

HABITAT III URBAN DIALOGUES

Barcelona Thematic Meeting on Public Spaces

4 - 5 April, 2016

Public Spaces

Moderators: David Bravo, CCCB Barcelona and Lydia Gény, OHCHR

Dialogue Structure:

The Habitat III thematic discussion on Public Spaces took place over a 10-day period from 14 - 26 March 2016 prior to the two-day Thematic Meeting on Public Spaces in Barcelona.

The discussion was overseen by two substantive experts (“moderators”) from the Barcelona Centre of Contemporary Culture (CCCB) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Geneva who devised three general framing questions for the discussion (below). The moderators responded to participants’ particular questions and comments, engaging them through an extensive discussion around how to adapt and improve how cities are shared. Questions sought to encourage the exchange of experience, as well as get to the heart of practical difficulties and challenges faced by cities in providing inclusive, sustainable and accessible public spaces.

Local authorities all over the world are playing an increasingly important role in the delivery of fundamental basic public services. However, they are also facing huge challenges, in particular the widening gap between the availability of financial resources and municipal expenditure needs. Local authorities in many developing countries, cities and towns could generate increased revenue from local revenue sources by improving the efficiency of revenue generation and by implementing innovative, revenue-generating mechanisms. Sufficient financial resources to deliver better urban services and implement planned city extensions can also be generated by introducing more responsive and accountable governance practices. The dialogue looked at how this can be achieved without compromising the environment.

Participation:

During the online discussion, more than 2,200 individuals visited the Urban Dialogue on Public Spaces at: www.habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/barcelona, representing 126 countries, with the largest number of visitors from Spain, the United States, Switzerland, Kenya, the UK, Ecuador, Germany, Turkey, Morocco and Brazil. The platform featured the ability for participants to translate the dialogue into several dozen languages, which provided greater accessibility for participants to post and comment on the discussion in their native language.

Framing questions:

1. What is the public space model that best promotes equity in the city? - 49 replies

2. What kind of public policies simultaneously guarantee access to decent housing with the right to an active, diverse and well-located neighbourhood? - 29 replies
3. How do we build inclusive, sustainable and accessible urban spaces that reflect and encompass the diversity and needs of all inhabitants? - 69 replies

Key Recommendations from the Dialogue:

Summary of the Dialogue:

Q. 1. Public space models that best promote equity in the city

It was suggested that it is important from the outset to establish equity as an objective of public spaces and ensure that public space policies, design options and governance structures are assessed against a strong equity principal. Overall, participants advocated adopting and implementing a **people-centred approach and rights-based solutions** in order to promote equity in the city and citizen participation in the technical and political processes for the design and appropriation of space.

Several contributors highlighted that public spaces are not perceived or used in the same way in different regions of the world and therefore have different challenges to promoting equity. Examples of different perceptions of public spaces were shared of some parts of Asia and the Middle East where wealthier people congregate in shopping malls and other private spaces, considering public parks, etc. to be the preserve of poorer people. In other cities participants shared a challenge to equity in the form of gentrification, where improvements in public spaces have the unintended consequence of raising local house prices, forcing the poorest citizens to relocate further away.

However, despite these differences the Moderator called for unity and against fragmentation of solutions, *“Since we are in the framework of the UN, I think it is necessary to reinforce the idea that, in such an era marked by globalization, many cities face problems of universal scale and similar nature. It is therefore important to note that cities can learn from each other and coordinate themselves to combat common problems. For example, the massive proliferation of private vehicles in cities across the planet has spread homogeneous cityscapes and universal scale effects, such as climate change. [...] Despite their different cultural backgrounds, in these landscapes, attacks on the possibility of a fair and equitable public space are very similar and, therefore, can be fought with very similar solutions.”*

It was agreed that although every city and neighbourhood will need a unique solution to promote equity, given its unique geographic location, culture and heritage, there are nevertheless principals and values that can guide urban decision-makers to promote equity in public spaces. A participant suggested basing

“The key is to involve the target public as much as possible in the conception of public space themselves: if they participate and engage in the shaping of their own spaces, not only those spaces will be tailored to their needs but they will also develop a stronger sense of belonging, place attachment and identity with the place and with their community.”
- Javier Otero Pena, United States

these principals on the three (or four) pillars of sustainable development, namely economy, environment, social (and culture), i.e.:

- Promote economic vitality;
- Environmentally sound/resilient;
- Supportive of diverse cultural identity;
- Promote social cohesion.

Other participants suggested a variety of further principals, including:

- Easily accessible to all;
- Cost free and open to all daily;
- Designed to encourage use by all, including persons with disabilities, older people, women, children, minorities, etc.;
- Basic amenities provided, e.g. well-lit with adequate trees for shade/shelter; well-laid pavement in places to encourage vendors and other small businesses to provide a “community watch”, affordable, healthy local produce and livelihoods.

Interventions also proposed that public spaces need to involve:

- Free, active and meaningful participation and engagement of communities, in particular the most vulnerable and marginalised;
- Public spaces should be places for inclusion not exclusion, by banning laws that criminalise poverty and homelessness;
- Urban planners should adopt strategies for the political, social and economic empowerment of people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised.

“A city in which it is impossible to live as a pedestrian is not only less sustainable. It is also less equitable.”

- David Bravo -
Discussion
Moderator

Promoting “Mobility for All” to increase equity - Among the challenges to promoting equity in urban public spaces raised by participants was the dominance of the private car and related infrastructure. Examples of the negative impact shared were gated communities, private enclaves, large shopping malls and poor suburbs segregated between “walls” of traffic. Others argued that while car used is only available to some, it has serious consequences for all, including health effects of pollution, reduction of productivity due to traffic jams and the increase in public debt created by large motorways. To overcome this, participants highlighted the need to **include equity as a priority objective in public spaces**. Efficient, broad, accessible and inclusive public

transport systems were highlighted as one of the best ways to promote equity in urban areas.

“We must think our cities for ourselves, for people, not for cars or any other thing!”

- Gustavo Macedo,
Public Servant,
Brazil

Another recommendation was to refocus the design and construction of urban areas towards a **human-centred** rather than car-centred development, to ensure that car-owners actually *prefer* to use mass transit, bikes or walking in the city, for example by providing cycles lanes and stands, traffic calming measures, respect for pedestrians and cyclists on the road, express bus routes,

“If we don’t fundamentally change how we move in cities (and how we talk and think about mobility) then we will fail - not just for our public space vision but we will fail to achieve our sustainability, health, safety and equity goals.”
- HealthBridge Foundation of Canada

comfortable, air conditioned, wifi-enabled electric buses, “Cycle Days”, “Open Streets” events, etc. Examples were shared of European cities where pedestrians and mass transit is given priority, “while still coexisting with cars harmoniously”. Good practices cited include: enforcing emission controls, “bus lanes”, banning the use of cars in city centres and/or certain streets, etc. Another recommendation to overcome this was changing the focus from a “right to the car” to a “right to mobility”, with a consequent shift in the responsibilities of government, and the potential to fundamentally change public spaces. It was argued that if it is agreed that the ultimate goals of the right to mobility are health, sustainability, safety, equity and efficiency, the actions required to achieve this become clear. In addition to making walking and cycling more

attractive, it was recommended to **dis-incentivize driving**, for example with fuel taxes, congestion charges, high taxes on car imports, etc. Several participants highlighted the importance of raising awareness and discussion of the negative effects of cars in cities and called on the United Nations to champion public transport for the sustainable future development of cities.

Equitable distribution of public spaces - An example was shared of a study undertaken in **Kampala, Uganda** where it was found that while most of the formal open spaces recognized and protected by the government were located in the city centre and not in the areas where there are informal settlements and where people with lower incomes live, the informal spaces that people were using were very important for a diversity of uses, from sport, to selling goods and earning income, to drying clothes. It was recommended to protect these informal spaces from development to ensure that everyone has walkable access to an open space from home. A **community engagement model** for developing these informal spaces was shared from **Hoi An, Vietnam**, where the community participated in public spaces development by contributing ideas to the Public Spaces Master Plan, making equipment voluntarily and donating funding.

Public space vs private space - It was suggested that the public space model which best promotes equity is one that favours the interactions of all citizens, regardless of age, gender or economic status, e.g. public squares, parks, cycle paths and footpaths. The problem of the privatization of spaces for living, working and shopping was highlighted repeatedly throughout the discussion as limiting social interaction and hence cities’ social cohesion. Examples cited included **São Paulo, Brazil** where one contributor described the problem facing the city as people “fleeing from the streets” to private, fenced-in spaces due to “calamitous public security conditions, poor illumination, terrible sidewalks and the preference cars have in the public area”. The development plan for São Paulo aims to mitigate this by concentrating vertical development around public transportation hubs and limiting the development of massive shopping complexes and requiring them to provide compensation for their impact locally, for example by providing new public spaces, lighting.

Accessibility - Contributors highlighted that equity requires that persons with disabilities and other groups, including older persons, are able to use public spaces, including sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, public transportation. A positive example was shared of central **São Paulo** where tactile paving, dropped curbs, etc. are being progressively installed to improve accessibility for all. Other contributors advocated ensuring that women, children and other social groups and minorities are offered the same opportunities to enjoy the benefit of public spaces and identify and remedy any barriers which constrain their access.

Urban areas vs natural areas - Several participants proposed that an equitable public space must consider the geographic characteristics of the city. The poorest citizens are often the most vulnerable to natural disasters such as flooding and landslides as they tend to live in the cheapest areas, most susceptible to risk. In order to make cities more equitable participants recommended making public spaces more resilient to risks such as the effects of climate change, for example by re-designing parks, squares, streets and public buildings to re-direct and/or absorb flood water. Other participants recommended that urban design should protect the ecosystem of which the city is a part and promote ecosystem services, such as regulation of air quality and water circulation, to ensure that the potential impacts of public spaces on the environment are reduced and provide a safe and healthy environment for all.

Q. 2. Public policies that both ensure access to decent housing with the right to an active, diverse and well-located neighbourhood

The rapid pace of urbanization over the past sixty to seventy years has meant in many parts of the world informal settlements, public housing estates and city suburbs have developed without being able to generate good quality public spaces. The discussion looked at how the new urban agenda can provide a framework for cities to provide adequate housing for all accompanied by sufficient, accessible and quality public spaces.

Participants were in agreement that housing issues have a direct impact on the creation, size and number of public spaces, depending on the city and neighbourhood.

“The problem is that the rapid and massive housing production often leads to poor quality public spaces. In other words, we try to realize housing without guaranteeing human rights and the right to the city.”
- David Bravo, Discussion Moderator

“Spontaneous urban growth is not a challenge per se, the question is to drive this fantastic energy towards collective interests rather than immediate individual benefits.”

- Frederic Saliez, UN-Habitat, Belgium

Examples of the challenges highlighted included large housing estates and suburbs on the outskirts of cities where the cost of land combined with the need to provide low-cost housing for all has combined to limit the amount of land dedicated to public spaces. Participants argued that developers have tended to neglect the needs of the poorest and construction in cities when not based on an inclusive approach to urban planning have not included provision for quality public spaces. Other contributors gave examples of informal settlements and slums, where the intrinsic lack of planning creates problems such as poor sewers, insufficient space for public

transportation and lack of parks and squares, while conversely gives rise in many places to vibrant public areas.

There appeared to be consensus that the primary objective is to promote mixed, compact urban centres with decent housing and quality public spaces accessible to all. Several participants argued that this can only be achieved as part of a comprehensive urban plan for the development of the city. Some of the main challenges highlighted were current market conditions, the **cost of land**, the **commodification of housing** and resultant housing ‘bubbles’. As a solution several participants advocated government regulation of the cost of housing, for example by providing affordable housing to families of mixed incomes and ensuring that urban housing is available in the future at a cost commensurate to the potential growth of purchasing power of local families.

In terms of solutions, participants argued that in order to ensure access to adequate housing, policies should enshrine housing as a right. As highlighted by one participant, from a human rights perspective, housing is a place for individuals, families and communities to live in peace, security and dignity. Housing can no longer be understood as a mere commodity or the production of housing alone, but there are a series of other elements, such as security of tenure, affordability, habitability, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy that need to be taken into account when addressing housing issues in urban spaces.

However, a participant from India highlighted the magnitude of the problem there in providing housing to all, citing the example of the New Delhi housing policy which aims to provide housing for all by 2021 from a current shortfall of 87%. The Moderator suggested that in order to meet the massive need for housing worldwide, urban planners and large construction companies will be insufficient - innovative solutions are needed involving small professionals and self-build schemes to meet the shortfall in a local way, with the potential to ensure the accommodation and public spaces meet the needs of the people themselves.

In order to try to avoid the problems seen in isolated public housing and suburbs segregated from the city, and gentrified but ossified historic centres devoid of mixed street life, it was proposed to replicate the energy and local knowledge and materials used to create vibrant informal settlements by providing support to communities in need of housing to construct their own accommodation collaboratively, including the design and construction of adjacent public spaces. A participant from India also argued that housing should be intertwined with livelihoods. Participants argued that housing and spaces created with and by the community which will live in and use them will ensure the spaces are relevant and actively used. To enable this one participant from Spain suggested local or national governments should facilitate collaboration between local communities and the private sector to enable their respective interests, viz housing and profit, are met.

Q. 3. How to build inclusive, sustainable and accessible urban public spaces that reflect and encompass the diversity and needs of all inhabitants

The discussion focused on how States can ensure that all individuals, in particular those in vulnerable situations, can enjoy their human rights in urban spaces. The Moderator encouraged participants to look at how the issue of urban spaces can be addressed through a human-rights based approach, highlighting that there are a series of barriers in public spaces that obstruct certain groups from fully enjoying their human rights and from living securely, peacefully and with dignity in their communities. Adopting a human rights based approach enables the identification individuals as rights-holders and their entitlements, and corresponding duty-bearers and their obligations.

“Urban spaces often exacerbate segregation and exclude certain groups, including older persons and persons with disabilities.”
- Lydia Gény,
Discussion Moderator

a) Key challenges faced by specific groups in urban public spaces around the world

One of the main challenges raised in the discussion was the **inaccessibility** of urban public spaces to specific groups, particularly **older persons and persons with disabilities** for whom public spaces may be poorly designed and/or lit, limiting their use by these groups, as well as poorer communities living on the periphery of cities whose **mobility** and accessibility to central public spaces is limited due to distance, cost and time of **poor public transportation**. Similarly, several participants argued that gentrification of parts of many cities worldwide means that the poorest citizens are increasingly priced out of neighbourhoods close to well-appointed public spaces, with the result that these spaces are used by fewer people and a narrower range of social groups. Conversely, in many developing countries there is a challenge in the **perception of public spaces** being seen as only for use by poorer people, hence not adequately maintained, with resources diverted to segregating middle and upper classes in shopping malls and other private recreation facilities.

Other key challenges faced by specific groups cited by participants **included excessive appropriation by one group** to the detriment of another, for example, men vs women; children vs teenagers; younger people vs older people; one ethnic group vs another, etc., as well as **violence, insecurity and crime** in urban public spaces, particularly affecting vulnerable groups. Participants argued that it is important to find a means to make public spaces safe spaces, without resorting to policies which cause segregation or economically tiered or tied access in public spaces, including with paid/invitation-only events and ‘quality of life’ policing which tends to discriminate against the poorest (new laws against ‘loitering’, ‘charitable giving’, etc. in public spaces).

Participants argued that a challenge to the accessibility and inclusivity of urban public spaces was **local government’s** lack of consideration to meeting the needs and promoting and protecting the human rights of all users, instead prioritizing the needs of other groups over the most vulnerable, e.g. developers, car-owners, wealthy residents, etc. It was argued that the views of all citizens are not included in planning processes, and highlighted that there is a missed opportunity for local authorities to serve as a bridge between local communities’ and private sectors’ interests.

The threat of urban development impinging on individuals’ right to access and enjoy **their cultural heritage** was highlighted as key to protect the people’s needs

in many public places in cities around the world which were often designed to promote **social cohesion** and/or nationhood and continue to preserve cultural memory. Increasing segregation of public spaces is a challenge undermining this purpose.

b) Best practices and innovative ways to address challenges faced by specific groups

Participants agreed that in order to ensure that urban public spaces are inclusive, accessible and sustainable for all inhabitants, urban planning should have a **people-centred approach**. This includes adopting a **human rights-based approach** and **participatory planning** techniques to enable all user groups to participate in planning future public spaces.

The Moderator highlighted that the specific needs of certain groups, such as older persons, persons with disabilities, women, internally displaced persons, persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, among other groups should be taken into consideration in urban planning and related processes, including the **impact of aging** on urban spaces, arguing, “Without access to the physical, social economic and cultural environments of public spaces, certain groups cannot fully enjoy all their rights and freedoms”. Public spaces should be localities that enhance social cohesion, promote cultural diversity and intergenerational solidarity. A participant from the **United States** shared the positive impact of the ‘American Disability Act’ minimum requirements on ensuring that public spaces are accessible to all including persons with disabilities, the “Safe Routes to Schools” initiative and the American Association of Retired Persons which is advocating for physical improvements to car-dominated environments, such as wider/better footpath design and other physical and cultural changes. Some innovative examples of measuring accessibility and “walkability” and the “happiest” routes were shared, as well as initiatives to improve connectivity between poorer and more affluent neighbourhoods to remove barriers and promote equity.

In terms of ensuring the **safety and security of individuals** due to violence and crime in public spaces participants shared some studies related to urban violence prevention. Individuals should be able to live in peaceful and safe environments in order to reduce their vulnerability and safeguard their involvement in the life of the community. One participant from the **Syrian Arab Republic** mentioned the transformation of the use of public spaces in her country and highlighted that particular attention should be given to those living in situations of risk, conflict and humanitarian emergencies.

Several participants emphasized that in order to create inclusive urban public spaces **local cultural context, history and traditions** must be taken into account to ensure they reflect the design needs of the community and that all inhabitants will use and benefit from it.

Several positive examples of participatory planning processes were shared, including from Chilpancingo, Guerrero, **Mexico**, where inhabitants were involved in the design of their new homes and adjacent public spaces in the context of displacement due to a new infrastructure project. The resultant public spaces were judged to be liveable, safe, resilient and inclusive and were embraced by the community who were integral to their creation.

Another example of community participation was shared from Bandung, **Indonesia** where as a reaction against middle class recreation becoming increasingly confined to shopping malls and private sports clubs, the major has engaged local citizens, and “creative communities” have moved to “activate” neglected public spaces through creative events. Public parks have been renovated and “activated” through collaboration with creative groups and local people, shifting public perception of public spaces seen as “poor people’s places” to “everybody’s places”. Bandung also provides an example of successful collaboration between local government, the private sector and local communities, which has revitalized more than ten urban thematic parks.

An example shared from ActionAid in **India** demonstrated how public spaces can be used as a tool for excluded groups to project their voice and participate in the decision making affecting their lives.

In addition, contributors also highlighted the importance of professional awareness, on the part of engineers, architects and others, of the implications of their profession on the enjoyment of all human rights by individuals.

Finally, the discussion emphasised the importance of adopting clear monitoring mechanisms, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the need for clear division of responsibility and accountability of State authorities in order to assess the progress, stagnation or regress of the implementation of public policies, aiming to protect and promote the whole spectrum of human rights of inhabitants in urban public spaces.

Disclaimer: the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this discussion summary report are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the Habitat III Secretariat, the United Nations, or the participants' organization.