What is the role of public and green space in slums? What are the gender dimensions of initiatives to develop them?

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A GROWING AGENDA FOR PUBLIC SPACES IN CITIES

Attention to the role of public spaces in cities has become more focused in recent years, including how they can play a role in enhancing citizenship, as well as social, economic and physical well-being.

A normative agenda for public spaces has been developed through the Habitat III conference in 2016 and is supported by the SDGs, which include a goal to “provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, particularly for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities” (Goal 11, Target 7). But poorly managed public spaces can create exclusion by being inaccessible, unsafe or threatening to particular groups. A sense of inclusion may need to be designed for and managed.

FEATURES OF PUBLIC SPACES IN SLUMS

In slums, where infrastructure is poor and living space cramped, there is an intensified need for spaces for health, recreation and socialization. Public spaces are likely to take on some characteristics of private spaces and play a particularly important role in the physical and social dynamics of the settlement.

In addition to other benefits, green public spaces also provide ‘ecosystem services’ such as absorbing pollution, regulating temperature and increasing mental peace. In slums, green spaces may have a wider range of uses than in planned urban areas, as people directly use their features: trees are used for shade to run businesses or complete domestic tasks as well as for supplementing nutrition, along with home gardening.

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF PUBLIC SPACES

There are significant gender dimensions to public space – arising from patriarchal norms and women’s association with private spaces. These include limited access, and strong expectations of their behaviour in public. Limited access to public space may be particularly acute for adolescent girls.

High levels of sexual harassment, assault and other violence – or the threat of these – are key features restricting women’s access to public spaces. The threat of assault regulates women’s behaviour in relation to public spaces on a daily basis: women routinely limit where they go, what they wear, who they go with and what time of day they go out. Harassment is also frequently under-reported, not least because young women fear further restrictions being placed on their mobility if they speak out.

Poorly designed public spaces can add to these risks, making assault and harassment more likely. With their multiple uses, slums may accentuate the risk of violence in particular ways.
Some public spaces in slums may be especially dominated by men – such as where men congregate socially and where they may be openly drinking and/or gambling.

Communal water and sanitation facilities also force women into public spaces which may not be safe.

**INITIATIVES TO UPGRADE PUBLIC SPACES**

Information on the impact of initiatives to upgrade public spaces is limited, but a number of organisations offer tools and strategies for planning and implementation. There is strong consensus that establishing community engagement and building partnerships are foundational steps.

Establishing this engagement in mapping and space description exercises – for example using tools build for mobile technologies – can be a useful first exercise. In some contexts, human and social capital building for agreements on public space usage may be more important than developing hard infrastructure. In others, infrastructure design will require innovation and adaptation to slum characteristics.

*Minecraft has been used as a tool for community participation in the planning of urban public spaces in Nairobi, Haiti, Mexico City, Kirtipur in Nepal, and Mumbai among others. In this process, UN-Habitat builds Minecraft models of the spaces as they currently exist. These are then used in workshops in which participants are trained in the use of Minecraft and asked to redesign the public space models in groups. These exercises have greatly increased people’s interest in urban design and planning, and empowers them to influence the policy agenda. In addition, working with visual tools which can be reviewed collectively facilitates a common deliberative process which improves social relations at the same time as building a broader understanding of the urban environment and acquiring individual skills. This planning process has been successful not just in engaging communities in general but also specific target groups within them, such as youth groups, and women.*

While a number of public space projects have been completed in recent years, little analysis of their results or impacts seems to be available. Projects in public spaces in Kenya, Haiti, Peru, India, Brazil, South Africa and Malawi have, variously: added trees, play equipment, drainage and sanitation, added lighting, developed gardens, initiated vegetable growing, cleaned up sports fields, created new spaces by realigning pathways, and built community halls.

**CHALLENGES AND LESSONS**

The most significant challenge to projects has been in solving conflicts and contesting claims over the use of targeted spaces. In some cases, conflict can be so severe, or technical issues over control so intransigent that projects have to be postponed. In others, conflicts have merely made the spaces difficult to sustain.
Lessons learned from projects include that open-endedness is important in informal communities to allow local people to become true owners of the space. Co-management systems involving locals, NGOs and the private sector are recommended in some contexts. Creating concrete plans with communities and local organisations on how to manage and maintain the spaces is a key step.

**Engaging women in public space projects**

Community-focused projects can often fail to recognize women’s particular roles in the community or respond to women’s different access to planning processes. However, experience with engaging women has been growing. Involving women has the benefit of building women’s capacities for prioritising their needs while also giving them opportunity to learn to negotiate and articulate ideas – but may also require tailored methods and tools.

Finding that official urban planners and community residents often lack a common language in which to express priorities for improving living conditions, Beltrão (2016) developed an experimental planning tool with a group of residents in a Brazilian favela. This used highly participatory verbal, visual, and cognitive methods: walking, talking, drawing, photographing, and mapping – which presented material in ways that were visible to planners and residents alike. For residents, this process helped awaken them to a new appreciation of their environment, their community, their place in it, their priorities, and their ability to improve it. Following this research, the women discussed their criteria while moving into the phase of identifying potential changes and prioritising these – a process which gave the women confidence and opportunity to strengthen their sense of responsibility and decision-making.

Women’s safety audits have successfully been used to evaluate the environment from the standpoint of those who feel vulnerable. These can help identify specific improvements needed as well as the raise awareness of elected officials of women’s safety concerns. On the whole, however, there seem to have been few efforts specifically to reach out to and work with a full diversity of women.

Some projects have made formal efforts to establish women as partners in the implementation and maintenance of public space improvements – but these may involve accommodating women’s schedules and capacities and may involve space for them to process past experiences of violence.

**Recommendations for future projects**

Recommendations include:

- Involving a wide range of stakeholders;
- Partnering different types of stakeholders;
- Making efforts to explore experiences of a diversity of women;
- Engaging women at local levels to take leadership.