



**65<sup>th</sup> REGULAR MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE OF PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVES  
TO UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME**

**29 JUNE 2017**

**Agenda Item 5: Thematic/Country Presentation (HSP/CPR/65/5)**

**Briefing Note on Public space in Asia-Pacific**

# BRIEFING NOTE

## PUBLIC SPACE IN ASIA PACIFIC

29<sup>TH</sup> June 2017

### Background

*"Public Space improvements have been the tool for action for empowered city leaders."*

UN-Habitat has worked in the area of public space for over 15 years. However, it was only in 2011, at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Governing Council of UN-Habitat, that member states mandated UN-Habitat to consolidate agency-wide work on public space, to develop and promote public space policy, coordination, disseminate knowledge and directly assist cities in public space initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, studies were conducted such as Streets as Drivers for urban prosperity<sup>2</sup> and Streets as Tools for Urban Transformation<sup>3</sup> that linked public space to urban prosperity.

Over the last 20 years, public space interventions have been growing in importance in many cities in both the developed and developing world. More recently, in the rapidly transforming Asian cities, public space is being eroded, becoming highly commercialized and being replaced by private or semi-public buildings. Commercialization divides society and eventually separates people into different social classes. Where public space is inadequate, poorly designed, or privatized, the city becomes increasingly segregated. The result can be a polarized city where social tensions are likely to flare up and where social mobility and economic opportunity are stifled.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Asia traditionally having a very high quality and good distribution of public spaces and identifying public space as a common good and shared asset, many local governments are still struggling in adopting an integrated approach and recognizing the multifaceted role of public space as a key lever to achieving 'sustainability'. Some detrimental approaches include: slum upgrading mainly focusing on private space, urban transformation leading to less diverse public space or insecurity resulting in that public spaces are not maintained and left derelict, their vibrancy and potential lost. UN-Habitat's work on urban safety, sustainable cities and LA21 were a precursor of new pioneering ways (e.g India, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, amongst others) have also provided important innovations.

Apart from some highly successful and visible demonstration projects on public space in the region, the initiatives did not take a city-wide approach and were often not mainstreamed or able to be scaled up as they were not part of the national and local policy frameworks.

To date, there is not much evidence of cities and local governments adopting a city-wide integrated and inclusive development approach guaranteeing planning, design and management of public spaces at different scales. Without a clear strategy/policy, it is difficult for local governments to prioritise, spend and plan resources and to show how much public space is valued. Public space

---

<sup>1</sup> UN-Habitat Resolution 23/4 on Sustainable Urban Development through Access to Public Spaces

<sup>2</sup> UN-Habitat, (2013) "Streets As Public Spaces And Drivers Of Urban Prosperity"

<sup>3</sup> UN-Habitat, (2012) "Streets as Tools for Urban Transformation in Slums: A Street-Led Approach to Citywide Slum Upgrading"

<sup>4</sup> UN-Habitat, 2012 *Placemaking and the Future of Cities*

remains the place where conflicts between private and public interest, community, individual and city priorities are negotiated and solved often on an ad hoc basis.

The success of public space interventions rests very often with empowered city leaders and citizens that engage and work together to improve their public spaces. Good public spaces can be improved at a reasonable cost and really make a difference to many citizens, when city leaders engage citizens and the local private sector in protecting and improving the design, management and enjoyment of public space. City leaders could get things easily wrong when opting for exclusive pet projects and allocating budgets foolishly.

Improving public spaces is not only a matter of creating better quality spaces for citizens in Asia. These interventions are also leveraging new shared benefits for urban renewal programmes. A lot of urban space in Asia Pacific cities in for example China, Korea, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, urban growth has led to developments which have already outlived their purpose or settlements which grew informally without ever having been slums - e.g. warehouses, factories, low-rise developments, etc. Public space can lead urban development by ensuring that building will only be permitted if public space has been organized prior to development. This link between public space and urban development needs to be understood in each context and legal framework in order to prevent the creation of unmanaged and/or public space deficiencies common to many cities. Particularly in recent years, many cities have put public space at the core of urban development, for example in Surabaya, Indonesia.

Public Space City leaders are again discovering the value of city-wide public space programmes in this context as well as supporting local pilot projects that demonstrate participatory processes and their benefits, expanding access to public space and test shared management frameworks with communities, private sector and local government as partners. Such projects respond to and can catalyse a huge demand and interest by communities and leaders.

### **SDG 11.7 and the New Urban Agenda – an opportunity**

The adoption of the **2030 Sustainable Development Goals** and particularly Goal 11 target 7 which states: *“by 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, particularly for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities”* provides significant recognition of the importance of public space in sustainable development. Public Space is also prominent in the New Urban Agenda. The theme of one of the 22 *Issue Papers* was on public space. Though a critical first step, on its own will have little impact without an appropriate follow up mechanism. Therefore, there is a need for supporting local and national governments in developing legislation, policy, norms and practices, which support governments in adopting a holistic and integrated approach to the planning, design, development, creation, protection and management of public space. This will require the concerted effort of governments at different levels (national and local) to develop strategies and invest to ensure access to public space for all in their cities and towns.

### **Public Space in the Asia Pacific**

A city can tackle inequality through the provision of inclusive, safe and accessible public spaces. Local governments sometimes ignore the use of public space by the poor, although public space is ‘the poor man’s living room’ and important for recreation, social, cultural and economic

development of vulnerable groups.<sup>5</sup> Public space as a common good is the key enabler for the fulfillment of human rights, empowering women and providing opportunities for youth.

The intention of the public space programme is to impact on the development of the whole city; to help improve capacity of local institutions and communities; and to contribute to long-term change. The programme is organized around five main areas:

1. **Partnerships and networking**
2. **City-wide strategies and pilot/demonstration projects** – UN-Habitat supports cities in developing city-wide strategies, policies and sectorial development plans. These activities are strategic entry points for public space as well as for demonstrating participatory approaches to public space design, implementation and management.
3. **Knowledge management, advocacy and tools** – The efforts related to developing a policy approach, development of tools and indicators, and implementing capacity building programmes, help to institutionalize public space in the normative work of the UN and its partner cities.
4. In addition, UN-Habitat is increasingly providing **expertise and advice** to on-going projects by local government in order to increase the impact and improve dimensions of inclusion and leverage public space as a development tool. This takes into account the inclusion of public space in larger UN-Habitat urban development projects, such as in Afghanistan.
5. Finally, UN-Habitat supports the **development of local and national policy**, national guidance or legislation, addressing blockages and hindrances to local actions (e.g. national public space programme in China)

## Partnerships

**Regional partners** - The partners of the Public Space Programme are involved in both normative work (developing tools, indicators, technical and policy guidelines, etc.) and operational work (implementing public space projects in cities and towns). United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Asia Pacific, Citynet, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), Healthbridge, Plan International, just to mention a few.

**Other UN Agencies:** UN-Habitat is developing collaborations with other UN agencies on the issue of public space. UN-Habitat and UNESCO organized a joint panel during the International Conference on Culture for Sustainable Cities in Hangzhou, China on “Public spaces as a key to urban regeneration”.

## Main donors include:

- **Mojang/Microsoft and Block by Block Foundation**, Stockholm: the gaming company behind the popular computer game Minecraft provided funding of USD1,200,000 to pilot projects in Mumbai and Pune (India), Kirtipur and Bungamati (Nepal), Khulna (Bangladesh), Surabaya, Sijarjo and Jambi (Indonesia), Hanoi and Da Nang (Vietnam) and Wuhan (China) from 2013 to 2017.

---

<sup>5</sup> Key Messages, Future of Places Conference II, Buenos Aires 2014 - <http://futureofplaces.com/2014/12/key-messages-from-buenos-aires-conference-2014/>

- **Wuhan Land and Spatial Planning Institute (WLSP):** USD 200,000 (2016) and USD 200,000 (2017).
- **Afghanistan 30 projects**
- **Local governments and other key partners** have also mobilized resources on the local level to support implementation. This amounts to about USD 600,000 both as in-kind and actual financial resources for project implementation.

### City wide strategies and overview of pilot projects in the region

Altogether, 16 projects are being implemented in the region of which 3 have been completed – Dey Pukhu, Kirtipur; Lotus Garden, Mumbai; Surabaya – Ketandan (Indonesia) and 13 are in progress - Khulna (Bangladesh), Kirtipur phase II and Bungamati (Nepal), Gautam Nagar phase II and Street vendors (Mumbai), Pune (India), Sijoarjo, Jambi and Surabaya (Indonesia), Wuhan (China), Da Nang and Hanoi (Vietnam), Kabul (Afghanistan).

Kirtipur Municipal Office together with the Centre of Integrated Urban Development (CIUD) and the support of UN-Habitat developed a plan for the “Revitalization of Open Spaces in the Traditional Core Settlement of Kirtipur”. A guide on how to design and manage public space in resettlement colonies is being developed with Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (MMRDA). UN-Habitat will support Wuhan (China) in preparing to conduct city-wide public space assessments.

The UN-Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (ROAP) is in the process of establishing National Public Space programme in China and UN-Habitat in partnership with UCLG ASPAC is developing a regional strategy for public space. An EGM is being prepared to identify current issues relating to public space, ascertain thematic orientation for the regional programme, develop criteria for selection of public space pilot projects, identify cities/towns for conducting the city-wide public space assessment, start an initial stakeholder mapping and finally develop a resource mobilization strategy.

### Knowledge Management, Advocacy and Tools

The success of this initiative has shown the commitment of a wide range of actors with a stake in public space, as well as highlighted the regional importance of this theme. In a short time it has created a regional movement for public space contributing actively to highlighting its benefits and putting public space on the regional development agenda.

UN-Habitat has developed a **city-wide open public space inventory and assessment tool** which will be piloted in Wuhan. The tool looks at spatial location, distribution, accessibility, quantity and quality (in terms of accessibility, safety and inclusiveness) of public space in the city.

A **step-by-step participatory design manual for using Minecraft** as a tool to engage communities in the design of public space has been developed.

CityNet, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) ASPAC and UN-Habitat have organised a series of **training/ learning events** for cities to further the dialogue on public spaces and taking the opportunity to network, learn and develop a body of knowledge on public space, as well as to

support the cities in their work on public space. The learning events were established upon the request and due to a growing need for municipal practitioners to continue learning, sharing ideas and creative ways to develop, design, implement, protect and manage public spaces. UN-Habitat also delivers training on city level in for example how to conduct a city-wide assessment of public space.

### Future plans and opportunities

In conclusion, 2016 and 2017 has focused on scaling-up, with many new partnerships being developed and public space being elevated in the regional dialogue on sustainable urbanisation. Next steps for 2017/2018 include:

- Developing a regional strategy and network of partners on public space jointly with UCLG ASPAC and CITYNET.
- Establishing a framework for collaboration with other UN agencies on public space
- Developing national public space programmes (such as China)
- Establishing regional and thematic knowledge “hubs” on public space
- Developing a city to city learning exchange programme on public space
- Compilation and scaling-up of public space tools and development of a set of training modules
- Rolling-out the public space assessment tool to assess the quality of public spaces
- Development of a guide for cities on how to develop city-wide public space strategies
- Developing a quick guide on creating and protecting public/community space in informal settlements
- Developing a set of simple indicators for cities to establish a baseline and monitor implementation of their public space projects and programmes

With many new partnerships there is also a need to form a network around the issues of public space, at the regional and national levels. In partnership with UCLG, UN-Habitat is aiming to establish of a regional platform for public space which will be a crucial piece of the puzzle to be able to support national and local governments in their public space work.