

WIEGO - Key Messages on Public Space

INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACES CREATE VIBRANT CITIES

- A city's character is defined by its streets and public spaces. From the iconic central spaces – the squares, plazas, boulevards and esplanades etched in history – to the neighborhood parks of childhood play, public space frames city image and community life.
- Public spaces can take many forms: Streets and sidewalks serve as public infrastructure to promote urban mobility and accessibility by supporting the movement of people and goods. Streets, sidewalks and other open spaces can also serve as sites of production and distribution. Formal parks and informal community spaces provide shared places for recreation and social life.
- These public spaces are the settings for livelihood activities, social events and functions that contribute to and define community and city character: not only the ceremonial festivities and carnivals of the multi-cultural city and the movement of goods and people, but also everyday community life and the day-to-day activity of workers in the informal economy – including street vendors, waste-pickers and others.
- Street vending and waste picking in particular have long contributed to the culture and vibrancy of public spaces. These activities contribute to economic diversity, human activity and management of these spaces. Street vendors offer affordable choices for consumers at convenient locations and times. Waste pickers supply waste collection services and through their work, they help keep clean public spaces in many cities in developing countries – at little or no cost to city budgets – while diverting tons of material from landfills.
- Weak legal frameworks coupled with weak political will have resulted in a land grab of public space for private interests or development that often result in conflicts between communities, the informal workforce and the government around the use of public space. The value of public spaces and the competing uses/users of them are often overlooked or underestimated, either deliberately or inadvertently: with the result that there is limited understanding of or public engagement around the possibilities of envisioning and regulating public space as a complete, multi-functional urban system.
- Public spaces should serve as a point of intervention to promote inclusivity and to enable the voices of the poor to be heard in urban planning, housing and slum upgrading, governance and basic services projects.

Street Vendor Contributions to Public Spaces

Street vendors play an integral role in creating vibrant public spaces. Located at convenient points on streets, sidewalks and other public spaces, street vendors create natural markets where they provide convenient, accessible retail options to consumers and economic diversity to the local urban economy, bringing vibrancy to city life. The plethora of commercial activities can transform public spaces — such as parks and streetscapes — into multi-use destinations where commercial activity serves as a magnet to draw people to a community. Through their long-term establishment in a location, vendors also maintain enduring relationships with customers, residents, local businesses and other vendors, and contribute to residents and business' social ties, community character, commercial attractions and an overall sense of community and safety.

Street vendors contribute to keeping their spaces and the city clean. Vendors organize sweep-

ups or pool resources to hire refuse collectors in order to keep their environment clean, contributing to an overall healthy environment.

In order to operate on streets, these vendors pay taxes, licensing and permit fees and levies to the local/central governments. The government revenues gained from their work promote development and help strengthen the community and city economy.

Despite their contributions, vendors are the frequent target of municipal crackdowns, harassment and seizure of goods by authorities. This is in spite of court rulings in multiple locations deeming such seizures inappropriate or unconstitutional. Because vendors rely on these earnings, they usually return within a few days – creating a futile cycle. Evictions cost local authorities time and money and devastate the livelihoods of informal vendors. The widespread tendency of local authorities to move vendors out of their natural markets deprives urban consumers of convenient retail options. It also disrupts the existing social and commercial fabric in communities.

Waste Pickers and Contributions to Public Space

Waste pickers provide an essential public service that contributes to a healthy city. In developing countries, millions of workers collect, sort, process, parcel and sell what others have cast aside. Through their activities, waste pickers help keep city spaces clean, including public spaces like streets and sidewalks, as well as additional spaces like offices, schools, drains and garbage collection points. These actors supply a significant portion of solid waste management, recycling and disposal in developing countries, with low cost to the municipal budget.

Waste pickers play a key role in the value chain of ensuring safe and clean urban environments and public spaces. Informal recyclers provide a multitude of services: door-to-door recyclable collection, curb-side collection, collection at designated receptacles, and along streets, in parks and other public areas such as sidewalks and streets. In fact, their collection and recycling of solid waste contributes not only to a clean environment but also to climate change mitigation, by enabling the re-use of products that would otherwise be destroyed, and ensuring clean streets, drains and gutters in the case of floods.

Despite their contributions, waste pickers are often treated poorly by authorities and the public, and ignored within public policy and planning processes. Their livelihoods are threatened as cities privatize solid waste management, aim to “modernize” their waste management practices through investments in capital-intensive machinery, and adopt more expensive and less environmental friendly approaches to waste disposal, such as incineration.

Urban Planning, Policy and Design Imperatives

Planning for public spaces must be demand-driven, inclusive and participatory. Effective planning must include consultation with the full range of public space stakeholders to be representative and inclusive.

- Urban authorities, as well as planners, designers and policy specialists, must ensure inclusive participation in the planning processes with street vendors and waste pickers (as well as other public space patrons, managers and users) to ensure interventions are context-specific and grounded in the realities of the public space users.

- At the neighbourhood level, imaginative urban design, planning and policy should be grounded in community ideals and visions, foster social inclusion, celebrate multiculturalism, and enable urban livelihoods, to create rich, vibrant spaces in the urban commons.
- Laws and regulations should be based on inclusive participation and need to establish enabling systems to create, revitalise, manage, and maintain vibrant public space.

A balanced approach is needed to support street vendor and waste picker livelihoods and community needs to ensure clean, accessible, open public spaces and streets.

- Urban authorities must accommodate the existence of demand-driven, locality specific “natural markets” where street vendors tend to congregate as part of an overall mixed-use development strategy: Allowing street vendors, hawkers, small kiosks and shops to thrive alongside large retail malls, creating economic diversity and consumer options.
- The enactment of progressive laws and regulations pertaining to licensing and location of vendors and waste pickers is needed. These would address existing tensions between street vendors and waste pickers and local authorities and pedestrians and foster long-term coexistence.

Like their formal counterparts, these informal operators need security of tenure.

Good practice documentation demonstrates that vendors can be part of the solution to urban management challenges like crime and cleaning. With security of access to operate in these spaces, these stakeholders have additional incentives to invest in and scale-up their enterprises, which supports wider community improvements. When these informal operators are recognized and seen as legitimate contributors to the urban economy, they are more likely to invest in and take better care of the common environment.

Basic workplace infrastructure contributes to healthy, clean environments for street vendors and waste pickers and greater security for all. Urban authorities must plan for and provide adequate infrastructure for the transport, recreational, commercial and leisure activities of public spaces. In addition to benches, chairs and shade for pedestrians, cities also need kiosks, tables and shelters for street vendors and waste and recycling receptacles for the public and waste pickers.

Voices from Informal Workers: Contributions to Public Spaces

“We help the community by providing them with their basic needs at affordable prices cheaper and closer to their homes.” Street vendor, Durban, South Africa

“I also protect the community from thieves and bad people. Our presence on the roads enables those pedestrians to walk freely knowing that they are safe and will not be robbed.” Male street vendor, Durban, South Africa

“We clean our vending sites thus keeping the city clean.” Male street vendor, Durban, South Africa

“We help Nakuru grow and develop because we pay taxes.” Male street vendor, Nakuru, Kenya

“We contribute to the growth of the town. We attract people because of the goods service and customer relations. When we sell, the wholesaler also grows and our [national] economy grows; also the economy of Nakuru grows.” Female street vendor, Nakuru, Kenya

“Our existence in a city adds to the vibrancy; without us everything would be barren and non-lively.” Street vendor, Ahmedabad, India

“We create jobs, people are employed and are kept very busy. That way, we contribute to the reduction of crime in Nakuru. We keep the drains clean. We now have a clean environment in Manyani.” Waste picker, Nakuru, Kenya

“We offer a doorstep collection service for citizens and we ensure recyclables get recycled.” Waste picker, Pune, India

“So much difference we make! They get a clean city without paying us a paisa.” Waste picker, Pune, India