Public spaces are places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without profit motive. Public spaces and streets are multifunctional areas for social interaction, economic exchange and cultural expression. Providing public space enhances community cohesion and civic identity and supports the levels of urban density required for environmentally and economically sustainable cities. Cities with sufficient public space are safe and attractive places to live and work in. Investing in public space is investing in the quality of our lives.

THE CHALLENGE

• Rapid urbanization, particularly in developing countries, places immense pressure on land for housing and other services. This often leads to the privatization of land (such as gated communities), the commercialization of the public good (shopping malls) and erosion of public space.

• In the developing world, less than 15% of land in the city core is allocated to streets, (dropping to 10% in informal settlements and suburban areas) resulting in traffic congestion and unsafe roads.

UN-HABITAT’S APPROACH

The Global Public Space Programme promotes the development of more sustainable urban areas through the creation, design, management and enjoyment of public space and the development of policies, tools and indicators in support thereof.

Based on extensive experience and research in cities, UN-Habitat recommends that up to 50% of urban land should be allocated to public space. This can be broken down to 30% for streets and sidewalks and about 20% for open spaces, green spaces and public facilities.

Through urban planning and design, UN-Habitat works with cities and towns to create, protect and manage public spaces and to encourage their use. The Global Public Space Programme employs several strategies to support development of public spaces:

• Partnerships and networking – the programme is underpinned by a network of over 40 partners involved in implementing projects at the city level and in developing appropriate tools, indicators, technical and policy guidelines. Experiences and best practices are exchanged annually at either the World Urban Forum and/or the Future of Places Conference.

• Citywide strategies – the intention of the Global Public Space Programme is to improve public space across the whole city and to raise the capacity of local institutions and communities to implement public space projects. UN-Habitat’s primary partners in this endeavor are cities and local governments.

• Pilot programmes – provide strategic entry points for public space as well as for demonstrating participatory approaches to public space design, implementation and management. In collaboration with Mojang, the developers of Minecraft, a popular video game, UN-Habitat organizes participatory workshops to assist communities plan and visualize public space projects which are then implemented.

• Knowledge management, advocacy and tools – which help to institutionalize public space in the normative work of the UN and its partner cities.

Providing high-quality public space enhances community cohesion and civic identity and supports the levels of urban density required for environmentally and economically sustainable cities. Studies indicate that cities in which 50% of land is allocated to streets and public spaces are more prosperous in terms of quality of life, infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, productivity, and equity and social inclusion.

Less than 15% of land in the city core is allocated to streets in the developing world, (dropping to 10% in informal settlements and suburban areas) resulting in traffic congestion and unsafe roads.

50% of urban land should be allocated to public space. This can be broken down to 30% for streets and sidewalks and about 20% for open spaces, green spaces and public facilities.

IMPACT

The programme is supporting 30 cities of the developing world to address public space challenges in various ways:

• Seven public spaces have been revitalized and 22 are being implemented.
• Two cities have conducted public space inventories.
• Three cities are preparing citywide public space strategies.
• Capacity of local government staff to implement public space initiatives has been improved in 20 cities.
On the global agenda, the profile of public space has been raised significantly through adoption of target 11.7 “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”

Source: UN-Habitat

Historically Dandora was known as a dirty slum rife with crime and violence. Open spaces in the neighbourhood were neglected and ignored… until they became dumpsites and no-one could use those spaces. We mobilised young people in the neighbourhood to clean up, level the ground and plant grass. Now we have community courtyards where the children can play safely. If we can change Dandora, we can change Nairobi and we can change the world.

Charles Gachanga, CEO, Dandora Transformation League