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Rehabilitating public space to increase access for all in Iraq

The strategic location of Mosul makes the city a melting pot of diverse cultures, ethnicities and religious beliefs, but also a target for violent extremism. The city’s already limited public green space deteriorated during the 2014–2016 occupation of Mosul by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Through the area-based programme Supporting Recovery and Stability in Iraq through Local Development, UN-Habitat is working to rehabilitate war-damaged houses and restore essential public services, helping the government to strengthen its institution, renewing the social contract between citizens and state.

Restoring Al Yarmouk Park through public participation

Al Yarmouk Park, once an iconic social area full of palm trees and colourful flower beds, was looted and logged during the conflict leading to a deterioration of the environment and a decrease in security in the area.

Recovering public space is a priority in Iraq, one that should always engage the community in a consultative and participatory planning approach. A 2019 focus group discussion asking older persons to identify the use of the park and the factors that led to its gradual dilapidation helped to inform and guide the rehabilitation. Children and youth also expressed their desire for playgrounds and sport activities.

In 2021, playgrounds will be installed, pathways lit by solar-powered lamp posts and a central axis with fountains created, and a community hall retrofitted. Once rehabilitated, Al Yarmouk Park’s 67,000 square metres will serve 500,000 people.

Transforming the space, influencing social change

Decades-long conflicts have shown how diversity can be a threat and disenfranchised youth can be negatively stereotyped and influenced by violent political and religious extremism. Public space that can host sports activities and playgrounds are known to have transformative and positive effects, improving relations between youth from different backgrounds and with varying physical abilities.

Scaling up projects like this in Mosul and nationwide will contribute to the stability and socio-economic development of Iraq.

Training and community-driven solutions are critical for sustainable development

Public open space should be available to all. The whole community, including the elderly and persons with disabilities, will have access to Al Yarmouk Park – a safe, comfortable and accessible space.

Participatory planning makes room for enthusiastic community-level commitment fostering a strong sense of ownership and well-managed public green space in the future.

Inclusive multi-purpose public space enriches the social fabric of neighbourhoods.

The strong engagement of municipal governments and local non-governmental organizations plays a pivotal role in delivering and implementing what would be otherwise top-down decisions and helps to improve capacities through practice.

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