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“Place-Making” puts citizens in the driver’s seat in designing their public spaces

“Place-Making” is an urban design tool that emphasises the participation of the community as a core element in the design process of public spaces. The heart of the methodology is a community-based and demand-oriented approach to rehabilitating public small-scale infrastructure. The objective is on the one hand to sensitise local authorities to the importance of community engagement and introduce them to inclusively designing all stages of the process, starting from selecting the site to agreeing on a maintenance plan. On the other hand, barriers are removed, and citizens are engaged to actively participate and support the locality in creating inclusive public spaces accessible to all citizens, in particular youth, women, children, and people with disabilities, according to their specific needs. This eventually leads to an improvement of the urban environment that sustainably reflects the lived reality of its citizens and the overall appearance of the village or city. The tool has been applied in two municipalities and five village councils (VCs) in the West Bank, and seven municipalities in the Gaza Strip.

One of the locations is Iraq Burin, a Palestinian village in the northern West Bank with a population of 1,079 inhabitants. This is where the two young women Taqua and Zainab live. They are students in a nearby school and often meet to hang out in the afternoon.

The village is located at 800 m. At the top of a cliff in the village’s heart, the students enjoy the view towards the west of the historical centre of the village. However, it is not accessible or secured. Zainab knows the area at the cliff well, as she has passed

by it throughout her childhood many times: **“I visited this place several times before, it was neglected and dangerous, particularly for the children”**. She sees the need to rehabilitate it and make it accessible to the community.

Place-Making at a glance

Place-Making is an urban design tool that facilitates the participation of the community, particularly women and marginalised groups, as a core element in the design, creation, or rehabilitation and maintenance process of small-scale public spaces of local authorities.

The methodology removes barriers to the participation of citizens, particularly women and marginalised groups and raises the local authorities’ awareness of the importance of citizen engagement.

The approach includes a series of community sessions for the design, construction, and maintenance of the public space.

Place-Making aims at creating or rehabilitating spaces that are accessible and environment- and climate-sensitive in their design and the materials used.

Throughout the process, the local authorities and the citizens agree on roles and responsibilities to guarantee the sustainability of the space.

The tool is included in the Ministry of Local Government’s (MoLG’s) Urban Design Manual for local authorities.



Young citizen Zeinab from Iraq Burin

The general methodology of Place-Making has been used globally since the 1960s and has recently been introduced in the Palestinian context. The Local Governance Reform Programme (LGRP II) has taken up the approach and finetuned it to allow a focus on the participation of women and marginalised groups. A total of 14 public spaces were co-designed and rehabilitated or constructed with this methodology. The tool is customised to fit the needs of citizens, specifically disadvantaged groups and their interests, making use of human-centred design approaches and site simulations to let the participants understand the technical drawings and connect with the site.

Zeinab and Taqua wish for a place where they can meet and hang out together, according to their needs and ideas. Both have never attended a community session to design a public space in their village. Their experience so far is that citizens have limited access to public spaces and that the level of participation in decision-making processes is low, particularly when it comes to women and marginalised groups.

Development

The development of LGRP II's Place-Making methodology has been inspired by global and local experiences of community-based urban design and harmonised with guidelines published by UN-Habitat, the United Nations programme for human settlements and sustainable urban development. In 2018, further additions were made together with a contracted engineering firm to remove barriers to the participation of marginalised citizens and women in the Palestinian context and to ensure their involvement from the first step of the process till after the implementation. To test the methodology, a piloting phase was commenced in two municipalities in the West Bank in 2019. Moreover, with the support of the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG), a call for proposals was sent to several village councils for technical support to design, rehabilitate and construct public spaces. The Place-Making tool was applied in five VCs in 2021-2022.

During the application of the methodology, it was noticed that the councils were not fully aware of the importance of citizen engagement, particularly of women. Therefore, attention was paid to

preparatory meetings which focused on orientation and awareness of the council members. Moreover, female planners were employed through the engineering firm to leverage the inputs of female citizens.

The overall process is resource-intensive, including the costs for external human resources, material, land, and construction costs. However, the local authorities' in-kind contributions (manpower, land, etc.) emphasise their high interest in the methodology. The process, therefore, needs negotiations and certain mitigation measures. For example, unforeseen construction costs during the implementation process can be mitigated by introducing changes to the design or material used and the increased in-kind contribution of the local authority and community. These learnings were incorporated into the methodology.

In the meantime, the Gaza Strip faced widespread destruction resulting from Israeli bombings in 2021. In reaction to the changed priorities of partners and beneficiaries, LGRP II saw the potential to support the rehabilitation of public spaces in the Gaza Strip. Young people were trained in developing community initiatives, including the place-making methodology to turn the initiatives into reality. Thereby, the tool was scaled up and further rolled out in additional locations. Seven public spaces were created in six municipalities in the Gaza Strip, bringing the total number to 14. Place-Making has furthermore been included as one of the tools in the MoLG Urban Design Manual. Thereby, other local government units have access to the methodology and can apply it based on their needs, priorities, and resources.

Application

To prepare the participatory process, the VC and the engineers conducted a stakeholder mapping to find out who the prospected users of the space are and, in the following, to be able to include and actively involve them in the design of the space. Moreover, they assessed the users' needs and analysed the technical conditions of the public spaces under nomination. Then, the council invited the citizens to join several interactive community meetings and discussions, which were facilitated by a team of experienced urban designers and engineers.

Citizens and head of Iraq Burin Village Council jointly plan a community area



Using a variety of interactive tools, the workshop participants jointly selected the location, developed the design, and validated the technical implementation plan. In addition, they agreed with the local authority on how to keep this public space vital and sustainable by establishing a maintenance plan.

In total, 74 citizens attended, representing various parts of the community: women, the elderly, children, youth, and people with disabilities. Together with the council members, the community discussed their needs, wishes and suggestions.

For Zeinab and Taqua it was the first time to participate in community-based urban design activities. Taqua describes: **“We formed groups, we drew and illustrated our ideas on what we want the project to look like in the future. When I saw the technical designs, I noted that our ideas and suggestions were integrated”**.

Eventually, the community and the local authority selected the project and the best location for the construction. The results were included in the technical designs. The community chose the area of the cliff to be rehabilitated and turned into a small public garden in the old centre of the village to vitalise it and draw more people there.

Taqua and Zeinab are proud to have contributed and to be able to understand the technical concept and how their ideas are reflected in it. The workshops were a success for the local authority and the citizens alike and have improved the relationship between them. The process makes the members of the community feel seen and respected. For the first time, Taqua explains, they were involved in such a process: **“It was a great feeling to see our ideas implemented in reality”**.

Moreover, the women’s ownership of the location has increased and they feel a shared responsibility for its sustainment. **“We witness the project development step by step, when the construction is complete, we will be very happy”**, says Taqua.

The selected location has turned into one of the attractions of the village. A few months after the construction, the head of Iraq Burin village council reports that he is planning to extend the area through a nearby land next to the garden.



Finalised Place-Making location in Iraq Burin



Relevance

The general concept and the methodology of Place-Making have been applied successfully around the world. The approach has proven that community-based, bottom-up development and decision-making lead to needs-based and tailored resource allocation and increased satisfaction and confidence among citizens towards their local authorities. Joint planning, based on the needs of the most marginalised community members, hence, benefits all. By joining resources, even communities with fewer (financial) capacities can more efficiently rehabilitate public spaces.

Beyond the material outcome, the methodology, or, more concretely, the joint design sessions and the shared responsibilities and arrangements concerning the maintenance and management of the public space reinforce the relationship and trust between the community and the decision-makers. The local authorities are sensitised to the significance of involving citizens in the early stages of projects, including infrastructure, to guarantee the effectiveness,

efficiency, and sustainability of local planning. Citizens, also those that face higher barriers to local decision-making and participation, are reached and encouraged to take responsibility for their common spaces. Through participating in the project, they feel ownership towards the spaces and experience themselves as an integral and active part of the community. The methodology emphasises and promotes invaluable cross-cutting principles, such as gender sensitivity, inclusion, accessibility, and awareness of climate and environment. This opens up opportunities to bring in a particular focus on either aspect for joint awareness raising and sustainable anchoring of these principles locally.

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