

Research Briefing Notes

Rebuilding Communities Through Public Space Interventions:

Co-Learning from Beirut's Reconstruction After the 2020 Beirut Port Blast

Summary

The Beirut port explosion killed at least 117 people, wounded 6,000 people, of whom at least 150 acquired a physical disability; caused untold psychological harm; destroyed infrastructure and damaged 77,000 apartments, displacing over 300,000 people.

This research facilitated a co-learning process on the reconstruction of public spaces in Beirut. The project conducted a participatory assessment of both built outputs (e.g. play infrastructure) as well as the processes (participatory and not) that led to their implementation. It produced a database containing 53 public space interventions in Beirut and its suburbs, built after August 2020 and October 2022, accessible to the public and funded in response to the Beirut explosion.

We learned that co-designed public spaces have the capacity to positively impact on local social cohesion, especially after a disaster, and this project generated new learning on this important aspect of the reconstruction process. The project delved into the methodological and practical challenges of measuring the impact of public space projects in the context of reconstruction post disaster. The project identified how to maximise benefits for the residents through public space projects and the importance of residents' role in such projects.

The project aimed at expanding co-designed built projects in Lebanon as opportunities to empower vulnerable communities, improve social cohesion and prevent conflict. It planned to do so by strengthening coordination between different stakeholders who have been working on public space projects and improving the understanding of how co-designed public spaces generate positive impacts.

The project also contributed to the overall MENASP research question regarding the methods of conflict prevention that are effective from a social protection perspective and the priority areas for capacity-building of the different actors involved. It also addressed the question on how to integrate procedures and policies for anticipating and responding to possible conflicts into the normal functioning of governments, international governmental and non-governmental organisations. A key aspect to which this research contributes is reflecting on how the actions of these organisations could be better coordinated.

Research Background

The Beirut port explosion caused extensive damage to infrastructure, including transport, energy, water supply and sanitation, and municipal services. Public spaces were recognised as important assets to rehabilitate as they offered a needed breathing space for vulnerable individuals, and children in particular. During the Covid-19 pandemic, schools were closed, and many children were

spending most of their day in public parks or simply playing on the streets. Local tensions between different religious, political and national groups have been a historical feature of Lebanon but they have been intensified by the huge inflow of refugees from neighbouring Syria and a deep economic and political crisis.

This project produced a participatory assessment of the reconstruction efforts following the Beirut explosion, in particular in relation to public spaces. The analytical framework builds upon the co-design of built projects with children affected by displacement (DeCID handbook), which was adapted to consider the specificities of the post-blast context. Data was gathered and analysed through a series of interviews followed by a participatory workshop, bringing together all the different stakeholders working on public spaces in Beirut to co-learn and exchange knowledge with the aim of identifying shared standards among the actors operating in the city on public space projects.

This was complemented by a temporary and participatory public art installation produced in collaboration with residents of the Karantina neighbourhood. The database of public space projects included including public parks, stairs, streets, community centres, libraries, art installations, street lighting and murals. Data was sourced via online desktop research and from field observations, then information about each project was sent to the relevant actors who were involved to be verified and approved. The research team interviewed 17 key stakeholders, discussing 38 public space projects with municipalities, NGOs, INGOs, implementing actors, donors, artists, researchers and academics.

Key Findings

The co-learning process focused on the following questions:

- Are public space projects a good approach for disaster recovery? Why? Why not?
- What are the positive impacts of prioritising public space projects following a disaster?
- Are there any negative impacts/challenges in prioritising public space projects following a disaster?
- How can the planning of public space projects maximise benefits for the residents?
- What does it mean to build back “better” or “differently” in the context of Beirut?
- How can we measure the impact of public space projects post blast?

The Impact of Public Space Reconstruction after a Disaster

Following the Beirut blast, public space projects provided an opportunity for residents to cope, heal and socialise. Public spaces rekindled hope and stimulated a sustainable recovery of the city. The rehabilitation of public spaces created collective and lasting positive impacts beyond the physical intervention of a communal meeting place.

Rehabilitated public spaces provided a venue to address multiple needs of various community groups, for instance distribution points for food parcels and medicines, or an incentive to open new businesses and generate livelihood income. Moreover, public space projects that adopted a context-specific participatory approach created a safe space that fostered social inclusion and cohesion. In the context of a dysfunctional state, rehabilitation of public spaces presented an opportunity to restore people’s right to access them.

The public space projects have restored residents’ right to the city. A public space intervention can have a multiplier effect, serving and impacting more people simultaneously, including improving their mental health. It also positively impacts vulnerable groups: for example, when a public space

project is successful, it can provide the space for a child to seek refuge following episodes of domestic violence, which tend to increase in the aftermath of disasters.

Measuring the Impact of Public Space Projects Post Blast

Opening channels of communication between residents and practitioners through WhatsApp was key to being better able to understand the impact of a project on a daily basis, and not only during site visits. Measuring attitudes and behaviour change towards a public space to understand the feeling of community ownership and buy-in was also an indicator of the impact of public space projects. Another indicator was the level of engagement of key stakeholders in the various phases of the project, and whether this resulted in a collaboration that could guarantee the sustainability of the space.

Key Implications

Maximising Benefits for the Residents through Public Space Projects

Residents who are engaged throughout the various steps of the project gain a sense of belonging and ownership of the rehabilitated spaces. When residents are meaningfully engaged throughout the project, the space is shaped to address their specific needs, and this motivates the community to take ownership of and look after the space. A greater sense of belonging is achieved when residents' engagement extends from the design to the construction phase: being hired as labourers and generating an income or volunteering to join in shaping the space.

The Role of Local Residents in Public Space Projects

When residents get to participate in choosing their priorities, identifying the location, developing the design, building the intervention, and overseeing management and maintenance, the project is more successful, leading to a sense of ownership and motivation to participate in creating and caring for the space. Through a participatory approach that embeds intersectionality and diversity, residents get the chance to better understand the needs of different members of the community. Simultaneously engaging residents and the local authority requires time and different approaches.

To **build back better** involves understanding how much the space is being used and who is using it and gathering feedback from residents to create spaces that better serve their needs.

Key Policy Target Groups

Local government, local and international NGOs, United Nations agencies, architects and other urban professionals, academic community.

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About the Research

The project produced a full report, which includes a database of the guide [available here](#). We produced a short documentary on the co-learning process and a video of public art installation. Both are available on the project [page here](#).

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