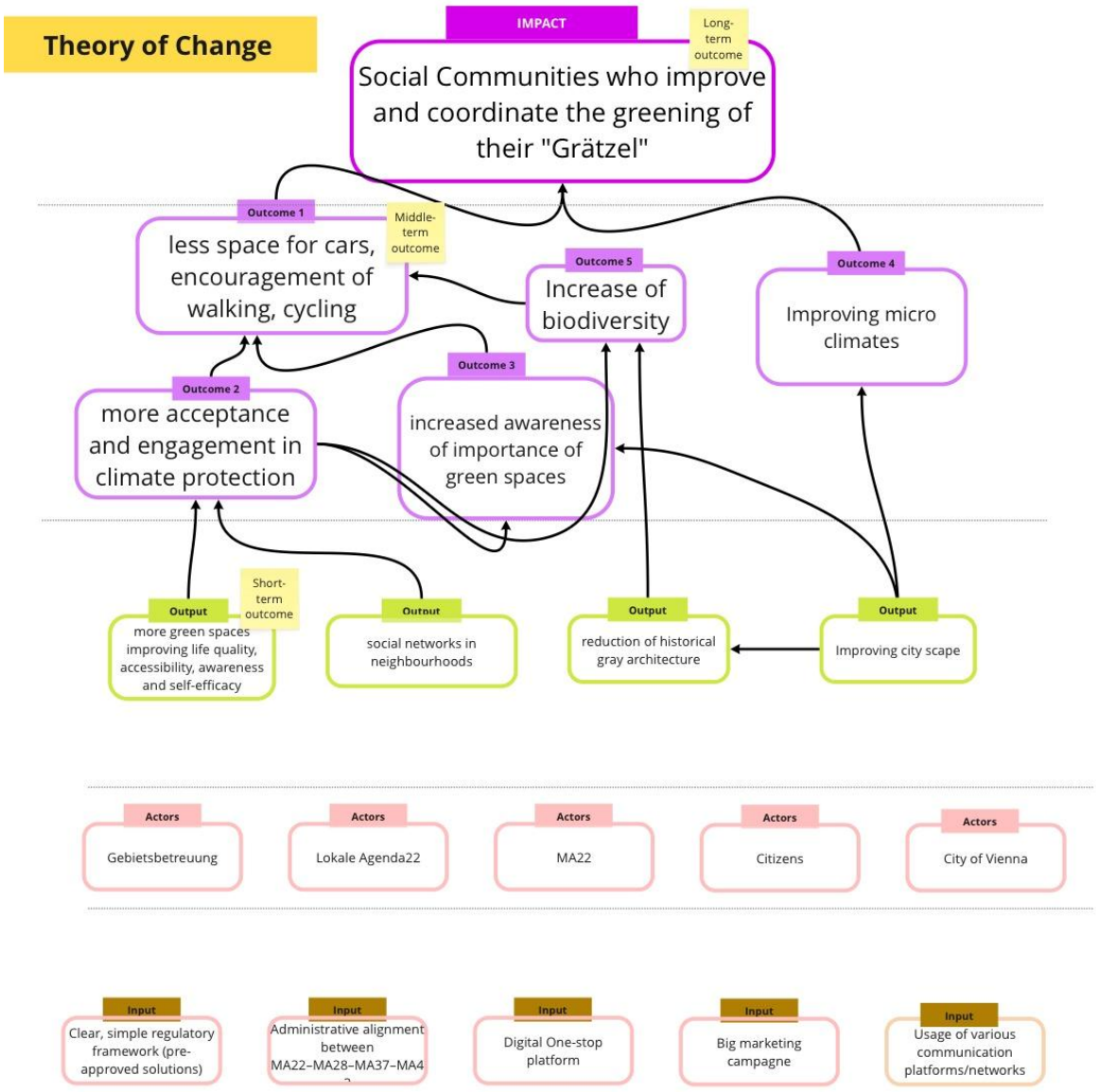
Citizens and residents are the primary stakeholders whose daily experiences, health, and access to ecosystem services are most directly affected. This gives them a strong incentive to demand action from governing institutions.

Private-sector actors, including developers, hospitality businesses, and construction companies, provide resources and implement projects. Nevertheless their involvement is largely driven by economic incentives and regulatory requirements.

Biodiversity stakeholders such as flora and fauna, also count towards the primary stakeholders group. Their presence and survival depend on the availability of green

spaces, as they rely on them for habitat. While they have little control over the state of green spaces, their condition directly shapes the quality and functioning of such spaces.

Theory of Change



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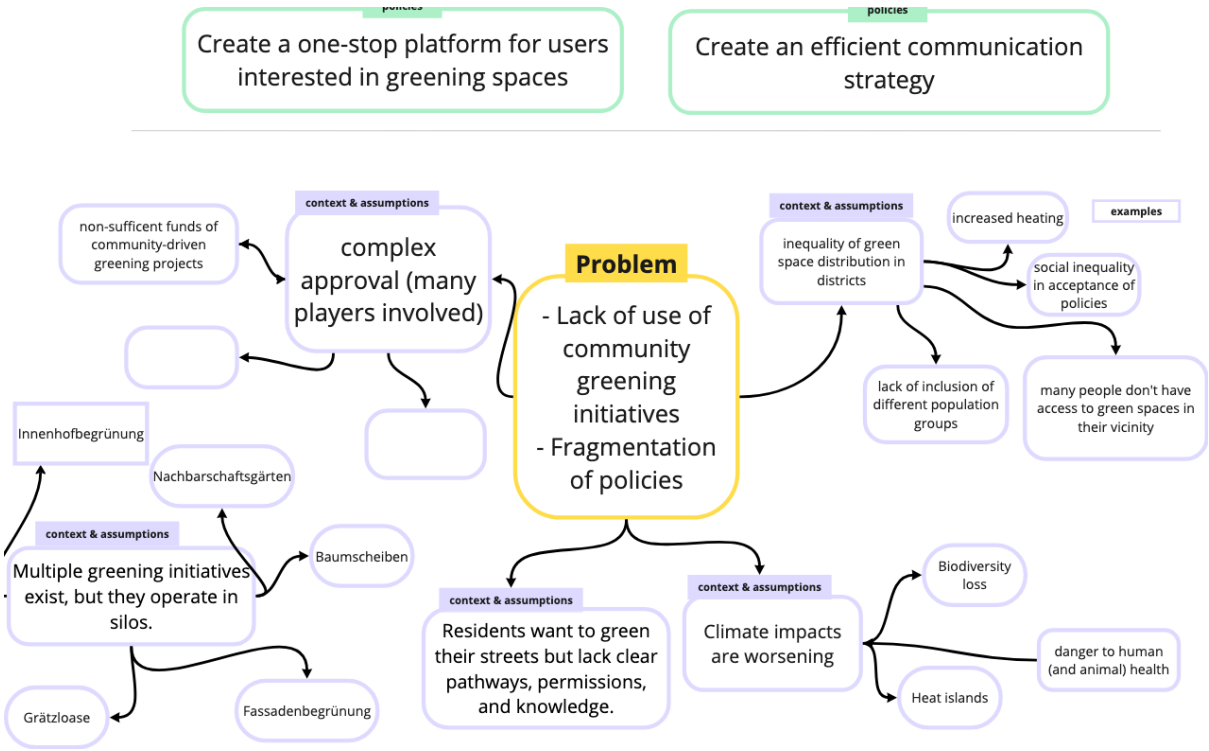

The starting point of our Theory of Change is the problem that Vienna's community greening initiatives are underused due to fragmented responsibilities, complex approval procedures, and unclear communication. In this context, residents who would like to green their streets often lack knowledge about permissions, pathways, or available programs, while multiple micro-greening initiatives operate in parallel but in silos. We assume that communities are willing to engage if procedures are simple, information is accessible, and the city provides a clear framework.

To address this, our policy's focus is on creating a one-stop communication platform for all greening options, establishing a streamlined regulatory framework with pre-approved solutions and to go public: an inclusive communication campaign reaching diverse communities.

These inputs generate short-term outputs such as more micro-greening projects, stronger neighborhood networks, reduced grey infrastructure, and visible improvements in the streetscape. In the medium term, this leads to greater public awareness of green spaces, higher acceptance of climate protection, improved microclimates, and increased biodiversity, while encouraging walking and cycling through more pleasant local environments.

Ultimately, these changes contribute to the long-term impact: socially connected communities who coordinate, implement, and sustain greening in their own Grätzel, strengthening both climate resilience and neighborhood cohesion.

Photos

Figure 1 Photograph taken by authors, November 2025; Example of a "Bodengebundene Bepflanzung" - where Asphalt was removed in front of a building, Vienna;

Figure 2 Photograph taken by authors, November 2025; Example of green infrastructure - green roof of an underground parking lot. Observed at 'Am grüner Prater", 1020 Vienna;

Figure 3 Photograph taken by authors, November 2025; Example of a 'Grätzloase' - a community spot on a previous parking spot, Vienna;

Figure 4 Photograph taken by authors, November 2025;Informative poster for the 'Garteln ums Eck' initiative, Vienna;

Figure 5 Photograph taken by authors, November 2025; 'Garteln in der Stadt' initiative, Vienna;

Figure 6 Photograph taken by authors, November 2025; Fassadenbegrünung, Grätzloase, Pflanzentröge and trees all at once, Vienna;