



World Habitat Day 2015
Message of the UN-Habitat Executive Director
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Public Spaces for all

This year we start the Urban October celebrating the World Habitat Day and reflecting on Public Spaces for All. We do it in a partnership between UN-Habitat and the HeforShe initiative promoted by UN-Women. It aims to engage men and boys, one half of humanity, in removing the social and cultural barriers that prevent the other half of humanity from achieving their potential. This partnership examines and promotes the role for men and women alike in the creation of gender-equal public spaces for all. Good public spaces enhance community cohesion and promote health, happiness, and well-being for all citizens as well as fostering investment, economic development and environmental sustainability.

The character of a city is defined by its streets and public spaces. From squares and boulevards to neighbourhood gardens and children playgrounds, public space frames city image. The connective matrix of streets and public spaces forms the skeleton of the city upon which all else rests. Public space is a vital component of a prosperous city. Well designed and managed public space is a key asset for a city's functioning and has a positive impact on its economy, environment, safety, health, integration and connectivity. The quality of life for people in cities is directly related to the state of its public spaces.

Public space provides room for social and cultural interaction and can foster a sense of belonging and pride in an area. A public space that is open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, provides a democratic forum for citizens and society. Public space can bring communities together, provide meeting places and foster social ties. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities. Sharing common spaces is the soul of the city.

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 crime and violence rises. A mixed and diverse public space (use, users, design, state, time, etc.) provides a place that is vibrant and busy automatically reducing insecurity.

Many cities are developing policies that promote compact, liveable areas, with adequate public space that facilitate public transport, encourages walking and cycling, thereby reducing carbon emissions. Public space is critical for environmental sustainability. Green and open public space brings many important environmental benefits such as, the cooling of air and the absorption of atmospheric pollutants. The significant increase in hard surfacing and the reduction in green spaces lead to higher temperatures in towns and cities. Vegetation in the public space can help to redress this imbalance.

Although a good city performance is not only about the amount of public space; we see successful urban grids when public space is in balance with buildable plots. Like in a perfect yin and yang, a city should allocate to open spaces, parks, squares and plazas at least the same proportion as to private space.

Given the importance of public spaces, it is worrying that provision of public space is limited in many cities, that access to public space is becoming more and more controlled and that often cities lack comprehensive knowledge of the public space they have and management mechanisms to enhance its quality, access and benefits. In addition, tools for creating and protecting public spaces are not widely applied and accessible to cities across the world, and in particular in developing countries. An enormous local asset is undervalued and underutilized.

We should all ensure that in the framework of the 'Transforming our World – the 2030 development agenda', especially SDG 11, which formulates the ambition to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable – we reflect on the need to plan and manage public spaces. The New Urban Agenda to be defined in Habitat III in Quito in 2016 will provide a unique opportunity to implement the 2030 development framework and deal with the challenges of urbanization in the next two decades.