C CASE STUDY

BOGOTÁ | CARE-CENTRED MOBILITY

Learning to Care: The Legacy of Bogotá's District Care System

Bogotá's District Care System reframes urban mobility around the everyday journeys of caregivers. By bringing essential services closer to neighbourhoods and linking Care Blocks with public transport, the city seeks to reduce time poverty and expand access to education, employment and care.





Claudia López became Bogotá's first female and openly LGBTQ+ Mayor in 2019, after four years as a Colombian Senator. She holds a master's degree from Columbia University in public administration and urban policy, and a PhD in Political Science from Northwestern University. A 2009 Yale World Fellow and 2004 Harvard ALI fellow, she is a board member of the WRI's Ross Center for Cities and an international consultant.

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For generations, Latin American cities were planned with a deep blindness toward the invisible hand of care. Avenues were mapped out, buildings rose, and public policies were designed around the productive economy—all while taking for granted the silent engine that sustained life itself. That engine has had a name and a face: women.

In Bogotá, a metropolis of eight million people where over half the population is female, 1.2 million adult women—30% of all females—dedicate their entire days to washing, cooking, cleaning and caring for children, older adults or family members with disabilities. They do so without pause, without rest, and, above all, without pay.

The National Time Use Survey demonstrates that the disparity of care work is overwhelming. While men spend a daily average of 3 hours 14 minutes on household duties, women devote 7.5 hours to unpaid care and domestic labour. This is a monumental contribution representing no less than 19.7% of the city's GDP and 21.4% nationally. This disparity translates into inequality in women's lives: 70% of caregivers had completed, at most, high school education; a third did not have a single minute of free time to see a doctor or work for a wage; one in five suffered from diagnosed chronic illnesses; and, 90% belonged to the most socio-economically vulnerable strata. The burden of care has not only crushed women's life goals, it has also impoverished and drained the productivity of society as a whole.

Designing a Radical System for Eradicating Inequality

When I assumed the honour of serving as the first elected female Mayor in Bogotá's history, we understood that we had to settle this historic debt. Traditionally, the state only looked at those who required care—children, older adults, and people with disabilities. We decided to shift our gaze and introduce a radically new perspective: placing caregivers—76% of whom are women—at the very centre of our agenda. Thus was born the *Sistema Distrital del Cuidado* (SDC) or "District Care System".

The first experience of its kind in the region, the SDC was designed not as an isolated welfare programme, but a true urban revolution driven by three fundamental imperatives: to recognise, reduce and redistribute care work from the shoulders of women to all family members, and the public and the private sectors.

The power of the SDC lies in breaking down old bureaucratic silos and connecting proximate, simultaneous and intergenerational services.

To deliver local solutions effectively, SDC operates three flexible, adaptive modalities:

1. **Care Blocks:** At the structural core of the system are defined urban zones where municipal social infrastructure and public services are concentrated within a 20-minute walk of caregivers' homes. Each block features an anchor facility—such as a public school or community centre—which coordinates services across the Secretariats of Social Integration, Education, Health, Culture, Economic Inclusion and Women's Affairs. This comprehensive, simultaneous service offering has replaced facilities that once operated in silos under multiple roofs.
2. **Care Buses:** To serve remote rural areas like Sumapaz and urban neighbourhoods facing infrastructure deficits, we engineered mobile adaptations of classrooms and clinics to bring municipal services directly to caregivers. Women boarded the transformed bus to complete their education or receive legal and psychological support, while their care dependents engaged in supervised extra school education, sports, games and cultural activities in adjacent mobile units.
3. **Home Assistance:** Tailored for caregivers of home-bound individuals with severe physical or cognitive dependencies, professional care providers deliver direct, home-based assistance—including essential respite, health services, distance learning opportunities, and legal or social guidance.

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The location and rollout of these Care Blocks were never left to chance or political improvisation. To identify the risk level of unpaid care work burdens across neighbourhoods, the Secretariat for Women created the *Índice de Priorización de Manzanas del Cuidado* (IPMC) or Care Block Prioritisation Index in 2020. This considered four crucial dimensions that were equally weighted: care demand (for children under 5 and adults over 80), caregiver density (women dedicated exclusively to domestic work and female single-parent households), multidimensional poverty levels in female-headed households, and the community's voice expressed through participatory budgeting.

The District Secretariat for Women then created a territorial ranking guided by five technical criteria: the IPMC results, public facility deficits, mobility megaprojects in Multimodal Integration Areas, projects in the Land Use Master Plan, and land availability. The data and territorial evidence gathered helped determine with rigour where the doors of each Care Block should open.

A Foundation of Care for Dignified Caregiving

Before the Care Blocks, the daily scene was heartbreaking: women caregivers would take their dependent children or relatives to a sports or medical appointment and spend two or three hours sitting on cold concrete bleachers, passively waiting for the activity to end. With SDC, we managed to get these women off those bleachers!

Now, while professional educators and sports instructors care for their loved ones, those very hours belong to the women. In the same place and at the same time, regardless of age, the women have the opportunity to finish high school, undertake technical training with Colombia's *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* (SENA) or Technical Apprenticeship Service, learn entrepreneurship, or connect with formal employment. They can access healthcare, receive legal or psychological counselling if they are victims of violence, or simply swim, ride a bike or practice yoga. Some even do laundry in our free community laundromats—freeing themselves from the exhaustion of washing by hand.

Added to this physical and social transformation was a fundamental conviction: there is no dignified caregiving without mobility and urbanism designed to care.

Traditionally, urban engineering conceived public transport solely for commuter trips back and forth between periphery and formal employment. However, Bogotá's Region Mobility Survey 2023 became the first to include explicitly an analysis on care trips and gender perspective, demonstrating that the "mobility of care" operates under an entirely different logic.

Trip chaining—a complex, interconnected network of linked trips—is undertaken by caregivers to take children to daycare, accompany older adults to medical appointments, shop, and attend their own educational spaces. While women do 8% more trips than men, of which 72% are on foot or by public transportation, men use more cars and motorcycles. In an Andean metropolis like Bogotá, where poverty often settles on steep, hard-to-access slopes, topography imposes another barrier of isolation and physical exhaustion.

Therefore, linking mass transit with social infrastructure became an essential pillar. An iconic testament to this vision is the **San Cristóbal Cable Car**. Envisioned not merely as an aerial transit system but a direct artery for territorial equity, this project was designed to seamlessly connect the highest and most vulnerable neighbourhoods of the San Cristóbal locality with



From community laundries and childcare to digital training, cycling and cooking classes, Bogotá's SDC offers practical opportunities and support for caregivers and residents.
Image: Bogotá's Care System, Mayor's Office

Ensuring True Sustainability

both the Care Blocks and the mass transit trunk network, under an integrated fare.

This COP 799,000 million (USD 180 million) project allocated 53% of funds to the aerial cable, 47% for the surrounding urban and care infrastructure. The cable features three stations—which also house a Care Block, and a cultural and recreation centre—complemented by six neighbouring parks and three pedestrian circuits. Serving approximately 400,000 people, it reduces air pollution, congestion, and transit times from approximately 35 minutes to 10 minutes, a reduction of 72%.

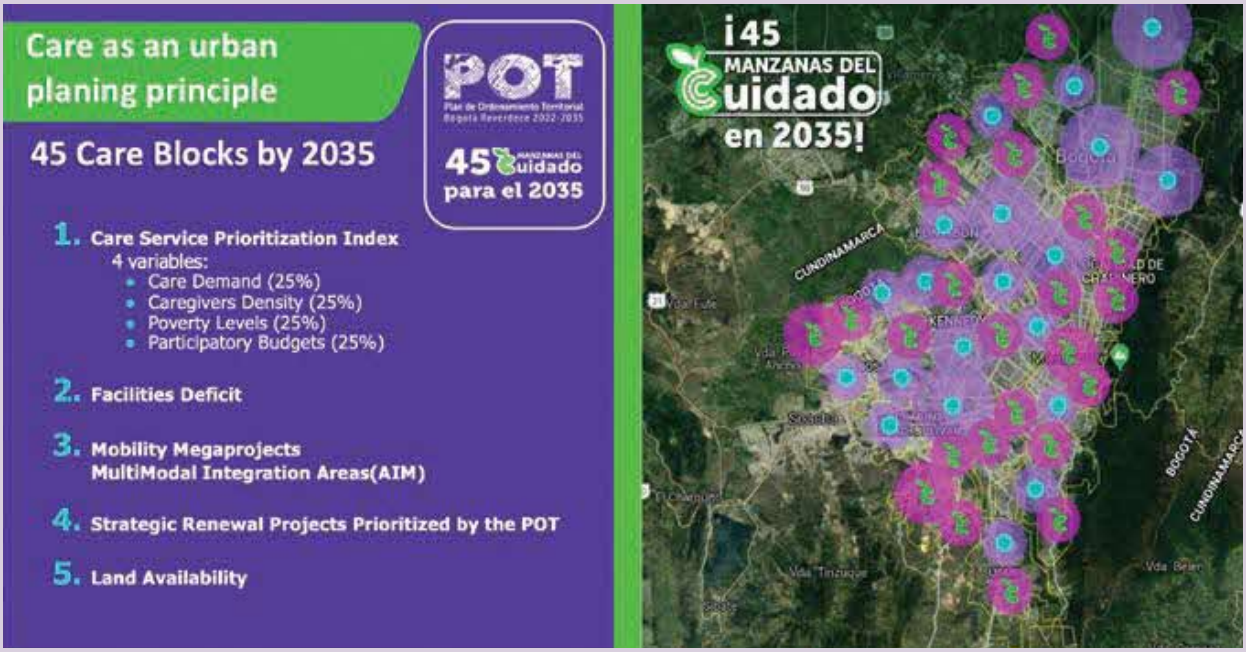
By overcoming the mountain barrier, the San Cristóbal Cable Car drastically reduced not only travel times but also the "time poverty" of thousands of women—as hard-to-reach terrain is turned into a corridor of opportunity, safety and comprehensive well-being.

We knew that all our efforts to integrate care and mobility infrastructure and to set aside time would not be enough if we did not dismantle the cultural roots of inequality. That is why we incorporated the Learning to Care strategy, which is based on a mantra that is as simple as it is transformative: men can also learn to care.

Care, like mathematics or science, is something to be learned. We designed workshops to teach men how to cook, clean, iron, and share the co-responsibility of caring for their children and parents. It is equity's true contemporary trinity—liberty, equality and fraternity—woven into daily life.

Finally, the true sustainability of a transformative care system does not depend solely on the political will of a passing administration, but on its ability to anchor itself deeply within the city's institutions, laws, and urban planning. To guarantee that SDC endures over time and transcends future governments, we designed and implemented a three-level institutional shielding strategy:

1. **District Legal Framework:** Through District Agreement 837 of 2021, which was passed unanimously by Bogotá's City Council and championed alongside the Women's Advisory Council, we institutionalised the SDC as a legal obligation —this secures its ongoing maintenance, strengthening, and funding across the District's future administrations.
2. **Long-Term Territorial Planning:** We embedded care into the backbone of the Land Use Master Plan—for the first time in Latin American urban planning history, care was included as a structural category of spatial organisation. This guarantees that the location and



Bogotá's plan for 45 Care Blocks by 2035 integrates care needs, gaps in public facilities, mobility investments and land availability into long-term spatial planning. *Image: Bogotá's Care System, Mayor's Office*



Manitas station, part of Bogotá's Ciudad Bolívar TransMiCable system, connects hillside communities to the wider transport network and care services within the station.
Image: Bogotá's Care System, Mayor's Office

construction of future public facilities respond to the needs of caregivers and care recipients, in support of the goal of implementing 45 Care Blocks—one in every Local Planning Unit—by 2035.

3. **Governance and Intersectorality:** We established the Intersectoral Commission of the SDC—led by the District Secretariat for Women and composed of 13 district-level entities. This is critical to ensuring coordinated management, cross-cutting funding and a unified service portfolio that will help address administrative fragmentation.

A Collective Triumph

Not too long ago, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted to the world the fragility of human life and the unfair distribution of domestic and care labour. In a century defined by climate, demographic and technological transitions, care policy must serve as the central bridge between socio-economic and urban agendas.

The SDC is a collective triumph of women's social movements and feminist collectives. During our administration, we put into operation more than 20 Care Blocks and 2 Care Buses—these reached over 600,000 women and their families, presenting them with new opportunities to break out of the cycle of poverty. We transformed Bogotá into a caring city—an initiative supported by UN Women and recognised in 2023 with the Guangzhou International Award for Urban Innovation.

Today, we are building a city transformed from segregation to connection—a human metropolis where caregiving is no longer a silent sentence but the very pillar upon which society thrives, leaving none behind.