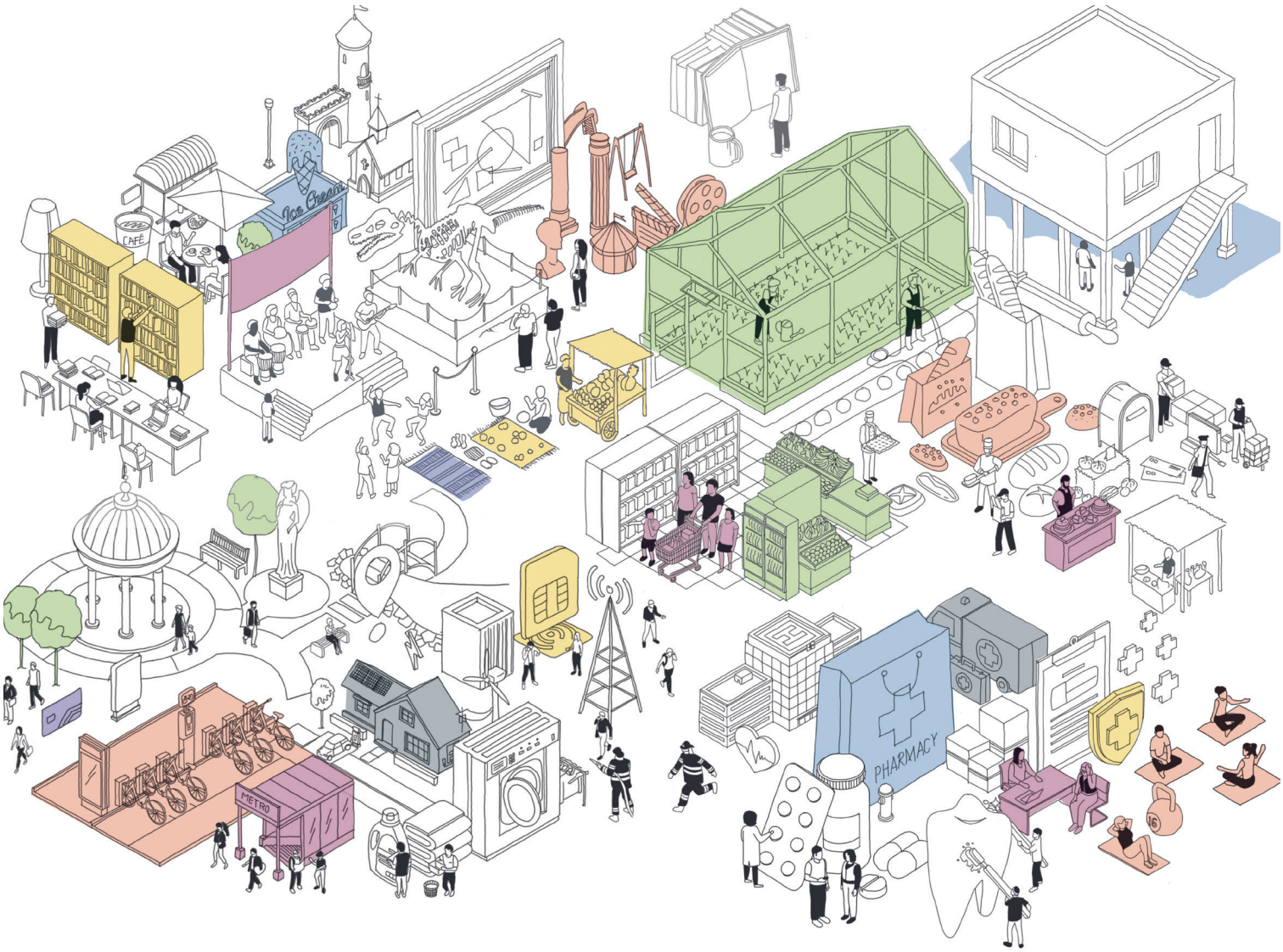

THE SPACES THAT **SHAPE US**

The Value of Public Facilities for Inclusive and Resilient Neighbourhoods

UN-HABITAT





United Nations Human Settlements Programme
(UN-Habitat)
P.O. Box 30030, 00100 Nairobi GPO Kenya
Tel: +254 020-7623120 (Central Office)
www.unhabitat.org

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Acknowledgements

Project Supervisor: Shubhagato Dasgupta

Principal authors and coordinators:
Katriya Bulutoglu, Jose Chong, Hendrik Tieben

Contributors:
Full list of authors and contributors on page seven

Design and layout:
Remi Urbain

Cover art based on original designs by Asmae Elrhazi and Seunghoon Han

About UN-Habitat

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is the part of the United Nations that focuses on working towards a better urban future. Its mission is to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements development and the achievement of adequate housing for all. UN-Habitat works with partners to build inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities. It promotes urbanization as a positive transformative force for people and communities, reducing inequality, discrimination and poverty, and provides technical assistance, policy advice, knowledge and capacity building to national and local governments in over 90 countries.

About the Chinese University of Hong Kong School of Architecture

The School of Architecture at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) is a leading design school in Asia, known for its interdisciplinary approach to architecture, urbanism, and environmental design. It emphasizes the integration of design with social, cultural, and ecological responsibility, particularly in high-density and rapidly urbanizing contexts. The School combines research, practice, and education and engages with global challenges.

Foreword – UN-Habitat

For decades, UN-Habitat has advanced public space as a cornerstone of sustainable urban development. This mandate was formally strengthened in 2011, when UN-Habitat's Governing Council adopted Resolution 23/4, providing a clear direction to consolidate and scale agency wide work on public space.

Through normative guidance and direct collaboration with cities, UN-Habitat has demonstrated how well planned and well managed public spaces defined as: streets, open public spaces, and public facilities advance social cohesion, economic vitality, climate resilience, and quality of life.

Reflected in UN-Habitat's global public space portfolio, including the Global Public Space Programme, this work positions public space as a core lever for delivering the New Urban Agenda, SDG 11, and UN-Habitat's 2026-2029 Strategic Plan, which centres sustainable urbanization with universal access to housing, land and basic services. Building on this foundation, the publication focuses on public facilities as critical social and spatial infrastructure whose location, accessibility, governance, and design shape inclusive, safe, and resilient urban development.

UN-Habitat is pleased to have developed this publication in partnership with The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). This collaboration has enabled a rich and rigorous exploration of public facilities across diverse geographical and socio economic contexts, combining global policy perspectives with in depth research and grounded, case based insights. Building on UN-Habitat's detailed portfolio of work on streets and open public spaces, the partnership has helped address a critical normative gap - bringing public facilities fully into the public space discourse.

This publication draws on the expertise and experience of a wide range of organizations and practitioners worldwide, reflecting a collective effort to consolidate knowledge, share practical lessons, and strengthen the role of public facilities within sustainable urban development agendas.

Following the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the New Urban Agenda held in New York in July 2026 to mark Quito+10, there is a renewed opportunity to follow through on decisive priorities agreed by Member States and accelerate implementation.

We are proud to have shared the working paper of this publication at the World Urban Forum 13 in Baku, facilitating discussion with city leaders and centring the urgent need to respond to the global housing crisis. Situating public facilities at the core of these debates, this publication demonstrates how facilities not only support adequate and affordable housing, but address the multiple, intersecting crises cities face today.

At a time of growing urban fragility, constrained public resources, and accelerating climate risks, this publication calls for renewed attention to public facilities as shared civic assets. It offers practical guidance for city leaders, planners, and practitioners, and serves as a reference and a call to action: investing in public facilities is investing in the people, places and future of our cities.



Rafael Tuts
Director of Global Solutions Division
UN-Habitat

Foreword – CUHK

The transition from architecture for people to architecture with people marks a necessary departure from the industrial shadow of the "expert." For decades, the professional gaze has been fixed upon the building as a frozen monument, a glorified object that serves the ego of the designer rather than the vitality of the inhabitant. By prioritizing the individual over the collective, we have eroded the "vernacular" of the street. It is, therefore, an act of recovery to return our focus to the public realm, where the infrastructure of life is shared rather than consumed.

Public spaces are not merely service-delivery points; they are the heart of conviviality. They are the sites where neighbours reclaim the agency to assemble, relate, and sustain one another. When we treat public facilities as core urban infrastructure, we move beyond the concept of housing as a series of isolated, sanitized cells. Instead, we begin to see the city as a living tapestry that provides not just "services," but the essential human requirements of dignity and mutual aid.

In our current era, the city is besieged by a "radical monopoly" of crisis: climate instability, the commodification of shelter, and the scarcity of public resources. To respond is not to build more rigid structures, but to foster flexibility. We must look toward hybrid programming and adaptive reuse; tools that allow people to shape their own environments rather than being shaped by them.

This report is the fruit of a multi-year collaboration between UN-Habitat and CUHK, born from the realization that spatial design cannot exist in a vacuum of professional privilege. It must be rooted in the social and economic realities of those it serves. By engaging a global network of practitioners and community leaders, we have sought to break down the barriers between the "planner" and the "planned."

We offer no fixed blueprints or "expert" certainties here. Such things often stifle the very autonomy they claim to support. Instead, we present a framework for a living platform, a tool for learning and exchange. Our goal is to reinforce public facilities as the everyday commons, ensuring they remain resilient assets for a community's own recovery in times of upheaval.

We extend our deepest gratitude to UN-Habitat and our international partners. Their commitment suggests that a convivial urban future is not only possible but is already being built in the spaces between us. We invite you to join us in reclaiming the city as a place of shared life.



Peter Ferretto
Director School of Architecture
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Acknowledgements

Chapter Authors
Patricia Aelbrecht, University of Cardiff, Lead: Public Facilities as Social Infrastructure

Chiara Martinuzzi, Chaire ETI, Lead: The Role of Proximity

Kristie Daniel, HealthBridge and Kurt Wheeler, Project for Public Spaces, Lead: Livelihoods and Economy

Kelly Donovan and Emily Simpson, Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation, Contributor: Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Giselle Sebag, International Society of Urban Health, Lead: Health and Well-being

Case Study Authors
Camden Libraries, London (p. 26)
Patricia Aelbrecht, University of Cardiff

UTOPIAs in Iztapalapa, Mexico City (p. 34)
Chiara Martinuzzi, Chaire ETI

Redo Merezzate, Milan (p. 42)
Giordana Ferri and Francesca Spigarolo, Fondazione Housing Sociale

Territórios da Infância, Rio de Janeiro (p. 48)
Vera Tangari, Daniel Athias and Flora Fernandez, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

Kibera Bookhouse, Nairobi (p. 58)
Wacera Thande and Regina Opondo, Kounkuey Design Initiative and Peter Ferretto, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Boulevard, Lusail City (p. 64)
Dr Fatema Hassan Al Sulaiti, Mahmoud Mohammad Ali Dari, Sharoq Hussain Hassan and Enes Talha Balyemez, Qatar Museum

Kenyatta Market, Nairobi (p. 74)
Joseph Nzioki, UN-Habitat

Safer Schools Chókwè, Gaza Province (p. 82)
Sandra Roque and Juan Hurtado, UN-Habitat

Community Service Centres, Gaza (p. 84)
Wafa Butmeh and Lubna Shaheen, UN-Habitat

Innovation Hub, Naga City (p. 88)
Kelly Donovan and Emily Simpson, Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation

Manzanas del Cuidado, Bogotá (p. 96)
Giselle Sebag and Marina Kolovou-Kouri, International Society for Urban Health

Play LA, Los Angeles (p. 102)
Ollie Dudfield and Saurabh Mishra, International Olympic Committee

Community Sport, Nghe An Province (p. 106)
Ollie Dudfield and Saurabh Mishra, International Olympic Committee

MetroPublicNet, Lisbon (p. 114)
João Rafael Santos and Filipa Serpa, Universidade de Lisboa

UN-Habitat Contributors
Anne Amin - Cecilia Anderson - Christelle Lahoud - Edson Pereira - Elin Andersdotter Fabre - Filiep Decorte - Francesca Lionetti - Juan Hurtado - Jessica Lage - Jing Ren - Marla Dava - Mark Ojal - Samuel Gichohi Nijugun - Sandra Roque

External Contributors
Emil Rodriguez, CAF - Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean
Joan Roca, City Museum of Barcelona
Jon Kher Kaw, World Bank
Samuel Kerongo, Chinese University of Hong Kong
Puvenendra Akkiah, United Cities and Local Government

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public facilities frame the rhythms of urban life. They are the spaces where communities gather, where culture and creativity thrive, and where resilience is built in times of crisis. Whether providing shelter during natural disasters, enabling livelihoods through markets, or fostering cohesion through cultural institutions, public facilities are integral to the daily functioning and long-term sustainability of cities.

Alongside streets and open spaces, they form the backbone of urban systems structuring daily routines and enabling access to essential services.

Despite their importance, public facilities are often treated as an afterthought in urban decision-making. Too frequently they are seen as financial burdens on municipal budgets, rather than as assets that generate income, stimulate local economies, and underpin social inclusion.

In many cities they are delivered in isolation from housing and transport systems, or deprioritized in favour of short-term cost savings. This fragmented approach leads to underused assets, unequal access, and missed opportunities to address pressing urban challenges such as inequality, climate vulnerability, and social fragmentation.

At the same time, growing fiscal constraints, rising land values, and increasing demand for services are placing additional pressure on cities' ability to deliver and maintain these assets.

This publication is a collaborative effort, bringing together reflections from more than twenty expert organizations across local government, civil society, United Nations and international agencies. Illustrating the current state of public facilities across diverse contexts, this publication explores how they contribute to urban life across five interconnected dimensions:



Access to adequate housing



Enabling education, art & culture



Boosting livelihoods & economy



Offering safe and inclusive spaces



Bolstering health and well-being

Through these five avenues, the impact of public facilities to address interconnected challenges facing cities today is made clear.



People enjoying Vendome stairs in Beirut, Lebanon. © Catalytic Action

From large-scale public housing programmes to informal settlement upgrading, and from mobile service provision to major event-led investment, the evidence shows that proximity, accessibility, and multi-functionality are key to success. Facilities that are embedded within daily life, connected to safe, walkable public spaces and responsive to local needs, are more likely to be used, trusted, and sustained over time. Equally, recognizing the role of community-led and informal provision is critical, particularly in underserved areas where these systems already function as essential social infrastructure.

The publication also highlights the importance of governance, finance, and land management in shaping outcomes. With 15 concluding recommendations targeted to policymakers & city leaders, developers & investors, and built environment professionals, a coherent action plan is set out to move cities towards delivering inclusive and sustainable public facilities for all.

From developer contributions, land value capture, and public–private partnerships, there are many tools that cities can use to lever long-term and structured financing options that deliver long-term public value and avoid exacerbating inequality or displacement.

Translating these insights into a practical implementation framework for cities the final chapter sets out a clear pathway - from mapping existing assets and diagnosing need, to integrated planning, flexible design, sustainable financing, and long-term management. Across all stages, the central message is consistent: **public facilities deliver the greatest impact when they are planned as part of a coordinated urban system, rather than as standalone projects**.

Spotlighting practical examples from around the world, this publication is a call to action. As cities confront rising inequality, climate pressures, and rapid urbanization, investing in public facilities offers a practical and proven route to more inclusive, resilient, and liveable urban environments. By recognizing their full value and embedding them at the heart of urban development, cities can move beyond fragmented delivery toward integrated systems that support everyday life and long-term prosperity.

Local governments can use this as a tool to strengthen planning, sharpen investment decisions, make the case for and accelerate the delivery of high-quality spaces that contribute to resilience, equity, and economic vitality.

Methodology and collaboration

This publication draws on a collaborative process involving over 20 partner organizations across academia, local government, civil society, and international agencies. The analysis combines global case studies, expert insights, and thematic research on public facilities and urban systems.

Expert insights were gathered through

- **December 2023-December 2025** - Series of hybrid Community of Practice sessions hosted with expert organizations, architecture students and UN organizations.
- **January 2026** - Expert Group Meeting attended by 33 experts from across academia, local government, UN organizations and NGOs
- **April 2026** - Writeshop hosted with lead partner organizations to collaboratively review findings and write recommendations and implementation framework.
- **May 2026** - Working paper launched at the World Urban Forum. Feedback gathered to refine the publication.

A full list of contributing organizations, authors and reviewers can be found on p. 7.

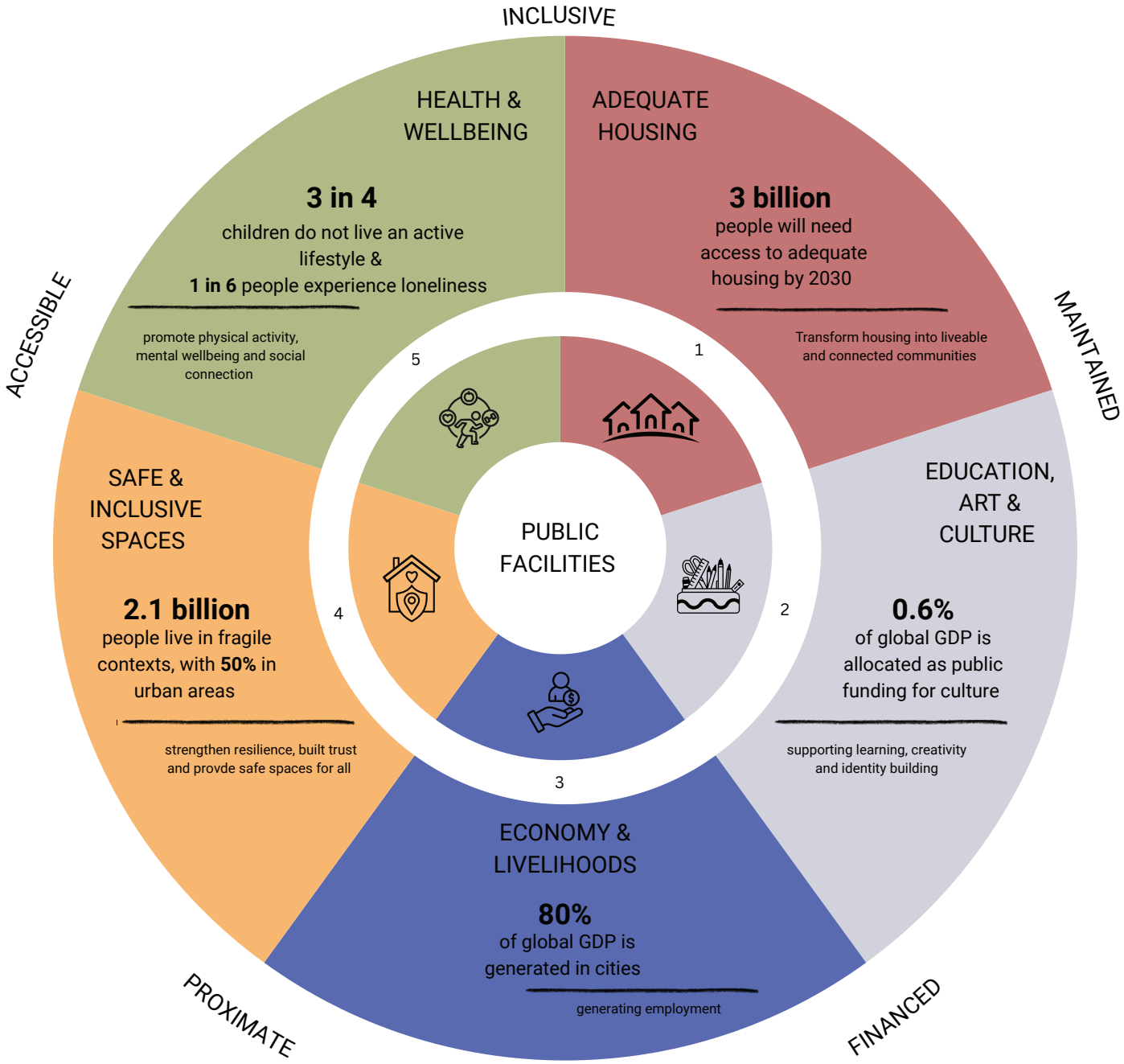


Figure 1: 5 key contributions of public facilities

1 | Why Now?

The importance of public facilities today

Cities today are navigating a convergence of crises that are reshaping how people experience urban environments. This is having significant implications on the type of infrastructure needed and the policy decisions that must be made.

The global state of housing remains deeply concerning. An estimated 3.4 billion people are currently affected by housing inadequacy, including 1.1 billion people living in informal settlements or slum housing (UN-Habitat, 2026). As of 2023 there was a global housing shortage of 269 million units, and this is only set to rise with an additional 2 billion urban residents expected by 2050 (UN-Habitat, 2026). Rapid urbanization, rising inequality, displacement, and economic volatility are compounding these pressures, stretching the capacity of governments and planning systems worldwide.

At the same time, the accelerating impacts of climate change are intensifying vulnerabilities. Increasing temperatures, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation are disproportionately affecting those already living in inadequate housing or underserved neighbourhoods. By 2050 an estimated 216 million people may be forced to migrate within their own country and more than 2 billion urban residents are set to be exposed to temperature rises of at least 0.5°C by 2040 (UN-Habitat, 2024). Predicted changes disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable populations, exacerbating existing inequalities and placing further strain on already inadequate housing systems.

Increasing geopolitical tensions are further reshaping cities, driving new patterns of migration, disrupting supply chains, straining public finances, and heightening uncertainty in already fragile contexts. Housing shortages, climate change, economic instability, forced displacement, public health pressures, and rising inequality are unfolding simultaneously, often compounding their impacts at the urban level. The pressure on governments, urban planners, and policymakers to find durable and sustainable solutions is immense.

Many cities are also experiencing a growing crisis of trust and social cohesion. Rising polarization, the spread of misinformation through changing digital patterns, and widening socio-economic divides are contributing to tensions between communities and declining confidence in public institutions across many cities. Where residents do not see fair and visible investment in shared infrastructure, perceptions of neglect and exclusion can deepen, further fragmenting societies. Addressing this challenge requires not only technical solutions, but also spaces and systems that rebuild trust, enable interaction, and support collective life.

It is within this context that public facilities become critical. Schools, health centres, markets, community hubs, and public spaces are the physical interfaces through which cities deliver services, support livelihoods, build trust, and foster social interaction. When these facilities are absent, inaccessible, or unevenly distributed, the consequences cascade across multiple dimensions: poorer health outcomes, reduced economic opportunity, heightened exposure to climate risks, and weakened social cohesion. When well-planned and equitably distributed, public facilities act as stabilizing anchors of response within this so-called ‘polycrisis’, supporting immediate needs and long-term resilience building.

However, rising expectations of what public facilities must deliver are not always matched by adequate investment, governance, or long-term management. Without sustained financing and coordinated oversight, these assets risk becoming overstretched, underperforming, or inaccessible - undermining their impact.

As cities work to address the housing crisis and systemic inequalities, the provision of accessible, high-quality public facilities must be part of the strategy. This requires a shift away from a narrow focus on housing unit delivery towards holistic and well-planned interventions to create liveable, healthy, and resilient neighbourhoods for all.



Kibera Book House in Nairobi, Kenya. © Condition_Lab

2 | Definitions

Common definitions used across this topic are often used varyingly and with differing focus and emphasis. The definitions outlined in this section outline the way in which UN-Habitat and partners have used these concepts throughout this paper.

Public space – Public spaces are places which are publicly owned, or for public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without profit motive. They provide sites for social interaction and recreation, promote health and well-being and often contribute to environmental sustainability. Public spaces are an expression of collective urban life, serving as venues to express the diversity and cultural richness of a community's identity (Biennial of Public Space, 2013).

Public facilities – Public facilities are a specific form of public space and generally refer to the sheltered infrastructure or amenities controlled by public authorities, such as schools, libraries, community centres, and sports facilities that are accessible to local people and function as public goods. Within academic publications public facilities are often termed social infrastructure. Public facilities tend to be higher maintenance and are often only accessible during daylight or specific operating hours (UN-Habitat, 2015).

Urban infrastructure – The facilities and systems that are vital to a city's functioning including transport, utilities and energy and communication. Infrastructure is generally crucial to a city's smooth running and, if disrupted, would have a debilitating and harmful impact on the economy, security, public health and safety.

Social infrastructure – A broad and largely anglophone term which refers to the spaces, services, and institutions that support social life, everyday interaction, and opportunities for participation beyond the spheres of work and home. Within academic publications public facilities are often termed social infrastructure, but the term also includes less visible and tangible elements including the formal and informal relationships, partnerships and initiatives which form the social fabric of a place.

Urban Commons – The Urban Commons can differ from public spaces in that, whilst public denotes an asset owned by a local or national authority on behalf of citizens, common suggests a community of people that actively utilize and upkeep a space. Public spaces and facilities may not always be common (UN-Habitat, 2018a).

Proximity – Proximity is an urban principle which promotes cities that serve communities in shorter time and distances. This refers to polycentric cities – consisting of a network of interconnected and self-sufficient neighbourhoods which integrate inhabitants' essential needs, also called social functions, including living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying. The most recognized proximity model is the '15-minute city' which promotes access to essential functions within a 15-minute walk or bike ride (Chaire ETI, 2023).

Adequate housing – Access to adequate housing is a right recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It goes beyond shelter, including adequate privacy, space, physical accessibility, security of tenure, structural stability, access to basic infrastructure, suitable environmental quality and in an adequate and accessible location regarding work and basic facilities (UN-Habitat, 2014).



Market in Barcelona, Spain. © H. Tieben

Global housing crisis – The global housing crisis refers to the current critical housing inadequacy facing the world, both the Global South and the Global North. While the crisis may manifest in different ways depending on context, it is characterized by the lack of one or more elements of adequate housing: habitability, affordability, accessibility, tenure security and access to basic services. These deficits often manifest in the form of steeply rising housing costs, forced evictions, displacement and homelessness. Key among their drivers are weak land governance systems and unsustainable land use practices that fail to optimize the social and ecological functions of land (UN-Habitat, 2026).

Informal settlement – Broadly, informal settlements refer to residential sites where inhabitants have no security of tenure, often lack access to basic services and city infrastructure and where housing likely does not comply with building safety and planning regulations. Whilst the term informal settlement is widely used its meaning varies significantly across contexts. Informal settlements tend to be based on household level deprivation for individual dwellings but it is important to consider collective dynamics such as spatial clustering of households, shared infrastructure, communal governance and systematic vulnerabilities which emerge at scale within settlements (UN-Habitat, 2015).

Urban resilience – Resilience is the capacity of individuals, communities, cities, institutions and systems to prevent, resist, absorb, adapt, respond and recover positively, efficiently and effectively when faced with a wide range of risks. Urban resilience refers to the ability of cities and human settlements to position themselves accordingly to shocks and stresses, while undergoing transformation into more sustainable systems. Resilience at a city level recognizes the urban area as a dynamic and complex system that must continually adapt to various challenges in an integrated and holistic manner.

Climate change – A long-term shift in average temperatures and weather patterns which is directly or indirectly attributed to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere. Since the 1800s and the industrial revolution, human activities have been the main driver of climate change. In particular, the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal, oil and gas, generates greenhouse gas emissions that trap heat within the atmosphere. This raises the average surface temperature of Earth, contributing to a range of weather-related changes and secondary impacts.

Climate proofing – A process for identifying risks from climate-change and variability to a development project, or any other specified natural or human asset, and ensuring that those risks are reduced to acceptable levels through long-lasting and environmentally sound, economically viable, and socially acceptable changes. In practice this means integrating climate change risks and opportunities into the design, operation, and management of infrastructure.



Safer Schools Initiative in Chókwè, Gaza Province, Mozambique. © UN-Habitat

3 TYPOLOGIES OF PUBLIC FACILITIES



São Paulo Cultural Centre, Brazil. © H. Tieben

3 | Typologies of Public Facilities

Public facilities are a foundational component of urban systems, providing the physical spaces through which cities deliver essential services, support everyday social functions, and foster inclusion and resilience. Classifications of public facilities are open to scrutiny. It is important to remember that attributions vary across regions and cultures. Public facilities sit within the broader category of three types of public spaces: streets, open spaces and facilities (UN-Habitat, 2015).

To typologize public facilities is not a simple task. They commonly include but are not limited to libraries, civic and community centres, municipal markets and sports facilities. They are unique from open public spaces in that they are sheltered spaces or amenities. Facilities tend to require more regular maintenance and oversight and are often only open at specific hours.

Despite this diversity, there is broad agreement across legal, planning, and academic literature on the core characteristics that define a public facility. For this publication, a facility is considered public if it meets the following criteria:

- **Universal accessibility:** The facility is open to everyone, regardless of race, gender, age, income, or social status, and is not controlled or restricted by any individual or private group.
- **Non-commercial presence:** People can remain in the space for extended or indefinite periods without pressure to pay, consume, or engage in commercial activity.
- **Locally responsive:** The facility is intended to serve the needs of local people and provide access to services, resources, or opportunities that may otherwise be lacking within the neighbourhood.

In practice, however, the “publicness” of facilities exists along a spectrum. Many spaces that function as public facilities are not fully state-provided or managed. Community organizations, charities, faith groups, and informal networks often play a central role in delivering and maintaining facilities, particularly in underserved or informal contexts.

These spaces, ranging from community-run centres to informal childcare, art galleries or learning spaces, operate as vital forms of social infrastructure and reflect the principles of the urban commons: collectively used, locally



STREETS



OPEN SPACES



PUBLIC FACILITIES

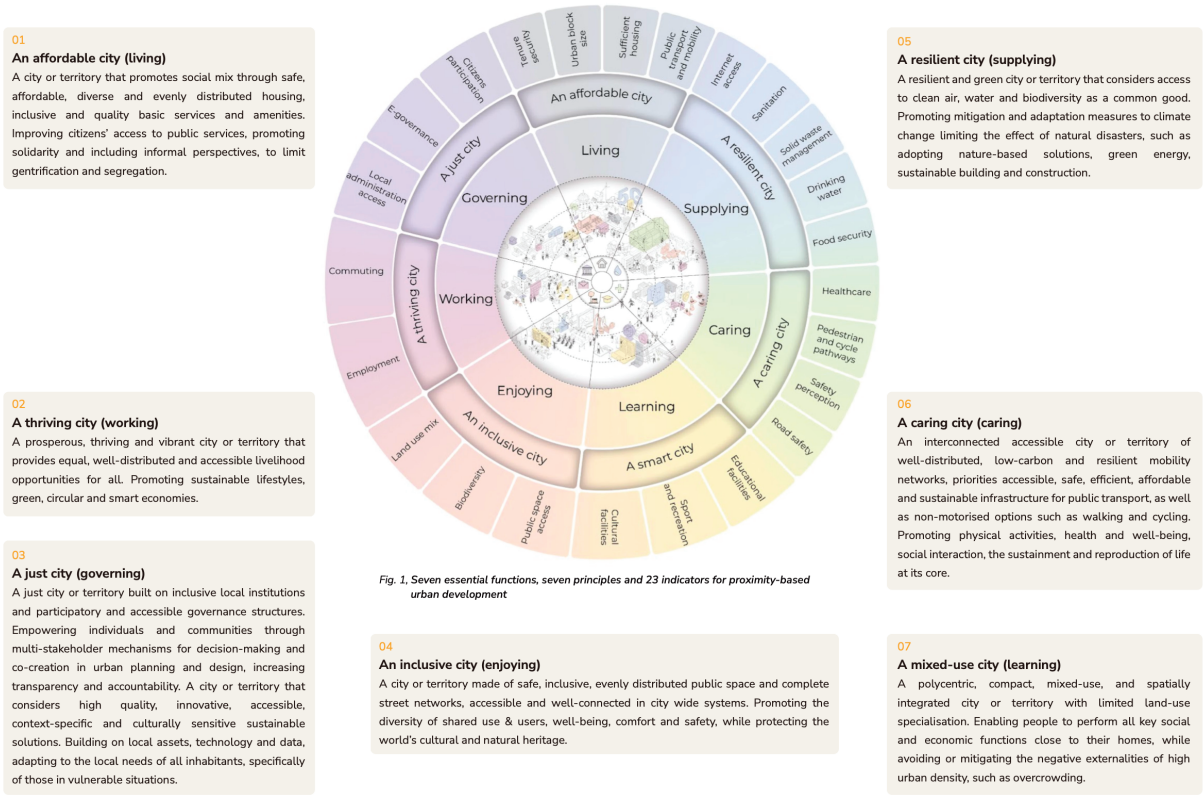


Figure 2: Essential functions, from Sustainable Proximities for a High Quality of Societal Life, the methodological framework of the Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities (2025)

governed, and oriented toward shared benefit. Recognizing and supporting these is essential, even as cities work toward more stable, equitable, and publicly accountable systems.

Public facilities are hybrid by nature. This multifunctionality is a strength but means the ways in which we categorize public facilities must adequately reflect their flexible and multipurpose nature. To better understand the role and diversity of public facilities, this publication adopts Chaire ETI's framework of the six social functions of urban life: living, working, learning, caring, supplying, and enjoying.

This framework is particularly useful because it links physical infrastructure to everyday human activities and needs, providing a people-centred lens through which to analyse public facilities. Rather than viewing public facilities as isolated buildings, this approach emphasizes their role as enablers of social functions, often supporting multiple functions simultaneously.

Understanding public facilities through this lens reinforces a key principle: they should not be seen as isolated assets, but as integral components of a wider urban system. Whether publicly delivered, community-led, or hybrid in nature, the goal should be to ensure that these spaces remain as open, inclusive, and accessible as possible, anchoring neighbourhood life and supporting equitable access to resources and opportunities.

4 PUBLIC FACILITIES AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE



SESC Pompeia (Cultural and Social Centre) in São Paulo, Brazil. © H. Tieben

4 | Public Facilities as Social Infrastructure

Context, Challenges and Opportunities

At a time of profound social, economic, and political disruption, social infrastructure has emerged as a critical foundation for cohesion, resilience, and collective well-being. Recent upheavals, including the COVID-19 pandemic, regional conflicts, the cost-of-living crisis, economic recession, housing shortages, and migration pressures, have exposed the fragility of social ties and underscored the importance of the spaces, services, and institutions that sustain everyday social life. In this context, social infrastructure is increasingly recognized as essential to addressing deprivation, social isolation, loneliness, and declining levels of trust, while supporting civic life and resilience.

Social infrastructure has consequently become an increasingly prominent concept in academic and policy debates over the past decade. Although there is no single, universally agreed definition, there is growing consensus that social infrastructure refers to the spaces, services, and institutions that support social life, everyday interaction, and opportunities for participation beyond the spheres of work and home (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019).

Typical examples include playgrounds, parks, community centres, sports facilities, cafés, marketplaces, digital platforms, and libraries. While the term itself is largely anglophone in its origins, comparable concepts are articulated around the world through proxy concepts such as social cohesion, community spaces, or collective facilities (Kazepov, 2010; Hollis et al., 2023). Despite differences in terminology, these debates converge around shared questions of connection, inclusion, and collective well-being.

In the United Kingdom, social infrastructure began to attract sustained attention in the early 2010s, with its significance becoming particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the absence, fragility, and uneven distribution of social infrastructure were sharply exposed, especially in disadvantaged communities (Klinenberg et al., 2020; HM Government, 2022).

At the European level, social infrastructure has increasingly been framed as a key instrument for inclusive growth and for strengthening Europe's social base (Fransen et al., 2018). There is now substantial evidence that communities with strong social infrastructure benefit from enhanced social support networks, economic vitality (Fransen et al., 2018), and improved health outcomes (O'Sullivan et al., 2013), and that social infrastructure has historically played a vital role in recovery from wars, pandemics, and other crises.

Despite this growing recognition, significant conceptual and practical gaps remain. There is still limited clarity regarding what qualifies as social infrastructure, which forms matter most in different contexts, how social infrastructure should be understood and valued, and how it can be assessed, planned, and delivered in systematic and equitable ways (Fincher et al., 2014; Hall & Lamont, 2013; Davern et al., 2017; Latham & Layton, 2019). These unresolved questions continue to pose challenges for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

Public facilities sit at the core of these debates. Spaces such as parks, schools, libraries, and markets are among the most recognized forms of social infrastructure and are frequently prioritized through public-sector provision. Historically, they have been conceived as publicly accessible and inclusive spaces, typically publicly owned and governed (Madanipour, 2003).

However, they are not neutral assets; they are shaped and enabled by legal and policy frameworks that define rights, responsibilities, and standards of provision. Constitutional or statutory recognition of rights, such as access to housing, education, and health, establishes the obligation for public facilities, while decentralization frameworks and governance arrangements determine which actors are responsible for their delivery and management. In the African context, these dynamics are particularly visible, where gaps between national mandates and local capacities can significantly influence the availability and

quality of facilities. Without sufficient long-term investment to ensure adequate maintenance, capacity, or adaptability, the ability to respond to changing social needs is significantly limited (Latham & Layton, 2022).

Contemporary understandings of social infrastructure extend beyond these conventional facilities to encompass a wider ecosystem of physical and digital spaces, services, networks, and initiatives (Klinenberg, 2018). Many of these are delivered by the voluntary and community sector, including community organizations and informal social networks. Although these actors play a crucial social role, they frequently receive less recognition, visibility, and funding than publicly provided facilities (Enneking et al., 2025). In many cities in the Global South, community-led and informal provision plays a particularly significant role, often filling critical gaps where formal systems are absent or under-resourced.

The social role of public facilities is highly context dependent. What functions as key social infrastructure varies significantly across cities, regions, and cultural settings. In the United Kingdom, public libraries have increasingly evolved from primarily book-lending institutions into multi-functional social hubs (Aelbrecht et al, forthcoming 2026). In contrast, cafés and informal meeting places often fulfil a comparable social function in parts of southern Europe (Amin, 2008), sports and recreational facilities are particularly significant in parts of Western and Central Europe (Heinemann, 2005; Kustec & Ličen, 2020) and ancient monuments hold together the daily rituals of everyday life in Asian countries (Knowles, 2019). These variations underline the extent to which social infrastructure is shaped by welfare regimes, cultural practices, and everyday social life, rather than conforming to a single universal model.

Recent research demonstrates the significance of public facilities as social infrastructure through empirical studies and comparative analyses of markets and public libraries (Aelbrecht et al., 2022; forthcoming 2026). Insights from wider European research contexts, and from international networks of researchers and practitioners further emphasize the need for comparative and context-sensitive approaches to social infrastructure (Robinson, 2016).

Despite their importance, public facilities face escalating pressures. These include sustained reductions in public expenditure following long-term austerity (Lowndes & McCaughie, 2013), widening social and spatial inequalities (Tunstall et al., 2014), increasing levels of social isolation and digital exclusion (Helsper, 2021), and growing expectations placed on facilities without corresponding increases in resources or capacity. These challenges are particularly acute in contexts characterized by limited investment in social welfare.

At the same time, there remains a lack of systematic and empirical research capable of robustly evaluating social infrastructure interventions. Research, policy, and practice often operate in silos, resulting in evidence that is disconnected from local needs and practices that are insufficiently informed by research (Carmona, 2019). This situation is further compounded by a strong Western bias and limited cross-disciplinary collaboration, which constrain understanding of social infrastructure across diverse global contexts.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal a fundamental tension. Social infrastructure is increasingly expected to address widening inequalities, social fragmentation, and well-being challenges, while simultaneously operating under sustained funding and capacity constraints (Klinenberg, 2018). This tension raises critical questions for research, policy, and practice, particularly regarding how public facilities are defined, supported, and evaluated as social infrastructure across different contexts.

Case Study: Camden Libraries, London

Mobilizing social infrastructure in Kentish Town Library

Kentish Town Library is one of nine branch libraries operated by the London borough of Camden (Camden Libraries, 2024a, 2024b; ONS, 2025). It is the second highest-used library in the borough, serving a notably diverse user population across age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and patterns of use (GLA, 2020). It has also been designated as one of the 17 pilot areas for the Mayor of London's Social Integration Lab, recognizing its contribution to equity, inclusion, and social cohesion (GLA, 2020). Crucially, Kentish Town Library is not a flagship redevelopment or elite "showpiece" facility, but a mid-sized, heavily used urban branch embedded in routine community life. This makes it methodologically valuable as a representative case through which to examine how ordinary libraries function as social infrastructure under contemporary urban pressures.

Implementation and Operational Model

Located on Kentish Town Road, a busy inner-North London high street, Kentish Town Library benefits from strong public transport connectivity and consistently high demand, recording nearly 40,000 visits in the first half of 2024 (Camden Libraries, 2024b). The surrounding area is socially diverse and marked by structural inequality, generating strong demand for inclusive, low-cost public services.

Kentish Town Library operates as a multi-functional public service rather than a book-focused facility. In addition to adult and children's lending collections, it provides study and computer spaces, digital support, and a Library of Things that allows residents to borrow household and DIY equipment. This diversification reflects a shift toward responding to evolving social and material needs, particularly in dense urban contexts with limited private space.

The library also hosts a wide range of cultural and community activities, including children's storytelling, craft sessions, knitting groups, book clubs, and digital skills workshops. These are complemented by larger-scale cultural initiatives, such as a collaborative exhibition with the British Library in 2024. Together, these programmes structure daily rhythms of use and reinforce the library's role as a shared civic space.

Funding, Governance, and Management

Kentish Town Library is publicly funded and managed as part of Camden's statutory library service. Its continued operation reflects a borough-wide strategy that prioritizes retaining accessible local branches through service diversification, partnership working, and modest income generation rather than centralization or closure. The Library of Things exemplifies this hybrid model, combining local authority support, third-sector partnerships, and small user fees.

Library staff play a central role beyond traditional functions, facilitating programmes, supporting digital access, assisting with administrative tasks, and mediating between diverse user groups. In doing so, they act as key community officers translating institutional objectives into everyday practices of care and inclusion.



Kentish Town Library in London, United Kingdom. © P. Aelbrecht

Impact

Evaluation of this inner-city asset forms part of a wider ESRC-funded research project (2024–2025) delivered through a partnership between Cardiff University, the Greater London Authority and Camden Libraries. The project investigates how London's public spaces function as social infrastructure, with a particular focus on assessing social value through post-occupancy evaluation, observational methods, and engagement with everyday users of public facilities.

Within this study, Post-Occupancy Evaluations offered useful insights into captured impact by documenting temporal rhythms of use, levels of sociability, and the interaction between programmed and informal activities, supplying empirical evidence of how high-use public facilities translate everyday occupancy into measurable social value.

More broadly, the Kentish Town Library project demonstrates how a typical high-use urban library can adapt despite austerity and limited funding to continue delivering meaningful social outcomes. The project also highlights the value of embedding evaluation within the lifecycle of public facilities, enabling facilities to move beyond measuring provision alone towards understanding how facilities are used, experienced and adapted over time to maximize their social impact.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Everyday facilities matter:** Ordinary, high-use public facilities can deliver significant social value when they are accessible, well-managed, and embedded in local communities.
- ✓ **Social infrastructure requires investment beyond capital delivery**: Staffing, programming, and maintenance are critical to sustaining long-term impact.
- ✓ **Multi-functionality increases resilience:** Facilities that combine services and enable social interaction are better able to respond to evolving urban challenges.
- ✓ **Non-commercial public space is essential**: In increasingly privatized urban environments, libraries provide rare spaces where people can stay without obligation to spend, supporting equity and inclusion.
- ✓ **Partnerships strengthen delivery:** Hybrid governance models can enhance services, but must maintain accessibility and public value at their core.
- ✓ **Undertake evaluations and iterative impact assessments:** To understand how facilities are used, experienced, and valued, enabling improved design, programming and better alignment of services with evolving community needs.



Parent and Baby activity in Kentish Town Library, London, United Kingdom. © P. Aelbrecht

5 THE ROLE OF PROXIMITY



Vendome stairs, Beirut, Lebanon © Catalytic Action

5 | The Role of Proximity

Bringing facilities closer to people

Public facilities shape inclusive, vibrant and resilient cities and communities. Far from merely service buildings, they act as social infrastructure, supporting daily needs of residents, offering equal opportunities for emancipation, boosting public life and social cohesion. Their benefits extend across social, economic, environmental, and governance dimensions.

Notably, public facilities are essential to respond to essential social functions and promote high quality of societal life (Moreno et al., 2021). Quality of life is defined by access to the six essential social functions: living, working, learning, caring, supplying, and enjoying. These functions are common to everyone, independent of age, gender, background and capabilities. City administrations are responsible for providing quality public services and facilities, and for regulating the private market to enable the fulfilment of social functions.

The opportunities public facilities can bring to communities are linked not only to their availability, but to their quality. This depends on factors such as their accessibility, territorial distribution, affordability and service diversity. Accessibility refers to proximity from home, ease of access, connectivity with public transport networks, as well as opening hours and design features for universal and cognitive access (Geurs, 2004).

Facilities should be equally distributed among the city, by decentralizing services. Decentralization strategies could be based on the demand, the frequency of use and resources or equipment requirements. This reduces congestion of services and streets.

Finally, affordability and service diversity is essential to leave no one behind. Social functions are broad categories fulfilled by a variety of services and, depending on the specific needs of each individual and their economic capacity, can vary considerably. For instance, a child requires a series of services that are different from those needed by an older person, even if they are part of the same social function. City leaders must adopt an intersectional approach to understand the needs of a heterogeneous population, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Without adequate planning strategies and enabling mechanisms to ensure a just implementation of social infrastructures, cities risk the exacerbation of urban inequalities and socio-spatial segregation (Klinenberg, 2018).

Proximity-based development for equal access to public facilities

In this context, the concept of proximity offers a catalytic opportunity to democratize cities and territories. Proximity-driven development proposes a model where residents can access all their needs within a reasonable walking or cycling distance (Moreno, 2024). Rooted in chrono-urbanism, the concept of proximity has been promoted throughout the 20th century (TUM, 2022). In 2016, it became further popularized by the 15-Minute City model (15mC) proposed by Prof. Carlos Moreno. The 15mC promotes polycentric cities with interconnected and self-sufficient neighbourhoods, equipped with all the essential services within 15 minutes' walk or cycle (Chaire ETI, 2025). Through the 15mC, residents can access their daily needs within a reasonable distance from their homes.

Proximity-driven cities foster accessibility of urban services, reducing distances from home. It encourages soft mobility, reducing congestion and pollution, and boosting physical activity, health and well-being of the inhabitants. Proximity enhances the adoption of a local lifestyle, reducing car dependency and strengthening social interactions and cohesion. It promotes decentralized governance and investments, boosting local economies and just decision-making (Chaire ETI, 2025).

Its synchronicity with the COVID-19 pandemic, and its clear and appealing messages, accounted for the 15-minute global movement success (Martinuzzi et al., 2024). In 2020, the city of Paris was the first to adopt it with the motto La Ville du Quart d'heure. Soon after, other cities

across the world crafted strategies for proximity-oriented development, including the 15-minute Community Life Circles in Chinese cities, Glasgow's Liveable Neighbourhoods, and Melbourne's 20 Minute Neighbourhoods (C40, 2020; Teixeira et al., 2024).

In this context, Chaire ETI, UN-Habitat, UCLG and C40 cities set-up a joint initiative, the Global Observatory of Sustainable Proximities (GOSP) to gather and disseminate proximity best practices. The Observatory is the go-to platform and centre of reference for sustainable proximities for equal and inclusive cities and communities (GOSP, 2024).

Spatial planning recommendations to implement social infrastructures in proximity

The GOSP's methodological framework, Sustainable Proximities for High Quality of Societal Life (GOSP, 2025), guides local governments in integrating sustainable proximities. Following five key phases: (1) project conception, (2) data-driven analysis, (3) people-driven co-creation, (4) actions for implementation, and (5) evaluation and mainstreaming, it promotes the adoption of a dual methodological approach, integrating evidence-based and people-centred methods. It utilizes personae profiles to integrate intersectionality in territorial diagnostics and co-creation activities, promoting public participation and democracy.

Several recommendations can be drawn from this methodology that reflect on equal access and distribution of public facilities. Cities shall promote mixed land use and avoid land specialization through proximity-oriented land management regulations. For instance, cities can adopt a minimum facilities requirement that refers to the smallest administrative unit, rather than the city boundaries, to ensure equal distribution of services and limit creation of segregated monofunctional social housing districts. A minimum local services requirement can be enforced to all new developments, including public spaces, mobility, social housing and public services, through density bonuses. Mutualization of services should also be encouraged, optimizing land consumption, leveraging underutilized assets, integrating compatible services and extending opening hours.

By bringing services closer to home, streets should increase spaces for walking, cycling and nature. The functionality of public facilities highly depends on the quality of the spaces that interconnect them, therefore people-centred urban design is important, to promote safety, accessibility, resilience and attractiveness of the public realm.

Decentralized governance also enhances equal access to public services. By delegating decision-making and resources to borough administrations, building strong private-public partnerships and integrating participatory mechanisms, cities can create a polycentric and vibrant urban and social fabric. Finally, digitalization of services for simple administrative matters, as well as medical consultations, educational courses, work-from-home, can also enhance the virtual fabric and reduce the pressure on the built environment.

The cases of Mexico City and Paris demonstrate that proximity is not a one-size-fits-all model, but a flexible and scalable approach that can be embedded through urban acupuncture or systemic integration in the regulatory frameworks, leveraging decentralized governance and innovative partnerships.

Ensuring equal access to public facilities is not only a matter of urban efficiency, but a political and ethical commitment to social justice. As cities face growing demographic pressure, patterns of rapid urbanization, environmental and socio-economic challenges, proximity-driven development offers a concrete pathway to re-anchor our cities around care, equity and collective well-being.

Case Study: UTOPIAs in Iztapalapa, Mexico City

the network of UTOPIAs maximizing proximity to public facilities

How it works

The Units for Transformation and Organization for Inclusion and Social Harmony (UTOPIAs) are large community centres gathering a variety of services within one safe and inclusive compound, to serve the most disadvantaged communities. The initiative started in Iztapalapa, the third poorest borough of Mexico City. Iztapalapa has a population of 2 million of which 54 percent is considered poor and 21 percent extremely poor (Bloomberg, 2024).

Inspired by the Manzanas del Cuidado from Bogotá and by the Pilares of Mexico City, the UTOPIAs offer community kitchen, sport facilities, laundromats, swimming pools, libraries, salons, healthcare, as well as free courses for children and adults. They requalified large abandoned or underutilized areas, utilizing recycled materials and disused buildings. They present high-quality facilities, intending to dignify the life of the inhabitants. The project has embodied creativity and imagination. One intervention includes the conversion of an old Boeing 737 plane into a library, featuring 26 internet-connected computers and about 200 books (Mexico City News, 2020). Each intervention presents high-quality facilities to the local population, giving them opportunities to learn, care, grow and emancipate.

Funding, governance and management

Each UTOPIA requires an initial investment of about 5.3 million USD and a running cost of half a million per year, crowdsourcing resources from multiple government departments and agencies. Residents can access facilities free of charge, except for the canteen and laundry service that require an affordable fee. They are government-owned facilities, managed by the public administration and thanks to the support given by a network of residents and volunteers.

Impact, key lessons and relevance to citymakers

Prior to the installation of the UTOPIAs, most of the regional population worked below minumum wage and had little access to cinemas, libraries or sports pitches (the Guardian, 2024). Bordered by the city's landfill site and a large prison, Iztapalapa suffered deep-seated inequality, drugs and crime.

In the six years since the installation, the area has seen significant transformation. The crime rate has fallen and perceptions of safety have increased. Local people now have access to music, dance and other free cultural activities - increasing access to cultural services within 30 minutes of their home by more than five-fold. Access to swimming has also increased, shifting from 1 swimming pool to 19 now across the borough.

21,000 people per day use the now 15 UTOPIAS (the Guardian, 2024). Strong political commitments have been maintained, with the Mayor vocal on commitments to build another 100 centres throughout Mexico City.

This acupuncture initiative brings essential and affordable services close to the home of the most marginalized groups, offering new powerful alternatives to criminality to youths, adults and children.

The initiative has focused on quality and aesthetics, to build a new image of these neglected areas, dignify the life of its population and give them something they can identify with and be proud of. By enlarging the network of UTOPIAs, the city will create a decentralized system of inclusive public facilities.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Locate facilities where need is greatest.** Prioritizing investment in underserved neighbourhoods helps reduce spatial inequalities and expands access to opportunity within walking distance of people's homes.
- ✓ **Build networks, not isolated projects**: A distributed system of neighbourhood facilities creates equitable access across the city and supports proximity focused principles.
- ✓ **Repurpose underused urban land creatively.** Many UTOPIAs transform vacant, degraded or underutilized sites into vibrant community destinations, demonstrating how cities can unlock social value without relying solely on new development.
- ✓ **Offer universal access.** Providing most services free of charge removes financial barriers and strengthens inclusion for low-income communities.

Tactical urbanism in San Nicolas de los Garza, Mexico © Luis Angel Flores Hernandez, UN-Habitat Mexico

6|1 ACCESS TO ADEQUATE HOUSING



Integration of Commercial & Community Centre with Public Space at Public Housing Estate Heng On in Hong Kong, China. © H. Tieben

6 | 1 Access to Adequate Housing

By 2030, UN-Habitat estimates that 3 billion people, about 40 percent of the world's population, will need access to adequate housing. This translates into a demand for 96,000 new affordable and accessible housing units every day (UN-Habitat, 2026). Additionally, an estimated 100 million people worldwide are homeless and one in four people live in harmful conditions that threaten their health, safety and prosperity (UN-Habitat, 2025).

Articulated in the New Urban Agenda, housing is a core pillar of sustainable urban development and inclusive growth (UN-Habitat, 2017). The agenda recognizes adequate housing not merely as shelter but as a transformative force for achieving broader social, economic, and environmental goals. Access to adequate housing is a human right which encompasses more than a roof over one's head. It includes seven defined aspects which include security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy (UN-Habitat, 2014). Focusing on both location and availability of services, the definition stipulates that housing cannot be defined as adequate if it is cut off from livelihood opportunities, health-care services, schools and other social facilities.

As cities rush to deliver new housing or upgrade existing informal settlements there is a risk that the broader context and wider criteria for what provision is seen as 'adequate' is overlooked. Restrictive budgets, limited access to land, and the rising costs of construction in many countries further constrains delivery. In this context, policies requiring the provision of public facilities are often being scaled back to prioritize available finance for housing unit delivery over broader infrastructure. This approach risks undermining the long-term value and cohesion of communities, as public facilities are not secondary additions but essential components that anchor housing spatially and socially, ensuring it functions within a wider system of access, inclusion, and everyday urban life.

1. How public facilities deliver adequate and affordable housing

Places with long-developed public housing programmes, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, with 45 percent to 80 percent of their population (respectively) living in public housing, plan public facilities as central parts of new housing estates (hb.gov.hk, 2024; mnd.gov.sg, 2025). These facilities offer community and commercial centres, wet- and hawker markets, kindergartens and schools, playgrounds, and sport facilities. The housing developments in Hong Kong and Singapore tend to be planned as parts of new towns, which provide additional higher category facilities such as hospitals, universities and stadiums and are planned near efficient public mass transport systems. This approach ensures that housing is not only delivered at scale, but functions as part of a complete and accessible urban system.

More recent models build on this logic through hybridization and intensification. Innovative approaches in Singapore's Kampung Admiralty are planned as hybrids of different facilities, including covered gathering spaces, cooked-food markets, health facilities, children's playgrounds, vertical gardens, and specialized housing for elderly (Seow, 2018).[1] Such hybrid facility types proactively address social and health issues arising from ageing of the society. Similarly, Hong Kong's Housing Authority has adopted a new Well-being Toolkit (2025) showing how existing developments can be retrofitted through smaller, flexible interventions rather than requiring new, additional or stand-alone buildings.



Library in Social Housing Project Redo Merezzate in Milan, Italy. © Fondazione Housing Sociale

In contexts where large public housing programmes are less prevalent, integrated delivery often depends on partnerships between public, private, and non-profit actors. Demonstrated through the example of Redo Merezzate in Milan, integrated projects of social housing and public facilities can be provided by non-profit foundations bringing together and coordinating public and private actors. Crucially, these facilities are not only physically embedded but socially activated through participatory design and ongoing management – showcasing that planned facilities can help to overcome social isolation, improve well-being and health, create better community interactions, and build support networks.

A critical mechanism underpinning many of these approaches is the use of developer contributions to fund and deliver public facilities. Tools such as planning obligations, impact fees, and inclusionary zoning enable cities to capture a portion of the land value uplift generated by new development and reinvest it into social and physical infrastructure. For example, in England, Section 106 agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) fund schools, health centres, parks, and community facilities alongside new housing (National Audit Office, 2025). In the United States of America, impact fees have been widely used to finance local infrastructure, with evidence showing they can support timely provision of schools, parks, and public services without undermining overall development viability when applied consistently (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2018). Similarly, São Paulo's Outorga Onerosa system captures value from increased development rights to fund urban infrastructure and social facilities (World Bank, 2020).

Reducing or removing these contributions in favour of short-term developer viability risks undermining long-term urban outcomes. Without adequate provision of schools, health services, public space, and community infrastructure, new housing can exacerbate inequality, reduce quality of life, and generate resistance from existing communities. This, in turn, can delay or constrain future development and can have long-standing impacts on perceptions, as in Tin Shui Wai New Town, Hong Kong, which became labelled as City of Sadness and long retained this name despite later improvements to facilities (Law, 2009).[2]

Embedding the provision of public facilities directly into housing transforms housing developments into integrated neighbourhoods, supporting access to services, strengthening social networks, and improving perceptions of safety and quality of life. This is also vital to addressing common sources of resistance to new housing by demonstrating tangible benefits and services for existing communities and reducing fears from existing residents that facilities will decline or become oversubscribed (Local Government Association, 2024).

Integrating public facilities into housing is therefore not a design choice but a strategic approach to delivering long-term value. Whether through large-scale public provision, hybrid building typologies, or partnership-led developments, the evidence shows that housing performs best and is more politically viable when it is planned alongside the social infrastructure that enables everyday life.



Multi-functional Public Facility" Kampung Admiralty, Singapore. © H. Tieben

Case Study: Redo Merezzate, Milan

An integrated approach to affordable housing

How it works

Redo Merezzate is an affordable housing district in Milan designed as an extension of the city rather than a standalone development. Completed in 2021, it includes 615 homes across mixed tenures targeting middle-income households excluded from both social housing and the private market. The masterplan is structured around a central pedestrian spine with interconnected courtyards, green spaces, and shared amenities. Public facilities, including schools, childcare, local retail, and community spaces, are embedded throughout the site, supporting proximity-based living. A dedicated "community start-up" process helped activate social life early on, enabling residents to co-create activities and services that respond to everyday needs. The district is entirely car-free and includes 10,500 m² of green space, 500 metres of cycle paths, and bicycle parking equipped with repair facilities.

Funding, governance and management

The project was delivered through Italy's national social housing fund (FIA), managed by CDP SGR, which blends public and private capital through a fund-of-funds model. Local funds attract investment from banking foundations, municipalities, and private actors, enabling place-based delivery. At the top of the structure, institutional investors, including CDP and other private investors, have committed roughly €2 billion to the National Fund FIA, managed by CDP SGR.

Fondazione Housing Sociale provided technical and social design support across all phases, while a dedicated social manager (Ecopolis Servizi) oversees both property and community management. This integrated governance model ensures that social objectives, such as affordability, inclusion, and long-term stewardship, are embedded alongside financial viability. Partnerships with local service providers and resident associations sustain daily operations, while ground-floor uses remain active and outward-facing. The model demonstrates how coordinated institutional frameworks can align investment, design, and long-term management.

Impact

The monitoring activities carried out in the district, based on feedback from both residents and service managers, highlight how the presence of public facilities contributes to neighbourhood vitality and helps connect the new development with the surrounding urban fabric.

- The common space dedicated to residents hosts activities open to the neighbourhood and is widely used: there have been 797 activities in a year and a half
- Local urban services and small-scale commercial spaces established in the district are attracting users coming in equal proportions from the surrounding neighbourhood, wider city, and from outside the city.
- 60 percent of the local urban services and small-scale commercial spaces offer activities resulting from co-design process with the residents of the project. The services have established collaborations with other entities active in the project/neighbourhood/city.
- For residents, educational, commercial and transport services are "easily accessible on foot", and interconnectivity with other neighbourhood residents has increased by 9 percent.
- According to residents, care and vitality in the neighbourhood occur quite frequently; conversely, acts of vandalism, neglect and social fragility occur infrequently.

The integrated design approach behind the Redo Merezzate district intentionally focuses on enhancing the public dimension of the project, with the goal to generate opportunities that go beyond the perimeter of the intervention, to the benefit of the surrounding territory.



Programme Map of Public Facilities included in the Social Housing project. Redo Merezzate in Milan, Italy. © Fondazione Housing Sociale

Key lessons

The project shows the importance of adopting an integrated approach when designing affordable housing districts, allowing for the creation of portions of the city that are embedded in their surroundings and contribute to the overall quality of life in the neighbourhood.

The experience of Redo Merezzate also shows the importance of considering not only the physical dimension of the social housing project, but also its immaterial aspects, with particular attention to the activation of local communities, the design of a social management scheme, and the careful curation of a functional mix ensuring active and safe ground floors.

Additionally, through the project it is possible to witness the key role that public facilities, green areas, shared spaces dedicated to the residents and active ground floors can play, making sure that affordable housing districts act as local services hubs, promoting proximity and generating opportunities for the local community.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Embed facilities from the outset:** Public facilities should be planned as core infrastructure from the start, not added later.
- ✓ **Design for proximity**: Linking housing, services and public space supports daily usability and well-being.
- ✓ **Plan for hardware and software:** Social infrastructure needs both “hardware” (spaces) and “software” (community activation and management).
- ✓ **Blend governance and finance:** Mixed governance and blended finance models can help to successfully deliver affordable housing at scale.
- ✓ **Activate ground floors**: Active ground floors and shared facilities strengthen safety, cohesion and neighbourhood integration.
- ✓ **Make housing a neighbourhood service hub:** Affordable housing can function as a hub for local services, particularly in underserved or peripheral areas. This depends on aligning design, financing and long-term management so that facilities remain accessible, relevant and well-used over time.



Redo Merezzate, Milan, Italy. © Fondazione Housing Sociale

2. Upgrading quality of life in informal settlements

With large parts of the world's population lacking access to affordable housing, the improvement of informal settlements remains both an urgent priority and a complex challenge. In most informal contexts, the public or state provision of facilities is limited or uneven, shaped by insecure land tenure, concerns over regularization, peripheral locations, constrained public finance, and gaps in transport and service networks. This significantly affects access to safe spaces for education, health and other services, with disproportionate impacts on children, women, and other vulnerable groups.

However, the absence of formal provision does not mean an absence of public life or social infrastructure. In many informal settlements, facilities are already provided through community initiatives, ranging from informal childcare spaces and sports areas to markets, and learning centres. While these spaces may lack formal recognition, they often function as essential public goods: they are trusted, locally embedded, free or affordable, and responsive to everyday needs.

Upgrading informal settlements is not only about introducing new infrastructure, but about recognizing, supporting, and strengthening the systems that already exist. In many cities, essential services and facilities are often delivered informally by community groups and local networks, functioning as critical public goods despite lacking formal recognition. Ignoring these systems risks undermining the social fabric that sustains everyday life.

Historically, a common response to deteriorating informal settlements and formal housing shortages has been large-scale clearance and relocation, often to peripheral areas where land is cheaper. However, this approach frequently fails to account for residents' existing livelihoods, social networks, and access to services and tends to fail at creating sustained change. In some cases, residents relocated to formal housing have struggled to maintain livelihoods or afford new living costs, leading to under-occupation, informal subletting, or even return to informal settlements due to the increase in living costs and eroded access to community facilities and support systems (WRI, 2022).

One type of effective approach therefore focuses on in-situ improvements that build on existing assets, combining incremental infrastructure investment, tenure security, and community-led interventions. By working with, rather than replacing, local systems, cities can improve living conditions while preserving the social and economic networks that are essential to long-term resilience and well-being. Initiatives such as Territórios da Infância in Rio de Janeiro, demonstrate how schools can be used as entry points for broader spatial interventions. Through participatory methods, including "affective mapping," where children document their daily routes and experiences, these projects identify priority areas for upgrading public space, improving safety, and strengthening connections between homes, schools, and community assets.

Importantly, this approach combines community knowledge with data-informed planning, ensuring that interventions respond to lived realities while aligning with wider urban strategies. It also demonstrates that meaningful improvements do not always require large-scale investment. Small, targeted interventions, such as upgrading pathways, creating play areas, or repurposing underused spaces, can significantly improve safety, usability, and social cohesion. When co-designed and implemented with residents, often using local materials and collective construction methods, these projects also strengthen community ownership and long-term stewardship.

3. Land Value, displacement risk and inclusive growth

Public facilities and housing shape land value in ways that generate both opportunity and risk. Investments in parks, schools, health centres,

and transport infrastructure can significantly increase the attractiveness of an area, raising land and property values. This can strengthen municipal revenues and improve overall urban quality. However, without safeguards, these same dynamics can also contribute to rising rents, speculative pressure, and the displacement of lower-income residents, the very communities such investments are often intended to benefit.

This tension is particularly visible in rapidly changing or previously under-served neighbourhoods. New or upgraded facilities can mean that whilst areas become better connected and more desirable, they risk becoming less affordable, and pushing out existing communities (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Housing and public space also interact in contested ways, particularly for people without stable housing. In many cities, facilities are nominally open to all but are governed by rules and policing that exclude or displace poorer residents and unhoused people. This creates a tension between public space as a site of refuge, and as a managed environment catering to wealthier communities and shaped by rules, enforcement, and competing claims over its use. These dynamics highlight the blurred boundaries between housing provision, public facilities, and public space governance, raising critical questions about who public infrastructure is designed to serve, and under what conditions.

A central factor in managing these dynamics is land tenure and regularization. In contexts of insecure or informal land rights, the relationship between public investment and land value becomes more complex. On one hand, insecure tenure can deter investment in permanent infrastructure and limit residents' ability to benefit from rising values. On the other, waiting for full formalization before delivering services can delay urgently needed improvements for years or decades (Cities Alliance, 2025). Effective approaches therefore often work incrementally, introducing adaptable, low-cost, or mobile facilities that improve living conditions in the short-term, while supporting longer-term pathways to tenure security and neighbourhood upgrading.

Land rights, in this sense, are fundamentally about confidence in the future (Cities Alliance, 2025). When residents have protection from eviction, through formal ownership, occupancy rights, or other legal recognition, they are more likely to invest in their homes and communities. These incremental, resident-led improvements can generate substantial collective value. However, this depends on enabling legal and regulatory frameworks. In many cities, dysfunctional land markets, restrictive planning standards, and opaque governance systems continue to limit access to well-located, serviced land for low-income populations, while also constraining public authorities' ability to plan proactively.

To ensure that rising land values translate into inclusive outcomes, cities are increasingly adopting a range of policy tools. These include land value capture, inclusionary zoning, community land trusts, and developer contributions toward public facilities and affordable housing. When effectively designed, such tools help retain value within communities, fund necessary infrastructure, and reduce displacement pressures. Equally important are protections for existing residents, such as phased development approaches and requirements on affordable housing provision, that allow communities to remain in place as neighbourhoods change.

The goal is not to avoid rising land values, but to shape them. Public facilities should anchor inclusive growth, enhancing liveability while ensuring the benefits of investment are broadly shared. This means aligning spatial planning, housing policy and land governance, and building equity into decisions about where and how facilities are delivered. Done well, public investment strengthens both the physical fabric of cities and the social stability of their communities.

Case Study: Territórios da Infância, Rio de Janeiro

Harnessing Infrastructure, Safeguarding Communities

How it works

In Rio de Janeiro, schools in informal settlements are being used as entry points to improve access to safe, inclusive spaces for children and communities. In dense and underserved neighbourhoods, schools act as everyday hubs, concentrating movement, care, and social life, making them effective anchors for wider neighbourhood interventions. Initiatives such as Territórios da Infância (Childhood Territories) use participatory design methods to transform underused spaces around schools into playgrounds, community areas, and safer routes. Children's insights, captured through drawings, storytelling, and workshops, directly inform design, ensuring that interventions reflect lived realities and strengthen connections between home, school, and public space.

Funding, governance and management

Delivery is based on collaborative governance, bringing together universities, civil society organizations, local authorities, and residents. Rather than relying on large-scale capital investment, projects are implemented through low-cost, community-led approaches, including mutirões (collective construction efforts) and the use of locally available or recycled materials. Academic partners contribute technical expertise and spatial analysis, while community organizations facilitate engagement and long-term stewardship.

A key feature of the model is the integration of qualitative and quantitative data. Geospatial mapping is combined with participatory tools, such as "affective mapping," which captures children's perceptions of safety, mobility, and play—to identify priority areas for intervention. This multi-scalar approach ensures that small-scale projects are aligned with broader urban strategies, enabling replication across different neighbourhoods while maintaining sensitivity to local conditions.

Impact

The interventions have delivered measurable improvements in safety, usability, and social cohesion. Small, targeted upgrades, such as playgrounds, shaded areas, and improved pedestrian routes, have created safer environments for children while also supporting broader community use. These spaces function as platforms for everyday interaction, strengthening local networks and fostering a sense of ownership among residents.
Importantly, the model demonstrates that modest investments can generate significant social value

By focusing on strategic locations around schools, interventions reach a wide cross-section of users, including children, caregivers, and older residents. The approach has also proven replicable, offering a scalable model for upgrading public space in resource-constrained settings. Beyond physical improvements, the process itself builds local capacity, reinforcing community agency and long-term stewardship of public spaces.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Schools as neighbourhood anchors:** Schools can function as critical neighbourhood anchors, enabling integrated, place-based interventions in underserved areas
- ✓ **Design with communities:** Participatory design improves relevance, inclusion and long-term use of public spaces
- ✓ **Start small, target well:** Small-scale, low-cost interventions can deliver high social impact when strategically targeted.
- ✓ **Combine data with lived experience:** Pairing data-driven analysis with residents' own knowledge supports a more equitable allocation of resources.
- ✓ **Build cross-sector partnerships:** Partnerships across sectors are essential to mobilize expertise, funding and community trust.



Community co-created public space, Favela da Providência, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. © Daniel Athias

From Value to Implementation

Public facilities and well-designed public spaces are not complementary to housing provision; they are fundamental to its success. When planned and delivered together, housing and public facilities create the conditions for adequate living: access to services, opportunities for social connection, and the ability to move safely through the city as part of everyday life. This applies equally across contexts. In large-scale public housing programmes, integrated planning ensures that homes are embedded within functioning neighbourhoods. In informal settlements, securing tenure alongside investment in basic public facilities provides a foundation for safety, stability, and incremental improvement.

Moving from value to implementation therefore requires a shift in how housing is planned. Rather than treating housing as a standalone output, it must be delivered as part of a broader neighbourhood system, one that combines location, accessibility, service provision, and public space. This includes ensuring that residents can reach schools, clinics, markets, transport, and community services through safe, continuous, and inclusive networks of streets and public spaces. Without this connectivity, even well-constructed housing risks remaining socially and economically disconnected.

Municipal governments play a central role in making this integration work. While national frameworks often define housing targets, standards, and financing structures, it is at the city level that coordination across sectors, housing, health, transport, education, and public space, must take place. This requires municipalities to move beyond fragmented, sector-based planning and instead align approvals, land use regulations, and infrastructure investment with identified needs. Housing should be treated as a core pillar of well-planned urban systems, with public facilities embedded from the outset rather than added retrospectively. This is where mapping demographic need and utilizing financing mechanisms such as developer contributions, value capture mechanisms, and public-private partnerships can play an important role in enabling this infrastructure in practice.

Implementation must account for land value dynamics and the risk of displacement. Investments in public facilities often increase land values, which can unintentionally exclude lower-income residents if not carefully managed. Safeguards such as inclusionary zoning, tenure regularization, phased development, and protections for existing communities are essential to ensure that the benefits of improved infrastructure are shared equitably.

In practice, delivering adequate housing is therefore not only about the number of units built, but about how those homes are connected - to services, to opportunities, and to each other. When public facilities are integrated into housing strategies from the outset, they transform development into inclusive neighbourhoods, reduce inequality, and create lasting social and economic value for cities and their residents.



SESC Pompeia (Cultural and Social Center) in São Paulo, Brazil. © H. Tieben

6|2 EDUCATION, ART & CULTURE



Kibera Book House in Nairobi, Kenya. © Condition_Lab

6 | 2 Education, Art and Culture

Cities are not only places of economic activity and housing provision; they are also centres of learning, creativity and cultural expression. Access to education, art and culture plays a fundamental role in shaping inclusive urban societies. Cultural and educational infrastructure supports lifelong learning, strengthens community identity, and enables residents to participate in civic and creative life. Facilities such as libraries, museums, cultural centres, arts venues, public schools and universities form a critical component of the social infrastructure that allows cities to thrive.

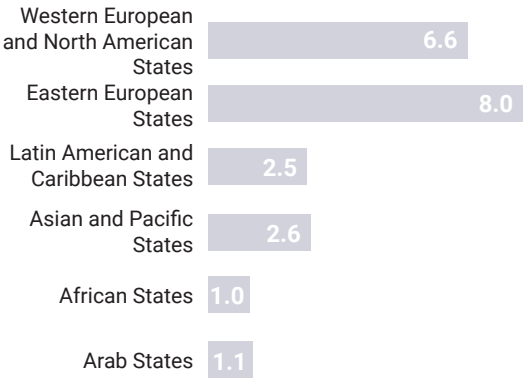


Figure 3: Average density of cultural infrastructure across 244 cities, facilities per 100,000 people, by region (BOP Consulting, 2025).

In line with SDG 4, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, educational access through schools and other cultural and education assets is vital. Despite significant improvements since 2015, 272 million children and young people remained out of school in 2023 and opportunities for lifelong learning remain limited with less than 3 percent of adults aged 25-54 and 55-64 engaging in learning (UN Stats, 2025). Whilst the provision of education is not always a public good, enabling access to public schools, museums, libraries and cultural centres is a vital component of continuing progress against these indicators by 2030.

Evidence from the World Cities Culture Forum demonstrates the scale and importance of this infrastructure in cities across every region. Amongst the 45 participating cities representing 260 million people, there are more than 3,021 museums, 4,012 public libraries, 1,086 cultural centres and 4,150 live music venues.

Cultural participation is also widespread. Approximately 40 percent of residents report visiting a museum, and the number of live music venues growing by 3.2 percent since 2018. Cities increasingly recognize the value of this ecosystem, with 94 percent actively working to support and secure spaces for creatives, and 41 percent implementing policies to support cultural and creative districts.

However, access to cultural and educational infrastructure remains uneven. Public investment in culture remains limited: public funding for culture accounts for less than 0.6 percent of global GDP, while only 0.15 percent of international development aid is directed toward culture and recreation. Analysis by UNESCO of 28,000 geo-coded cultural facilities – incorporating cinemas, libraries, museums and concert halls – across 244 cities in 105 countries highlights significant disparities in access to cultural infrastructure:

These disparities are also visible within cities themselves. Cultural infrastructure is often concentrated in affluent or central districts, while lower-income neighbourhoods remain underserved (Pranto et al, 2025). Whilst centralized hubs and clusters of cultural assets can have multiple benefits including enhanced skills development and boosted economic gains, this uneven distribution can also risk creating so-called “cultural deserts”, areas where residents have limited access to libraries, museums, performance venues or creative spaces. Such spatial inequalities mirror and reinforce broader urban disparities, limiting opportunities for participation, learning and cultural expression. Factoring in accessibility and proximity is key to minimizing these risks.

In response to observed challenges, many cities are increasingly recognizing the importance of cultural infrastructure in urban policy. Nearly 87 percent of cities now promote cultural participation through public policy (UNESCO, 2026), while 97 percent of WCCF cities report initiatives to support creative education and youth engagement (World Cities Forum). At the same time, new strategies are emerging to protect creative space and integrate cultural facilities into urban development, from creative workspace initiatives to the adaptive reuse of underutilized buildings. The remainder of this chapter sets out key pathways of contribution, illustrating the value of artistic, cultural and educational facilities to urban life.

1. Enabling Lifelong Learning and Educational Opportunity

Public facilities play a central role in supporting education within and beyond the classroom. Libraries, community learning centres, schools, museums and cultural institutions provide accessible spaces for lifelong learning, allowing residents of all ages to acquire knowledge, skills and new perspectives. Together, these facilities expand the educational landscape of cities, ensuring that learning opportunities are available throughout people's lives and embedded within neighbourhoods.

Public schools remain the cornerstone of formal education and are one of the most widely distributed forms of public facility in urban areas. When well-resourced and equitably accessible, they can provide a foundation for educational opportunity across communities. However, learning and knowledge creation extend far beyond the classroom. Cultural and educational facilities help complement formal education systems by offering flexible spaces where learning can take place through reading, dialogue, experimentation and creative engagement.

Public libraries have long served as key educational infrastructure within cities. They offer inclusive access to books, digital resources, study spaces and educational programmes that support both formal and informal learning. Increasingly, libraries also provide digital literacy training, language learning support and job-skills programmes, helping individuals navigate the growing demands of knowledge-based economies.

These facilities are especially important in contexts where educational resources may otherwise be limited. For young people, libraries and community learning spaces provide safe environments for study, creativity and engagement outside school hours. For adults, they offer opportunities for reskilling, professional development and personal enrichment. For example, impact data from the Room to Read Initiative, which supports more than 30,000 libraries around the world, found that in 2024 more than 10 million books were borrowed averaging 11.4 books per child. Data showed that in schools with strong library students' scores were on average 10-20 percent higher than in schools without.

Digital access is becoming an increasingly important component of educational opportunity. As economies and services become more digitally enabled, access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is increasingly essential for participation in education, employment and civic life. Reflected within Sustainable Development Goal 4, inclusive and equitable quality education, indicator 4.4.1 specifically analyses the 'proportion of youth and adults with ICT skills, by type of skill'.

2025 data shows that approximately 73 percent of the global population uses or has used the internet. Whilst this figure has continued to grow year on year, there remains over 2 billion people around the world who are digitally excluded. Additionally, 60 percent of web traffic takes place on a mobile phone as opposed to a desktop or laptop. Whilst increased mobile use has been widely beneficial in enhancing access, the extent to which people can benefit from the educational opportunities and employment skills through mobile phone is significantly constrained. Public libraries offer free or low-cost computer access, upskilling communities and enhancing equitable access to digital literacy. Between 2010 and 2016 interventions supported by the Communications Authority of Kenya improved access, transitioning from computers in fewer than 5 public libraries to more than 10 computers in all 61 national libraries. Across just 29 libraries more than 220,000 people obtained ICT skills (EIFL, 2016).

Museums and cultural institutions also contribute significantly to education by providing experiential learning environments. Through exhibitions, workshops and educational programming, museums translate complex historical, scientific and cultural knowledge into accessible formats for diverse audiences. Many institutions increasingly collaborate with schools, universities and community organizations to extend learning opportunities beyond formal educational settings.

By embedding these educational resources within neighbourhoods, cities can support more equitable access to knowledge and opportunity, particularly for communities that may face barriers to traditional education systems.



Kibera Book House Opening, Nairobi, Kenya © Condition_Lab

Case Study: Kibera Book House, Nairobi

From Space to Place: Community-Driven

How it works

The Amani Kibera Book House is a community-led education and cultural facility located in Lindi village within Kibera, one of Africa's largest informal settlements. Designed as a participatory upgrade of an underused and partially deteriorated building, it transforms a previously limited library into a multi-functional learning and community hub.

Serving around 300-400 children daily alongside youth and adult groups, the facility provides safe access to reading, after-school learning, workshops, and community gatherings. Its design prioritizes openness and flexibility, with a ground floor that merges indoor and outdoor space for events, and adaptable rooms that support both formal and informal learning, reinforcing its role as a neighbourhood education anchor.

The target population is the most vulnerable segment of Kibera, those with limited access to safe learning environments, public space, and basic services.

Funding, Governance, and Management

The original structure was owned by a non-governmental organization Amani Kibera. It was half-abandoned and structurally unstable, yet remained in critical use. The project's goal was not only to renovate a building but to create a replicable social-spatial prototype that embeds dignity, ownership, and reciprocity into the built environment. The prototype shall be developed into a model that can be applied to other sites of similar context.

The project is delivered through a partnership between Condition Lab (design facilitation), Kounkuey Design Initiative (local implementation partner), and Amani Kibera (community-based organization and site operator). Funding is primarily provided by a private foundation (approximately 90 percent), supplemented by locally generated income from craft sales (10 percent), ensuring partial community-based financial participation.

Governance is strongly community-centred. Design decisions – including spatial layout, materials, and programme priorities were made through structured participatory workshops involving residents of different ages and genders, supported by anonymous voting mechanisms to balance power dynamics.

Day-to-day management is led by Amani Kibera, supported by a community committee representing women's groups, youth, and disabled residents. The facility is programmed through a shared scheduling system, ensuring equitable access for education sessions, cultural activities, and group meetings. This governance model embeds long-term local stewardship of an education and cultural asset rather than external control.

Impact

The Amani Kibera Book House has significantly expanded access to education and cultural space in Kibera. Daily use has increased from a small reading room capacity of around 40 users to approximately 300–400 children per day, offering structured and informal learning opportunities in a safe environment.

The facility now functions as a multi-purpose cultural hub, hosting after-school programmes, literacy activities, women's group meetings, youth workshops, and community events. Its flexible design allows rapid reconfiguration for festivals, training, and intergenerational activities.

Accessibility improvements, including ramps and inclusive circulation routes, have made it one of the few education spaces in the area designed for disabled residents, addressing longstanding exclusion from public learning environments. The use of local labour and materials has strengthened community ownership and generated local economic benefits, and participatory design has increased trust and engagement.



Kibera Book House in Nairobi, Kenya. © Condition_Lab

Key Lessons

The Amani Kibera Book House demonstrates the importance of shifting from a technical, top-down approach to a community-driven process. True transformation occurs not through the delivery of a finished building, but through the social process of designing, deciding, and building together.

The project shows that value discovery must precede spatial design. Dignity, ownership, and reciprocity were not abstract ideals but became generative drivers that directly shaped design choices, from flexible spaces (enabling ownership) to local materials (enabling dignity) to cross-generational knowledge exchange (enabling reciprocity).

Another key lesson is the need to design for adaptability and long-term governance, not just physical form. Fixed spaces impose fixed behaviours; flexible spaces give communities the final say and rights. The project also highlights that architects must redefine their role from "creator" to "facilitator".

Building trust, facilitating multiple workshops, and ensuring genuine decision-making power cannot be rushed. This raises an important philosophy of "Slow architecture", especially when doing social architecture.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Informal settlements are not voids to be cleared:** The Kibera case shows that informal settlements are complex social spaces full of dynamism, self-organization and resilience. Interventions that build on existing local logics are more likely to succeed than imported "solutions".
- ✓ **Replicate principles, not buildings:** The project offers a social toolkit that can be adapted to other contexts. What transfers is not the building's form or materials but four principles: (1) value discovery as an essential first phase; (2) genuine transfer of decision-making power to communities; (3) participatory methods (physical models, community walks, anonymous voting) that transcend literacy and language barriers; and (4) social empowerment valued as highly as physical infrastructure.
- ✓ **Community-driven prototypes can catalyse wider change:** Public–community–academic partnerships offer a complementary model to large-scale public housing or top-down redevelopment. While not a replacement for systemic investment, they can act as catalysts for broader neighbourhood upgrading.

The Amani Kibera Book House points to the importance of **procedural justice**: the fairness of the process is as important as the quality of the outcome. When communities are treated as co-creators rather than passive recipients, the resulting spaces are more likely to be cared for, sustained, and adapted over time, offering a powerful lesson for affordable housing.



Kibera Book House Opening in Nairobi, Kenya. © Condition_Lab

2. Strengthening Community Identity and Urban Belonging

Public facilities play a critical role in strengthening community identity and fostering a sense of belonging within cities. Cultural and educational institutions create shared spaces where residents can interact across social groups and participate in collective cultural life, building a collective identity. In doing so, they contribute to more inclusive urban environments by providing accessible places that support participation across diverse communities.

Public schools are a particularly important example. When equitably distributed and accessible, they can help bring together children and families from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds, fostering interaction and cohesion from an early age. Schools are often one of the first shared institutions that residents encounter within a neighbourhood, making them powerful platforms for building mixed communities and strengthening social ties. However, this potential is not always fully realized. In many cities, public schools may be used predominantly by certain groups, reflecting wider inequalities in housing patterns, school choice policies or perceptions of quality. Ensuring that educational facilities are accessible, well-resourced and integrated within neighbourhood planning is therefore essential to maximizing their role as spaces of inclusion and social cohesion. Beyond formal education, cultural and educational public facilities also help communities develop a shared understanding of place. In urban environments characterized by rapid demographic change and migration, cultural and educational facilities also play a role in fostering intercultural understanding. Libraries and cultural centres often support multilingual programming and host events that celebrate diverse cultural traditions, helping communities maintain cultural identities while promoting dialogue across groups. Museums, heritage institutions and cultural centres preserve and interpret cultural heritage, enabling residents to connect local histories to broader social narratives. Through exhibitions and performances, these institutions create opportunities for collective learning and reflection on the historical and cultural fabric of the city.

At the neighbourhood level, such facilities frequently act as anchors within local communities. Libraries, cultural centres and local museums often host events, workshops and exhibitions that highlight neighbourhood stories, local artists and cultural traditions. These activities not only celebrate cultural diversity but also create opportunities for residents to gather, exchange ideas and build relationships across generations and backgrounds – transforming venues into active platforms for community interaction and social cohesion.

There is a growing movement to reimagine city museums and cultural institutions as participatory and evolving spaces, where residents are not only recipients of knowledge but active contributors to its creation. Rather than presenting fixed narratives, museums are increasingly adopting co-creation approaches, inviting communities to shape exhibitions, contribute stories, and reinterpret collections through contemporary lenses (Marshall and Roca, 2021). This shift recognizes that culture is dynamic and lived, and that inclusive representation requires opening institutional authority to a broader range of voices. Participatory curation, community archives, and collaborative programming enable residents to see their own identities, histories and experiences reflected in these spaces, while also fostering dialogue across different groups. In doing so, museums move beyond preservation alone to become platforms for exchange, learning and critical reflection, strengthening their role as civic spaces that support both education and social cohesion (Marshall and Roca, 2021).



São Paulo Cultural Center, Brazil. © H. Tieben

Case Study: Boulevard, Lusail City

A mixed-Use Civic Spine for Community Life

How it works

Lusail Boulevard is a central urban corridor designed as a pedestrian-friendly civic spine within Lusail City. Originally activated during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, it has since evolved into a permanent public facility hosting cultural events, entertainment, and daily social activities. The boulevard features wide pedestrian avenues, shaded walkways, retail and dining outlets, and open spaces for performances and gatherings. Its design prioritizes walkability and accessibility, creating a lively environment that encourages community interaction and supports a vibrant urban lifestyle.

Funding, governance and management

Lusail Boulevard is developed under the broader Lusail City master plan by Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Company, with operational management supported by Lusail Real Estate Development Company. The project is funded through a combination of state investment and revenue generated from commercial leasing along the boulevard.

Governance involves coordination between developers, municipal authorities, and private sector stakeholders to ensure efficient operations and maintenance. Event programming is often organized in partnership with cultural institutions, tourism bodies, and private organizers, ensuring continuous activation of the space. This hybrid governance model has enabled the boulevard to transition successfully from a mega-event venue into a sustainable, everyday public facility that serves both residents and visitors.

Impact

Lusail Boulevard has become a focal point for social life in Lusail, supporting community cohesion and cultural engagement. It attracts diverse audiences through events, dining, and entertainment options, contributing to a dynamic urban atmosphere. The boulevard enhances economic activity by driving foot traffic to surrounding businesses and increasing the city's appeal as a commercial and tourism destination. Its pedestrian-oriented design promotes healthier lifestyles and reduces reliance on cars within the neighbourhood. The space also demonstrates resilience by adapting from a temporary event-focused function to a permanent civic asset. Environmentally, shaded walkways and urban design elements improve comfort and usability. Overall, Lusail Boulevard illustrates how large-scale urban developments can create inclusive and adaptable public spaces.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ Mega-event infrastructure can be successfully converted into long-term public assets when supported by strategic planning and adaptive reuse.
- ✓ Prioritizing pedestrian-first design is essential for creating inclusive, accessible, and socially vibrant urban environments.
- ✓ Mixed-use corridors strengthen urban resilience by combining commercial, cultural, and social functions within a single integrated space.
- ✓ Strong public–private partnerships are often key to effective management, activation, and long-term sustainability of public spaces.
- ✓ Flexible and adaptable design enables public spaces to evolve over time in response to changing community needs and uses.
- ✓ Regular programming, cultural events, and everyday activities are critical to sustaining public engagement and preventing underuse.
- ✓ Integrated planning frameworks ensure that public spaces actively contribute to both social cohesion and local economic development.



Lusail Boulevard, Lusail City, Qatar. © Qatar Museums

3. Creating Spaces for Fun and Creative Expression

Enjoyment, fun and creativity are key elements which bring joy and improved quality of life to urban environments. Referring back to the six social functions of cities, 'enjoying', which includes cultural activities, social rituals, entertainment and relaxation is one of the essential functions which usually structure people's life and needs (Chaire ETI, 2025).

Public facilities are central to enabling this function. Cultural centres, libraries, sports facilities, community spaces and recreational venues provide accessible, shared environments where people can engage in creative expression and leisure. These spaces support both formal cultural production, such as performances and exhibitions, and informal, everyday practices including social gatherings, play, and community events. In doing so, they create opportunities for interaction, expression and enjoyment across different age groups, backgrounds and income levels.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out that everyone has the right to participate in and enjoy culture, art and science (OHCHR, 2015). Despite this international recognition access to culture and creative spaces remains uneven. In some contexts, cultural participation is constrained by restrictions on freedom of expression (UNESCO, 2024), while in others it is shaped by socio-economic divides, where cultural institutions are perceived as exclusive or inaccessible. Museums, galleries and performance venues are often associated with elite audiences, with cost, location or social norms limiting broader engagement.

Public facilities can play a transformative role in democratizing access to culture and redistributing cultural capital. By embedding cultural and creative spaces within a reasonable distance and at an affordable cost they challenge the perception that culture is reserved for certain groups or limited to central urban districts. Local libraries hosting exhibitions, community centres supporting grassroots arts, and multi-use cultural hubs providing rehearsal and performance space all contribute to normalizing cultural participation and enjoyment of culture for all.

In São Paulo the Spcine Circuit, launched in 2016, has established 32 public cinema rooms across the city in 27 education and cultural venues. The network has held 59,000 sessions between 2016 and 2024 attracting more than 2.2 million people, elevating Brazilian cinema, reducing exclusion based on income and geography and stimulating interest in and understanding of film production and film-adjacent careers (World Cities Culture Forum, 2025).

Globally there has also been growing recognition of the importance of the night-time economy, focusing on designing and managing public facilities to support flexible and extended use. Noting their importance for well-being and sociability, 97 percent of WCCF cities have strategies actively supporting night-time initiatives focused on strengthening cultural life after dark and helping cities safeguard venues and experiences to make nights more vibrant and inclusive for all communities and workers.

In Guangzhou, the largest consumer of the night-time economy of any Chinese city, this recognition has resulted in more than 600 events and programmes as part of the 'Project Young Yeah Market', opening up malls and public markets into the evening through a blend of culture, sport, and food to boost footfall for local business and provide a range of free or affordable activities for residents of all ages (Xinyi, 2025).

Similarly, in London, cultural institutions such as the Tate have introduced “Lates” - extended evening openings that reframe museums and galleries as more lively, social and inclusive spaces (Tate, 2025). By pairing exhibitions with music, performances and other activities, these initiatives have broadened participation, particularly among younger audiences and others unable to attend during standard opening hours (Baskerville, 2018). In doing so, they reposition cultural facilities as active, accessible spaces embedded within everyday urban life, rather than static, old-fashioned or exclusive institutions.

The role of urban environments to enable enjoyment and enhance creativity is increasingly recognized in global approaches to measuring urban success around the world. UN-Habitat’s Quality of Life Initiative, developed with partners, is an approach which places people’s experiences at the forefront of urban development and decision-making (UN-Habitat, 2024b).

Case Study: Docklands, Ghent

Activating Brownfield Sites for Art, Culture and Community Building

How it works

DOK is a temporary-use cultural and community space located in Ghent's Old Docks, a former industrial waterfront undergoing long-term redevelopment into a residential and mixed-use district. Established in 2011, DOK activates the site during the multi-year construction process, preventing vacancy and maintaining public access to the area.

The site operates as a seasonal cultural venue hosting concerts, open-air cinema, markets, food events, and informal gathering spaces, including a temporary "urban beach" along the water. Rather than waiting for full redevelopment, DOK uses interim occupation to transform a derelict industrial landscape into an active, accessible cultural destination that reconnects citizens with the waterfront.

Funding, governance and management

Delivered through a multi-actor governance models combining the City of Ghent, civil society organizations, and local residents, it has evolved from a programme initiator into a facilitator of resident-led activities, supporting concerts, festivals, and cultural programming while adapting to ongoing construction at the Old Docks redevelopment site.
Its flexible governance structure allows the space to remain active during phased urban development, balancing long-term planning with interim cultural use.

Impact

DOK has redefined Ghent's docklands as a vibrant cultural destination, hosting music events, open-air cinema, markets, and seasonal public activities. It has improved the public perception of a formerly derelict industrial waterfront, attracting citywide visitors and re-establishing the area as a key leisure and cultural node.

Together, the projects demonstrate how temporary use can maintain urban vitality during long redevelopment cycles, preventing dereliction while generating social, cultural, and economic benefits.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Temporary use is a powerful tool for managing long redevelopment cycles**, preventing vacancy, neglect, and social decline on brownfield sites.
- ✓ **Early activation creates social and cultural value before permanent redevelopment begins**, helping to "test" future uses and build public support for regeneration.
- ✓ **Community-led programming improves inclusion and relevance**, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods where traditional participation methods often fail to engage residents.
- ✓ **Hybrid governance models (city + civil society + residents) enable flexibility**, allowing spaces to evolve over time while maintaining public oversight.
- ✓ **Temporary cultural and recreational uses can reshape urban identity**, as seen in DOK's transformation of the docklands into a recognized city destination.
- ✓ **Social innovation tools (e.g. local currencies, urban agriculture, shared activities) can strengthen local economies and community cohesion.**
- ✓ **Flexibility is essential in active construction environments**, enabling public use to continue safely alongside long-term redevelopment.
- ✓ **Temporary use should be embedded in urban planning policy**, not treated as an exception, but as a strategic phase in regeneration processes.

From Value to Implementation

Translating the value of education, art and culture into lasting urban outcomes requires more than building facilities. The strongest results come when cities treat cultural and educational infrastructure as part of everyday urban systems – planned alongside housing, transport, health and economic development, rather than as stand-alone amenities. Case studies from Kibera, São Paulo, and Lusail demonstrate that impact depends as much on governance, management and financing as on physical design.

A first lesson is that implementation must begin with access. Cities often invest in landmark institutions concentrated in central districts, yet underserved neighbourhoods continue to experience "cultural deserts." More effective models prioritize distributed, neighbourhood-based provision: libraries embedded in residential areas, cultural centres within walking distance, schools designed as shared civic assets, and underused public buildings adapted for learning and creative uses. This approach expands reach while reducing travel costs and time barriers, particularly for lower-income communities. In practice, this requires integrating social infrastructure standards into local plans, zoning frameworks and land allocation processes so that educational and cultural facilities are treated as essential services rather than optional additions.

Lessons from case studies highlight the value for governance models to shift towards shared stewardship. The Kibera Book House illustrates that when communities are involved in defining needs, shaping design and managing spaces, facilities become more responsive and better maintained. Participatory governance mechanisms, such as community advisory boards, neighbourhood committees, youth councils or co-management agreements, can formalize this role. These structures help ensure that facilities remain adaptable over time and continue to reflect local priorities. For city authorities, this means creating enabling frameworks where public agencies retain accountability for standards and inclusion, while communities and civil society contribute operational knowledge and social legitimacy.

Successful examples demonstrate that programming and activation are as important as construction, highlighting the need for sustainable management. Libraries that provide digital skills, museums that co-curate with residents, or public spaces that host regular cultural events all remain relevant because they evolve with user needs. This requires dedicated operational teams, clear maintenance responsibilities, and long-term programming strategies. Hybrid management structures, combining municipal oversight with partnerships from NGOs, universities, cultural institutions or private operators, can strengthen capacity while diversifying expertise. The transition of Lusail Boulevard from a mega-event venue into a daily civic space highlights the importance of continuous activation and adaptive management in sustaining long-term public value.

Financing mechanisms must also move beyond one-time capital expenditure. Many cultural and educational projects fail because operating budgets are insufficient after construction. Stronger models combine multiple funding streams: public investment for core infrastructure, philanthropic or donor support for innovation, and earned income from commercial activities, memberships, events or leasing where appropriate.

6|3 LIVELIHOOD & ECONOMY



Pike Place Market in Seattle, United States of America. © H. Tieben

6 | 3 Livelihoods and Economy

Cities depend on the creation of economic and livelihood opportunities to sustain daily life and ensure their effective functioning (UNDP, 2025). Globally cities generate 80 percent of GDP (UN, 2022). Despite the economic importance of cities, significant challenges in urban economies persist.

While the global unemployment rate has remained steady at around 5 percent (ILO, 2025), more than 2 billion people work in informal sectors, with particularly high rates in Africa (85.8 percent) and Asia (68.2 percent) (ILO, 2018). Youth unemployment remains above 12 percent (ILO, 2025) and in-work poverty is continuing to rise as the cost-of-living outpaces wage growth in many cities.

Public facilities can play a catalysing role in responding to these pressures. They are not simply service points or social amenities; they are economic assets embedded within the urban fabric. Well-designed and well-managed facilities generate footfall, stimulate local commerce, create jobs, and anchor neighbourhood economies. As municipal assets they can generate revenue for the city, revenue which can be put back into financing new infrastructure and basic services (UN-Habitat, 2024).

Cultural and creative facilities, including museums, libraries, galleries, and community organizations, alone account for 6.2 percent of global employment (UNESCO, 2022), demonstrating the scale of economic activity that public assets can unlock. In Beijing, the restoration and reuse of historic buildings led to a significant growth of new culture- and design-driven businesses. Reportedly, total sales revenues grew from less than RMB 1 million (USD 151,000) in 2012 to RMB 85 million (USD 12.9 million) in 2018 and property values in the area more than doubled between 2012 and 2018 after the completion of the project (World Bank, 2020).

Whilst all facilities contribute to local economic life and provide new jobs, this section focuses primarily on markets – one of the most vital and multi-functionalpublic facilities in cities. Markets operate as economic hubs, food system nodes, and spaces of social resilience. Providing accessible employment, enabling entrepreneurship, and sustaining food systems, they connect producers and consumers, generate income, and create multiplier effects across urban economies. They offer low-barrier entry points for vulnerable groups, support small-scale farmers, and strengthen social capital. In this way, markets demonstrate how multi-functional public facilities can be leveraged to address global challenges of poverty, inequality, and urban economic fragility.

1. Providing Employment Opportunities

Markets are among the most important public facilities as they serve as critical nodes within broader food systems and operate simultaneously as economic hubs, platforms for entrepreneurship, and generators of formal and informal employment. As multi-functionalpublic spaces, markets shape how urban residents earn a living, access food, and build social and economic resilience.

The significance of markets arises in part from their centrality to national and urban food systems. The food system comprises a wide array of actors including farmers, transporters, vendors, producers, and retailers, all contributing to the flow of food from production to consumption. According to the World Bank, the food system is a major source of employment in developing countries, with 65 percent of working adults living in poverty relying on the agriculture sector as of 2016.

In East and Southern Africa, food systems are projected to account for more than 70 percent of all jobs by 2025 in Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Markets play a crucial role in sustaining this employment by providing sites for exchange, processing, and retailing, which are activities that link producers and consumers and add value throughout the system.

The number of jobs a sector can create is important, but so is the income generated from that employment. Markets provide meaningful economic opportunities across different contexts. Examples include Fiji where market earnings can rival annual per capita income, to the United States of America, where farmers' markets contribute both direct and indirect income. These examples show that markets not only provide employment but generate income and strengthen local economies.

Markets also generate substantial employment in higher-income settings. Studies from Spain and multiple American states demonstrate that farmers' markets contribute meaningfully to local labour markets, creating direct jobs and supporting additional employment through multiplier effects. This often results in net positive gains even where conventional retail activity declines. These findings highlight the economic versatility and resilience of market-based employment.

2. Catalysing Economic Hubs

Markets generate employment not only for vendors but also for a range of workers who support their operations. A case study in Dar es Salaam documented numerous roles within and around a city market, including casual labourers who pack sacks and unload trucks, cargo porters, security personnel, management staff, accountants, gate operators, and scale operators. These auxiliary positions highlight the multiplier effects generated by markets and the diversity of jobs they sustain.

Markets also function as incubators for entrepreneurship by providing low-cost low-barrier entry points for business development. Nearly 80 percent of American farmers' market vendors reported that the market offered the greatest opportunity for developing their business compared with other sales channels. Vendors also gain skills in customer relations, merchandising, pricing strategies, and product development. Importantly, start-up costs are minimal. A United States of America study found 83 percent of vendors financed their businesses through personal savings, making vending accessible to groups that often face barriers to formal financing. By enabling many small businesses to thrive rather than concentrating economic activity in large corporations, markets distribute economic opportunities more equitably.

Examples from South Africa and Namibia demonstrate how markets can extend support to informal vendors through training and business services. Across these contexts, markets provide programmes that help vendors navigate market operations, build basic business and financial management skills, and access resources such as financing or incubation support. This collectively strengthens the resilience of informal traders and promotes more inclusive economic development.

Markets not only operate as vital employment hubs but are also crucial economic assets for municipalities, generating significant own-source revenue through rents, licensing fees, stall permits, service charges, and taxation (UN-Habitat, 2022). This revenue stream has the potential to strengthen municipal financial autonomy, reduce reliance on unpredictable external funding, and enable local governments to invest in infrastructure, maintenance, and services.

Case Study: Kenyatta Market, Nairobi

Public Markets as Engines of Inclusive Urban Economies

How it works

Kenyatta Market is one of Nairobi's most prominent public markets, functioning as a dense, multi-use commercial and social hub. Established around the time of Kenya's independence, the market was designed to support economic participation among urban residents by providing affordable, serviced space for small-scale traders. Today, the market accommodates a wide range of activities – from food vendors and butchers to tailors, beauticians, and second-hand clothing traders – serving diverse populations including nearby residents, workers, and students. Its open-air structure with permanent stalls enables both formal and informal economic activity to coexist, creating a highly adaptable and accessible public facility embedded in everyday urban life.

Funding, governance and management

The market is owned and managed by the Nairobi City County, which oversees licensing, spatial organization, and basic service provision. Day-to-day management is carried out through market inspectors and sector leads, while informal trader associations play an active role in representing users and coordinating with authorities.

Recent improvements have focused on upgrading lighting, reorganizing stalls, and enhancing safety, demonstrating the importance of ongoing municipal stewardship combined with user-led governance structures.

Impact

Kenyatta Market plays a critical role in Nairobi's urban economy and social life:

- **Livelihoods and micro-enterprise:** It supports hundreds of small businesses, reflecting the central role of micro-enterprises in Kenya's economy and providing accessible entry points into employment.
- **Affordable services and goods:** The market delivers low-cost food, services, and everyday necessities, making it a vital resource for lower- and middle-income residents.
- **Urban vitality and identity:** Known as a centre for hair and beauty services and for its food culture, the market attracts users from across the city, generating footfall and local economic activity.
- **Social infrastructure:** Beyond commerce, it acts as a meeting point and informal social space, strengthening community networks and everyday interactions.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Leverage public facilities for revenue**: When properly regulated and well-managed, markets act as key revenue generators and community hubs, enhancing the city's economic landscape.
- ✓ **Inclusion not eviction**: Kenyatta Market demonstrates that informal businesses constitute a significant portion of Nairobi's economy. Instead of evicting traders, policy should focus on upgrading, providing, and organizing space to foster economic growth and provide strong social outcomes.
- ✓ **Infrastructure as economic empowerment**: The provision of proper sanitation, water, drainage, and electricity is foundational. Investing in these areas improves health outcomes, safety, and business functionality, especially in high-density areas.
- ✓ **Inclusive urban planning**: Successful urban policy requires moving from top-down planning to engaging with traders, residents, and civil society to create functional, localized solutions (planning with them rather than for them).



Santa Caterina Market in Barcelona, Spain. © H. Tiebe

3. Inclusive Livelihood Platforms

In addition to broad economic benefits, markets contribute to decent work through autonomy, flexibility, respect, and social cohesion. Vendors in Fiji and the United States of America cited independence, control over working hours, and the ability to make their own decisions as significant advantages of market-based work. Many reported that earning an income brought them respect in their communities. Studies in Arusha and Kampala found that 83 percent and 84 percent of vendors respectively were happy or very happy with their work, indicating that markets can provide favourable working conditions even when incomes are modest.

Within urban markets, two broad categories of vendors operate: formal and informal. Formal vendors typically work within regulated spaces, often under municipal oversight and within designated physical structures. In contrast, much of the employment associated with markets occurs in the informal economy, where workers are unregulated and lack state protection. Over 60 percent of global labour force is informal, including 85.8 percent in Africa, 68.2 percent in Asia and the Pacific, 68.6 percent in the Arab States, 40 percent in the Americas, and 25.1 percent in Europe and Central Asia. Informal market and street vendors constitute a substantial share of this workforce.

Importantly, barriers to entry for many market-related jobs are relatively low. One study found that only 20 percent of vendors had completed secondary school, suggesting that markets offer accessible employment opportunities for people with limited formal education. Local markets also strengthen livelihoods by supporting small-scale farmers and enabling inclusive economic participation. In contrast to supermarket chains that often impose high procurement requirements, markets frequently provide more flexible and equitable access for smaller producers.

Policies such as Johannesburg's requirement that market agents source at least 10 percent of their produce from poor, small-scale farmers, together with evidence from Asia showing pro-poor multiplier effects in farmers' markets, demonstrate how these systems extend income opportunities to low-income intermediaries such as transporters, processors, and traders.

The gendered nature of market and street trade also underscores its importance for women's economic empowerment. Evidence from Bangladesh shows that establishing designated market sites where women can sell their products leads to increased spending on healthcare, children's education, and transportation, indicating that access to markets improves well-being.

Market environments themselves are often cooperative settings where traders support one another. In Dar es Salaam, vendors accompany each other to wholesale markets, watch each other's stalls, care for one another's children, and train newcomers in the trade. When a vendor is absent, peers sell on their behalf and return the earnings. Such practices strengthen social capital and create mutually reinforcing support systems. More formal vendor cooperatives and associations further contribute to decent working conditions by enabling collective advocacy. Farmers' associations, traders' groups, and market cooperatives can negotiate for improved infrastructure, enhanced security, and better services. Examples from Uganda, South Asia, and Haiti illustrate how organized vendors have successfully secured market upgrades, safety improvements, and better working environments.

Despite these positive impacts, informal vendors operating outside market boundaries often face harassment, insecurity, and limited access to capital. Yet evidence shows that when markets are designed and managed inclusively, by offering stalls, storage facilities, and basic infrastructure, both formal and informal traders can benefit. The Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market's allocation of 71 stalls to informal vendors, along with overnight storage, exemplifies such inclusive approaches.

From Value to Implementation

Recognizing public facilities as economic infrastructure requires a shift in how cities plan, govern and finance them. Markets demonstrate this most clearly, but the lesson applies across libraries, transport hubs, sports complexes, cultural venues and community centres: these are not only service-delivery spaces, but they are also platforms for livelihoods, entrepreneurship and local wealth creation. The challenge for city leaders is to move from viewing such facilities as municipal costs to managing them as productive urban assets.

Economic value emerges when facilities are embedded within wider urban systems. Markets succeed not simply because they provide stalls, but because they connect transport, logistics, food supply chains, waste management, storage and consumer demand.

Cities should therefore plan facilities as part of broader economic ecosystems, ensuring that supporting infrastructure, public transport, utilities and surrounding public space are designed to maximize access and engagement.

Governance arrangements must also reflect the hybrid nature of these spaces. Public facilities that support livelihoods often operate at the intersection of municipal regulation, private enterprise and informal activity. Effective governance therefore depends on balancing oversight with flexibility.

Financial sustainability is another critical factor. Many facilities generate substantial own-source revenue, yet this potential is often underutilized due to weak collection systems, fragmented contracts or short-term budgeting. Stronger practice involves ring-fencing revenues, such as rents, permits, service charges or event income, for maintenance, upgrading and expansion of facilities. This creates a virtuous cycle where public assets fund their own resilience and reduce dependence on external grants or government funding. In this sense, transparent revenue management is essential: users are more willing to contribute fees when they see visible reinvestment in infrastructure and services. For municipalities, strengthening financial management around public facilities can also improve fiscal autonomy and long-term planning capacity.

At the same time, cities should adopt financing models that recognize both commercial and social returns. Facilities serving vulnerable populations may not maximize profit, but they generate significant public value through employment, food security and health improvements. Operational management is equally important. Continuous monitoring of occupancy, turnover, satisfaction and economic performance allows operators to adapt services and identify emerging challenges.

The broader implication for city leaders is that public facilities should be treated as long-term economic platforms. Their contribution is measured not only in direct jobs or revenue, but in the ecosystems they sustain, the entrepreneurs they enable and the resilience they build within neighbourhood economies.

When governance, financing and management mechanisms are aligned with this role, public facilities become powerful instruments for inclusive and sustainable urban development.

6|4 SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SPACES



Safer Schools Initiative, Mozambique © UN-Habitat

6 | 4 Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Urban fragility is increasing around the world as cities face an era of increasing risk. Already more than 2.1 billion people are exposed to high or extreme levels of fragility, this is a quarter of the world's population (OECD, 2025). Almost 50 percent of the population in fragile contexts live in urban environments (OECD, 2020). Violence is reaching record levels, and many cities are seeing growing threats from political polarization, security and natural hazards (De Boer et al., 2016; OECD, 2025).

As climate pressures intensify, the scale of the challenge is growing. By 2050, droughts are projected to affect more than three-quarters of the global population, while between 4.8 and 5.7 billion people may live in water-scarce areas for at least one month each year. In this context, public facilities are emerging as critical assets: embedded within neighbourhoods, accessible to communities, and often trusted as familiar civic spaces. Their dual function, as everyday social infrastructure and as emergency response assets, positions them uniquely within resilience strategies.

Global frameworks reinforce this imperative. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction calls for strengthened disaster-resilient infrastructure and identifies four priority areas: understanding risk, strengthening governance, investing in resilience, and enhancing preparedness to "build back better." Similarly, Sustainable Development Goals, namely SDG 11, emphasizes the need for cities to increase efforts to adopt and implement policies on disaster resilience and risk management as part of the wider goal of making settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (UNDRR, 2015; UN, 2016).

This chapter shows how public facilities can support disaster risk reduction and crisis response, while also bridging urban divides and improving safety and access for young people, women and marginalized communities.

1. Emergency Shelters and Dual Purpose Infrastructure

In dense and rapidly urbanizing environments, land constraints and financial limitations often make single-purpose emergency shelters challenging to deliver. As a result, cities are increasingly adopting dual-purpose approaches, where public facilities serve everyday functions while also being designed or retrofitted to act as shelters during crises.

Schools are among the most widely used examples. Following Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, many evacuation centres were in schools, while in Japan, nearly 90 percent of public schools have been designated as evacuation sites. Their structural resilience, familiarity, and central location make them effective and accessible shelters (Tsioulou et al., 2021).

Whilst facilities that are already embedded, trusted and regularly used by communities are far more likely to be effective in times of crisis, prolonged use can pose significant disruption to education and livelihoods (UN-Habitat, 2025). To mitigate this, precautions should be taken to adapt specific sections of facilities for dedicated emergency use minimizing the duration and extent of displacement.

Lessons from UN-Habitat's Safer Schools Initiative in Mozambique demonstrate the potential of upgrading public facilities to increase disaster resilience. Mozambique faces acute risks from tropical storms, cyclones, and flooding, recording 56 major meteorological events between 1956 and 2016. Yet for every USD 100 of development aid, only 50 cents (USD 1.5 per capita) has historically

been invested in protecting that development from future disasters.

Post-disaster financing has often been fragmented and spread across many small, uncoordinated projects, resulting in duplicated administrative costs and limited long-term impact. Evidence shows that one dollar invested in preparedness can save seven dollars in response and reconstruction (OCHA, 2014), making dual-purpose public facilities both a socially and fiscally prudent investment.

The Safer Schools approach reframes schools not only as education facilities, but as multi-functional community assets, serving as safe havens during extreme events, continuity hubs for services, and shared public spaces that support social cohesion between displaced and host communities. In Mozambique, this approach is now embedded within the National Regulatory Framework, including the Ministerial Diploma on Resilient School Construction, which formalizes the integration of disaster risk reduction, climate resilience, and environmental and social safeguards into public infrastructure design and delivery. This alignment with national systems ensures that resilient schools are not treated as exceptional humanitarian projects, but as a core component of long-term urban development (UN-Habitat, 2023).

An important dimension of this work is the Mixed Material Approach, which combines locally available materials with engineered components, reducing costs, enabling faster delivery, and actively involving communities in construction and maintenance. In doing so, it strengthens local capacity, builds ownership, and improves sustainability – ensuring that facilities remain resilient and socially embedded over time.

As climate pressures intensify, public facilities must also respond to extreme heat. Many cities are now designing or retrofitting public facilities including schools, libraries, sports halls, and community centres as “cool spaces” that provide safe refuge during extreme heatwaves. This includes integrating passive cooling, shading, reflective roofing, improved ventilation, urban greenery, and resilient power systems. These facilities help protect vulnerable groups, particularly children, older people, and outdoor workers, from the urban heat island effect whilst still functioning as shared and useful urban sites at other times of the year.

Case Study: Safer Schools Chókwè, Gaza Province

Resilient Schools as Dual-Purpose Shelters in Chókwè

How it works

The Safer Schools approach reduces community vulnerability to natural hazards by strengthening the resilience of school infrastructure and its role within the community. In Mozambique, where floods and cyclones are recurrent, schools are often among the few accessible public facilities. The approach promotes the design and rehabilitation of schools to withstand extreme weather, incorporating risk-informed planning, resilient construction techniques, and improved water and sanitation services. In Chókwè, these facilities are explicitly conceived as dual-purpose spaces, functioning as educational infrastructure during normal times and as safe havens during emergencies.

Funding, governance and management

The development of these dual-purpose facilities reflects a multi-partner approach combining government leadership, international financing, and technical assistance. Early interventions, such as the elevated classroom built with ECHO funding, after 2013 flooding, demonstrated the feasibility of integrating resilience into education infrastructure. Subsequent investments, including the larger multi-purpose structure supported by the Adaptation Fund and implemented with Oxfam, have built on this experience to scale up the concept. UN-Habitat has provided technical assistance through the Safer Schools Initiative, supporting the Government of Mozambique, particularly the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), in developing resilient designs and integrating them into national systems. This is reinforced by the Ministerial Diploma on resilient school construction (Diploma n.º 122/2021), which formalizes standards for risk-informed, climate-resilient infrastructure.

At the local level, school management committees and communities play an active role in the use and maintenance of these facilities. The adoption of a Mixed Material Approach further enables local participation in construction, contributing to cost-efficiency, ownership, and sustainability.

Impact

These interventions in Chókwè have demonstrated clear benefits in both emergency and non-emergency contexts. During flood events, the elevated classroom and the larger multi-purpose structure have been used as safe shelters for affected populations, providing protection from rising waters and reducing displacement risks. The presence of the elevated radio system has strengthened early warning capacity, allowing communities to receive timely alerts and respond more effectively to emergencies.

In non-disaster periods, the infrastructure contributes to improved educational capacity and community use. The larger structure, in particular, functions as an extension of school space, supporting learning activities and community gatherings. This dual-purpose use increases the overall value of the investment and ensures continuous utilization of the infrastructure.

Overall, these examples demonstrate how relatively targeted investments can significantly enhance community resilience, while also improving access to services and strengthening trust in public infrastructure.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Design for dual functionality:** Infrastructure that serves both daily needs and emergency response maximizes public investment.
- ✓ **Start small, scale strategically:** Early pilots, such as the 2012 elevated classroom, can inform larger and more impactful interventions over time.
- ✓ **Integrate early warning systems:** Complementing infrastructure with communication tools (e.g. elevated radio systems) enhances disaster preparedness.
- ✓ **Anchor solutions in policy:** National standards, such as the Ministerial Diploma 122/2021, are key to scaling resilient infrastructure.
- ✓ **Promote community participation:** The use of local materials and labour strengthens ownership and long-term sustainability.
- ✓ **Adopt a nexus approach:** Dual-purpose shelters effectively bridge humanitarian response and development, contributing to long-term urban resilience.

2. Conflict and Displacement: Integrating communities

Urban displacement is reshaping countries across the world yet aid actors and policymakers often pay insufficient attention to the spatial conditions that define displaced communities' daily lives. For internally displaced people (IDPs), where they settle largely determines their prospects for safety, access to services, and long-term integration. Connectivity to the wider urban fabric, including transport networks, markets, social services, and institutions, plays a decisive role in shaping livelihood opportunities and overall well-being (UNHCR, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2025).

In protracted crises the key question often goes beyond whether individual services exist, but focuses on the extent to which neighbourhoods continue to function at all. Schools, health centres, markets, streets, and community spaces collectively determine whether daily life, learning, care, exchange, access to information, and social interaction, can be sustained. Public facilities play a central role in this equation, not only as service providers, but as anchors of neighbourhood life.

Shared access to safe, accessible and multi-functional public facilities offers one of the most powerful pathways for integrating displaced populations while also improving the living conditions of the urban poor. In lower-income and fragile settings, limited access to water, sanitation, electricity, health, and education is rarely a problem affecting displaced people alone. It is tied to long-standing political, spatial, and economic exclusion of the non-displaced urban poor. When humanitarian interventions respond only to displaced populations, without recognizing this broader deprivation, they risk exacerbating tensions and undermining local integration (UN-Habitat, 2025). Urban contexts are characterized by complex and influential existing systems including municipal departments, national policies, private and informal service providers. Sustainable and scalable responses must therefore work with and through these existing systems, rather than bypass them.

Any approach to displacement must also foreground livelihoods. IDPs often rely heavily on informal economies, yet livelihood considerations remain an afterthought in many humanitarian responses (Crawford and Holloway, 2024; Sida et al., 2024). Supporting skills building and strengthening the role of public facilities: in particular markets are essential steps to helping IDPs rebuild self-reliance and can contribute to more integrated and successful urban economies (IDCM, 2015). This is illustrated through the case study below.

Case Study: Community Service Centres, Gaza

Multi-purpose Centres for Internally-Displaced People (IDPs)

How it works

The service centres were established by UN-Habitat in collaboration with the Palestinian Housing Council (PHC) to address the urgent humanitarian needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in displacement sites in Khan Younis and Deir al-Balah. In response to the destruction of infrastructure, shortages of construction materials, and limited ability to construct permanent facilities, the centres were developed as flexible, caravan-based service hubs that could be rapidly established in affected areas. Designed as safe and accessible community spaces, the centres provide integrated health, psychosocial, social, and recreational services to displaced populations. Their layout includes caravans arranged around a central courtyard, shaded waiting and activity areas, sanitation facilities, solar-powered electricity systems, and water storage, creating a functional and secure environment that supports the well-being of vulnerable groups, particularly women, children, and families affected by displacement.

The centres operated as multi-service community hubs where humanitarian partners delivered a range of health, psychosocial, protection, and recreational services to displaced communities. A range of specialized partners, including Aisha Association for Women and Child, Theatre Day Productions, JUZOOR for Health & Social Development, and Save the Children deliver comprehensive services such as primary healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support, protection and case management services, recreational and educational activities, and community outreach programmes.

Funding, governance and management

The centres were developed under the HAYA Joint Programme: Eliminating Violence Against Women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, funded by the Government of Canada.

Impact

The service centres generated a significant positive impact on internally displaced persons (IDPs) by providing accessible health, psychosocial, and community services in areas heavily affected by displacement. By 15 December 2024, the Khan Younis centre had reached 11,862 beneficiaries, including 4,896 women, 2,408 girls, 2,324 boys, and 2,234 men. The Deir al-Balah centre served 12,701 beneficiaries, bringing the total number of people reached across both centres to more than 24,500 individuals. These figures demonstrate the centres' important role in expanding access to essential services for vulnerable populations, particularly women and children, who represented the majority of beneficiaries.

A satisfaction survey conducted among beneficiaries highlighted the value of the centres and their services. Results showed that 83.6 percent of respondents considered the centres easy to reach, while 81.8 percent reported benefiting primarily from psychosocial support services and 56.4 percent from healthcare services. Furthermore, 59.1 percent of beneficiaries indicated that the centres contributed to improving their daily lives, and 64.5 percent reported positive effects on their mental health and well-being. Despite the challenging operating environment, 45.5 percent stated that the centres provided a safe and supportive space, while 69.1 percent reported effective communication with service providers. Overall, 83.6 percent said they would recommend the centres to others, reflecting high levels of trust and perceived value among the displaced communities they served.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Develop integrated and multi-purpose hubs:** Integrated, people-centred service hubs can effectively improve access to essential services while strengthening the resilience of displaced and vulnerable communities.
- ✓ **Consider scale and delivery models:** Flexible and scalable service delivery models can sustain critical urban services in contexts affected by conflict, displacement, and infrastructure disruption.
- ✓ **Engage multiple partners in early-stage development:** Multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential for delivering inclusive, coordinated, and context-responsive interventions that address diverse community needs.
- ✓ **Maintain regular feedback and improvement loops:** Community engagement and beneficiary feedback mechanisms are critical for enhancing accountability, improving service quality, and ensuring interventions remain responsive to evolving needs.



Activities for Kids in the service Centres, Gaza, State of Palestine. © Palestinian Housing Council

3. Youth and Inclusion: Creating safer cities for all

With 1.8 billion young people worldwide, 90 percent residing in the Global South, the pressures of rapid urbanization, economic stresses, deep-rooted social inequities, and accelerating environmental degradation are disproportionately affecting youth. Poor urban planning, inadequate infrastructure, and resource depletion exacerbate these challenges, affecting their livelihoods and well-being. Young people account for one in every 5 people in contexts experiencing high or extreme fragility (OECD, 2025). Globally, 193,000 homicides occur between those aged 15-29. Lack of access to education and support services are key risk factors (WHO, 2024). Gender imbalances are also pervasive. 1 in 5 girls report experiences of sexual abuse (WHO, 2024) and from just 8 years old, 80 percent of public spaces feel dominated by boys (UN-Habitat, 2021).

Yet, young people also bring rich perspectives shaped by their unique experiences, including their disproportionate vulnerability. Cities who involve young people in urban decision-making are often met with innovative solutions, increased civic engagement, and agile responses to challenges. Notably, despite their precarity, young people experiencing poverty are just as eager to participate in urban decision-making and policy advocacy.

Public facilities and public spaces designed with and for young people can be powerful drivers of safety, inclusion, and opportunity. When cities invest in youth-focused services they not only expand education and livelihood pathways but also help bridge divides between communities. These spaces foster positive social interactions, strengthen local identity, and reduce the conditions that fuel violence by offering alternatives for young people who may otherwise feel excluded or marginalized. Importantly, inclusive design approaches that intentionally integrate vulnerable groups to ensure that public spaces become environments where all young people feel welcome, respected, and able to thrive.

Evidence from cities around the world demonstrates the impact of these investments. For example, the Arteria intervention in Cuenca, Ecuador transformed a previously unsafe area through improved public space design and community programming. The result was a 75 percent increase in female presence, with 76 percent of users and 81 percent of surveyed women reporting a heightened sense of safety (Basel Foundation, 2026), illustrating how thoughtful design, coupled with youth engagement and targeted social initiatives, can make public spaces more inclusive and significantly enhance perceptions of safety – particularly for young women and girls (UN-Habitat, 2025).



SESC Pompeia (Cultural and Social Center) São Paulo, Brazil. © H. Tieben

Case Study: Innovation Hub, Naga City

Empowering Naga Youth Through Co-Designed Public Spaces and Inclusive Governance

How it works

Under the Safe and Sound Cities Programme, participating cities donate an unused public space to serve as a Youth Innovation Hub accessible to all young people and hosting programme activities. In Naga, in the Philippines, the Naga City Youth Development Office, in partnership with local NGO, the WeSolve Foundation established the Youth Innovation Hub adjacent to City Hall, and co-designed the interior, sparking the first collaborative endeavour between young people and the city government under this initiative. Visitors to the space range from government officials, young people, NGOs, private sector, and guests from neighbouring municipalities. The Youth Innovation Hub offers a neutral zone for constructive dialogue, inter-generational collaboration, and youth-oriented advocacy. The Hub serves around twenty young people weekly.

Funding, Governance, and Management

The Naga City Youth Innovation Hub, as well as all youth innovation hubs in the Safe and Sound Cities Programme, is managed and primarily funded by the local city government. The S²Cities Programme provides a small amount of funds to support renovations and equipment procurement, while the city commits to providing staff and maintaining the space. From its inception, it is established that young people have a say in the use, upkeep, and future of the space.

Impact

The Youth Innovation Hub fills critical gaps in services provided to young people of Naga, including opportunities to build capacity in leadership, innovation, design thinking, and policy advocacy, among many other disciplines. The Hub also provides a zone for building bridges between young people and local authorities for addressing key urban issues affecting youth and the broader community. The trust established by the Hub made it a safe haven during extreme distress caused by record-breaking typhoons and flooding in the fall of 2024. During the natural disasters, the space served as an emergency relief space for young people, who relied on the physical space, as well as the community which emerged from the Hub, to support them in a time of need.

For young people and government to connect on key urban issues, a neutral space offered by the city to serve young people's interests and support their creativity is key. Crucially, long-term use and activation of these spaces is enhanced when young people are engaged in their design. As seen through the S²Cities programme, jointly deciding on interior decoration, equipment, branding, maintenance protocols, and other operational considerations translates into public recognition and legitimization of young people as key urban stakeholders whose ideas and voices are taken seriously, establishing a foundation of trust for future engagements. This participatory approach also ensures fit-for-purpose infrastructure, supporting sustained usage and mitigating risk of falling into neglect or disuse.



Youth-led consultations in Baguio, the Philippines. © Cordilleran Youth Center

These long-term impacts and their benefit for generations of youth to come are evident in Naga. The successful integration of youth voices in the design of Naga's Youth Innovation Hub inspired a city-wide Executive Order mandating the inclusion of youth in future municipal infrastructure projects. The Naga city government also committed public budget to a large-scale rehabilitation of the existing Civic Centre through a participatory process with youth and community, following the successful pilot of the Youth Innovation Hub.

A Naga City Skate Park Ordinance also formally recognizes the skate park in front of the Civic Centre as a city asset jointly managed with young people. The Ordinance established the City Parks and Recreational Facilities Management Office as the lead agency with a management board composed of city officials, youth leaders, and civil society actors, signalling a systemic shift toward inclusive governance of public facilities to better serve youth interests and well-being.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Inclusive participation should be embedded in public facility design**, not treated as an add-on. Youth hubs show how infrastructure can enable ongoing dialogue with underrepresented groups.
- ✓ **Low-cost interventions can deliver high governance value**: even minimal investment in accessible spaces can significantly strengthen trust and engagement between citizens and government.
- ✓ **Neutral, dedicated spaces lower barriers to participation**, particularly for young people who may not engage through formal institutional channels.
- ✓ **Early and continuous engagement improves policy outcomes**, reducing risks of misaligned investments, redesigns, and underused infrastructure.
- ✓ **Co-management models strengthen ownership and sustainability**, ensuring facilities remain relevant and well-maintained over time.
- ✓ **Flexibility and institutional independence enable responsiveness**, allowing hubs to adapt to changing needs and support communities during crises.
- ✓ **Public facilities can act as civic infrastructure**, connecting housing, services, and governance while fostering more inclusive and responsive urban systems.



Her City participatory mapping workshop in Gebze, Türkiye © Shared City Foundation

6|5

HEALTH & WELL-BEING



Play LA in Los Angeles, United States of America. © International Olympic Committee

6 | 5 Health and Well-being

Health and well-being in cities are shaped not only by healthcare access or quality but also by whether people can reliably access the public facilities and public-realm assets that support everyday life. Schools, clinics, childcare centres, libraries, parks, sports facilities, markets, cultural venues, and community hubs influence whether residents can meet daily needs, remain socially connected, stay physically active, and participate in community life. Public facilities therefore matter not simply as amenities, but as essential social infrastructure for healthy, inclusive, and resilient urban life (UN-Habitat, 2026).

This challenge is becoming more urgent. The World Health Organization (WHO) has emphasized that health is shaped by the immediate environment around homes, including streets, recreational facilities, food sources such as markets and stores, open spaces, and other community resources in close proximity (WHO, 2018).

Around the world 3 in every 4 children and 8 out of every 10 adolescents fail to meet recommended guidelines for active lifestyles (WHO, 2022; Cities for Better Health, 2023). At the same time, WHO now reports that around one in six people worldwide experience loneliness, with significant consequences for physical health, mental health, and social well-being (WHO, 2025a). Public facilities are part of the response because they improve access to services, strengthen everyday social connection, and provide the neighbourhood infrastructure through which cities can respond more equitably to demographic change, climate stress, and widening inequality (WHO, 2025b).

1. Everyday access and proximity

Public facilities contribute to health and well-being through reliable, everyday access to health and social services. Primary care is a foundation of healthy urban life: it is where vaccinations are delivered, chronic conditions are monitored, maternal and child health is supported, and preventive screenings take place. When these services are available consistently and close to daily routines, they reduce pressure on hospitals, improve early intervention, and strengthen long-term community resilience.

Health outcomes improve not simply because services exist, but because they are reachable, affordable, and embedded within the rhythms of daily life. For many residents, particularly children, older adults, persons with disabilities, and caregivers, the practical reality of accessing care depends as much on distance, transport, and safety as on the service itself. Proximity matters because it reduces the time, cost, and stress involved in meeting basic needs. A short journey to a clinic, pharmacy, sports centre, market, or park increases the likelihood of regular use and preventive care. Yet in many cities, especially in informal settlements, peri-urban districts, and fragile contexts, fixed-site facilities do not meet demand (WHO, 2018; OECD, 2025a)

An important shift emerging from practice is that proximity should not be understood as a uniform distance standard, but as something shaped by the needs and constraints of specific user groups. The experience of Bogotá's Care Blocks (Manzanas del Cuidado) illustrates this clearly, demonstrating that effective proximity is not only about distance, but about aligning services with the lived geographies of those who rely on them most.

Through these principles, mobile clinics have become an increasingly important tool for extending proximate access to primary care, where permanent infrastructure is limited or unevenly distributed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, cities worldwide expanded mobile vaccination units to reach neighbourhoods with low uptake, demonstrating the flexibility of mobile models in both routine and emergency settings. In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service (NHS) is increasingly piloting use of mobile health clinics, delivering free health checks in supermarket car parks across the country, bringing health services directly into communities' daily routines (NHS, 2023). These services screen for common conditions including high blood pressure and cholesterol, supporting early detection while also contributing to national health data and long-term system planning (Our Future Health, 2023).

In the United States of America, 2,000 mobile clinics perform over 6 million annual visits. Dominant users are women (55 percent) and ethnic minorities (59 percent, with use saving the health system USD 12 for every USD 1 invested (Malone et al., 2020).

In more fragile and crisis-affected settings, the importance of mobile provision becomes even more pronounced. In Sudan, where conflict has left around 70 percent of hospitals non-functional in some areas, mobile clinics operated by organizations including the World Health Organization and UNICEF have provided a critical lifeline (UNICEF, 2024). In Khartoum, solar-powered mobile units have enabled continued delivery of essential services to tens of thousands of patients despite severe infrastructure disruption (WHO, 2023).These approaches show that health infrastructure does not always need to be fixed to be effective, but instead can also be adaptive, distributed, and responsive.

Case Study: Care Blocks, Bogotá

Reimagining Urban Care Infrastructure

How it works

Bogotá's Care Blocks (Manzanas del Cuidado in Spanish) are neighbourhood-based hubs that bring together essential services for unpaid caregivers, primarily women, within a 15–20-minute walk of their homes. Introduced in 2020, the initiative responds to the unequal burden of unpaid care work, which limits women's access to employment, education, and well-being. Each Care Block co-locates services such as childcare, eldercare, adult education, legal support, mental health counselling, job training, and recreational activities in one accessible site.

Rather than requiring caregivers to navigate multiple agencies across the city, the model organizes services around the realities of daily life. While dependents receive care or educational support, caregivers can pursue training, access health services, or simply take time for themselves. By embedding care into the urban fabric, Bogotá reframes caregiving as a shared civic responsibility rather than a private burden. By 2024, 24 Care Blocks were operating citywide, with a target of 45 by 2035.

Funding, governance and management

The Care Blocks are funded primarily through the reallocation of existing municipal budgets rather than through new funding streams. Instead of creating a stand-alone programme, Bogotá embedded the initiative within the mandates of existing city departments, including health, education, social integration, urban planning, and culture. These departments deliver services aligned with their core missions, while the Women's Secretariat acts as the coordinating body, ensuring an integrated and user-centred approach.

This governance structure is formalized through inter-institutional agreements, which distribute responsibilities across agencies and reduce reliance on any single political administration. The model has been described as "integration by default," ensuring resilience even in cases of budget pressures or leadership changes. The programme's long-term continuity was further strengthened in 2021, when Bogotá amended its citywide Land Use Plan to establish a legal framework for the Care Blocks.

Operationally, the city has prioritized retrofitting existing infrastructure, libraries, schools, and community centres, rather than constructing new buildings. This has minimized capital costs and accelerated implementation. Private sector actors have also contributed through in-kind support, including equipment donations and maintenance services. International recognition, including the Bloomberg Philanthropies Global Mayors Challenge award, provided additional technical assistance and visibility. This blended model of public-sector ownership, legal institutionalization, and strategic partnerships has been critical to the initiative's success.



View of Ciudad Bolívar in south Bogotá, Colombia© UN-Habitat

Impact

The Care Blocks have generated measurable social and economic outcomes at scale. By 2025, 46,854 individuals had completed high school programmes, complementary training, or skills certification through the initiative. A further 43,261 participants received support to access employment and entrepreneurship pathways.

Beyond economic outcomes, the programme has significantly enhanced well-being and community participation. More than 239,000 women and their families engaged in cultural, recreational, and psychosocial activities, while nearly 6,900 individuals used community washing facilities, freeing up valuable hours for rest, education, or income generation. Cultural transformation programmes have also reached over 39,000 participants, including men, helping to challenge traditional gender roles and redistribute caregiving responsibilities.

The initiative's greatest impact may lie in its recognition of time poverty as a structural barrier. By reducing the hours spent on unpaid domestic labour and improving access to integrated services, the Care Blocks have enabled women to reclaim time for education, work, and self-care. In doing so, they have positioned care as an essential dimension of inclusive urban development.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Integration of services is more effective than sectoral delivery.** Co-locating connected services reduces administrative fragmentation and can help to reflect how people actually use cities.
- ✓ **Institutional embedding ensures long-term resilience.** Anchoring Care Blocks within multiple municipal departments and formalizing coordination through inter-agency agreements reduces dependence on political cycles and improves continuity.
- ✓ **Legal and spatial planning frameworks matter.** Incorporating the model into Bogotá's Land Use Plan demonstrates how care infrastructure can be protected and scaled through statutory planning tools.
- ✓ **Cross-sector governance strengthens implementation.** Coordinated leadership through a central body (e.g. Bogotá's Women's Secretariat) ensures user-centred delivery while maintaining accountability across sectors such as health, education, and urban planning.
- ✓ **Time poverty should be treated as a planning indicator.** The model highlights how urban design can directly reduce unpaid labour burdens, expanding access to employment, education, and well-being opportunities.
- ✓ **Care systems generate both social and economic returns.** By linking caregiving support with skills training and employment pathways, Care Blocks demonstrate that social infrastructure can directly contribute to productivity and local economic participation.



Care Block, Bogotá, Colombia. © Observatory of Public Sector Innovation

2. Social cohesion and mental well-being

Public facilities contribute to health not only by delivering services, but by creating the conditions for interaction, trust, and belonging. Libraries, parks, schools, sports facilities, cultural centres, markets, community hubs, and well-used pedestrian public spaces can all function as settings where people meet each other, maintain routines, and remain visible in public life. This matters because well-being is shaped not only by individual circumstances, but also by the strength of everyday social connection (Berkman et al.., 2014). This pathway is increasingly relevant as loneliness and isolation gain recognition as urgent public health crises.

WHO's Commission on Social Connection reports that around one in six people worldwide experience loneliness and that loneliness and social isolation have serious consequences for health and well-being across the life course (WHO, 2025a; 2025b) The Commission also emphasizes that social infrastructure, including parks, libraries, and community settings, can help strengthen social connection and reduce risk.[4] Public facilities should therefore be understood as part of the everyday settings through which health is protected, not only as points of service delivery (WHO, 2025a).

The broader research base supports this view. Social epidemiology shows that social cohesion, social capital and social networks influence health outcomes and explain differences inwell-being across places (Berkman et al., 2014). Walkable, mixed-use environments and active public spaces also support more social interaction than car-dominated, disconnected ones (Frumkin et al., 2004; Jacobs, 1992). Their benefits depend on whether they feel safe, inclusive and relevant to local communities.

Facilities that are familiar, locally embedded and consistently activated can act as gateways to healthier behaviours and stronger social ties.

The Pedro Club, supported by Hackney Council in London, used cycling programmes for young people within a trusted setting to increase participation and reduce barriers to engagement, showing how small, community-led interventions can deliver meaningful health and social outcomes (Hackney Council, 2024; The Young Foundation, 2025). The same principle is applied at larger scale in Los Angeles, where preparations for the 2028 Olympic Games are being used to expand access to sport through low-cost programming in existing neighbourhood facilities, including for low-income households and children of all abilities.

Such approaches are increasingly being adopted in cities worldwide, reflecting a growing recognition that complex urban health challenges require coordinated, multi-sectoral responses. Partnerships between local authorities, community organizations, and health actors enable public facilities to serve as platforms for integrated interventions – addressing health through social connection, physical activity, and access to services (Cities for Better Health, 2025).

This is where non-traditional facilities and adjacent public-realm assets matter. Facilities that strengthen mental well-being, physical activity and social cohesion depend not only on physical design, but on stewardship, programming, and public legitimacy. A modest but trusted, well used and active place will contribute more to well-being than a larger facility that feels exclusionary or detached from neighbourhood life. In cities facing loneliness, social fragmentation, or declining trust, this contribution is central to urban well-being and the ability to thrive (WHO, 2025a; Berkman et al., 2014).



Kids enjoying the safe public spaces of the service centres, Gaza, State of Palestine © Palestinian Housing Council

Case Study: Play LA, Los Angeles

Expanding Community Access to Sports Facilities through Olympic Legacy Planning

How it works

In the lead-up to the Olympic Games Los Angeles 2028, the International Olympic Committee and local partners are advancing a model that prioritizes everyday access to sport as part of the Games' legacy. Central to this is the PlayLA programme, delivered by the LA28 Organizing Committee in partnership with the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. Rather than building new venues, the programme activates existing neighbourhood facilities, parks, pools, and recreation centres, by offering year-round sports programmes, classes, and clinics. Activities include Olympic sports such as surfing, skateboarding, football, judo, and tennis, alongside extended opening hours and targeted outreach to underserved communities.

Funding, governance and management

The PlayLA programme is supported by a USD 160 million commitment from LA28 and the International Olympic Committee, representing a significant investment in youth sport as social infrastructure. Governance is structured through a partnership model: LA28 provides strategic oversight and funding, while the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation leads on delivery through its network of public facilities. This ensures that programmes are embedded within established municipal systems, supporting continuity beyond the Games.

A key strength of the model is its operational focus on inclusion and accessibility. Fees are backed for low-income families, adaptive programmes are integrated for children of all abilities, and investment extends beyond facilities to include coaching, safety training, and equipment provision. By combining capital-light infrastructure use with programme-led delivery, the model avoids the risks related with large-scale construction while reinforcing long-term capacity within the public recreation system.

Impact

Since its launch in November 2021, PlayLA has rapidly expanded access to sport across Los Angeles. By 2022, over 90,000 children had enrolled, with participation continuing to grow as new programmes are introduced. The initiative has significantly broadened the range of activities available, including adaptive sports such as wheelchair basketball, para-swimming, visually impaired football, sitting volleyball, and adaptive skateboarding and surfing.

This inclusive approach has helped reduce barriers to participation, particularly for low-income households and children with disabilities. By activating local facilities and extending opening hours the programme has increased utilization of existing public assets while improving health and well-being outcomes for young people. It demonstrates how Olympic investment can be channelled into everyday community infrastructure, creating lasting benefits that extend far beyond the event itself.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Invest in programmes, not just infrastructure:** Expanding access through activities, coaching, and outreach can deliver faster and more equitable impact than building new venues.
- ✓ **Leverage existing public assets:** Using parks, schools, and recreation centres reduces costs and strengthens long-term operational sustainability.
- ✓ **Embed inclusion from the outset:** Subsidized fees and adaptive sports ensure that facilities and programmes reach diverse user groups, including low-income families and children with disabilities.
- ✓ **Align event investment with city systems:** Partnerships with municipal departments enable continuity, integration, and long-term legacy beyond major events.
- ✓ **Prioritize everyday access:** Locating programmes within neighbourhood facilities increases participation by making sport part of daily life.
- ✓ **Use major events as catalysts for system change:** The PlayLA model shows how time-bound investments can strengthen public service delivery and expand access at city scale.



Play LA, Los Angeles, United States of America . © International Olympic Committee

3. Resilience and equitable support across the life course

Public facilities play a critical role in enabling cities to respond to diverse needs across the life course while strengthening overall urban resilience. Rather than serving a single user group, the most effective facilities are those designed to support children, adolescents, working-age populations, older adults, and persons with disabilities simultaneously. Evidence shows that environments which work well for the youngest and oldest residents, those most sensitive to risk, accessibility, and environmental stress, tend to be safer, inclusive, and easier to navigate for everyone. This "life-course approach" offers a practical pathway to more equitable and resilient urban systems.

At different stages of life, public facilities provide distinct but interconnected forms of support. Children benefit from safe play areas, libraries, and access to education and care services that support early development. Adolescents require spaces for recreation, learning, and social interaction beyond commercial environments, helping to reduce exclusion and risk behaviours. Older adults depend on accessible, nearby facilities that support independence, routine, and social participation. Work on age-inclusive cities, access to local services and everyday infrastructure is directly linked to public health outcomes, social participation, and resilience in ageing societies (OECD, 2025; UN-Habitat, 2026).

Designing for these diverse needs also produces a broader "safety dividend." Environments designed to be usable for children and older adults generally require safer access, clearer wayfinding, seating, shade, and more attentive maintenance. These same features improve comfort and reduce risk for everyone in between. Designing for young and old is therefore often a practical proxy for designing for public safety, inclusion, and everyday usability more broadly (OECD, 2025; UN-Habitat 2026).

The experience of Bogotá's Care Blocks (Manzanas del Cuidado) illustrates how these principles can be operationalized at scale. Rather than treating care, health, and social services as separate sectors, the model brings them together within neighbourhood-based hubs organized around daily life. By co-locating childcare, eldercare, health services, education, and recreational activities, the programme reduces the time and mobility burdens that disproportionately affect caregivers, particularly women, while improving access to essential services across the life course.

Equity remains central. Not all neighbourhoods have the same access to safe, high-quality public facilities or the same ability to use them independently. A health-oriented approach therefore requires more than equal distribution by administrative unit. It requires prioritization based on need, attention to operational quality, and inclusive design and governance. For city leaders, the key point is that public facilities are a form of preventive urban investment: they reduce downstream harms by improving the daily conditions that shape health, safety, and resilience across the population (OECD, 2025a; Berkman et al., 2014)



Students participate in sports sessions as part of the Community Sport and Health Coorporation Initiative in Nghe An Province, Viet Nam. © PATH/International

Case Study: Health Cooperation Initiative, Nghe An Province

Promoting Physical Activity and Sport for Health through Community and School Partnerships

How it works

In Viet Nam, 87 percent of adolescents do not meet recommended physical activity levels – including 91 percent of girls and 82 percent of boys. Physical inactivity is also a growing contributor to non-communicable diseases. To address this, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), through its Olympism365 strategy, partnered with the World Health Organization (WHO) and global health NGO PATH to launch the Community Sport and Health Cooperation Initiative in Nghe An province, Viet Nam, with the support from national and provincial stakeholders.

In Nghe An province, the initiative applies an integrated approach by activating education spaces to strengthen links to health, enhancing sport and physical activity sessions. During the first phase of the initiative, it targets 10 pilot schools, using existing school spaces – including playgrounds, yards, sport courts, and sport halls – as everyday venues for sport and physical activity.

Activities were organized across four areas: raising awareness about sport and health; promoting regular physical activity in schools and communities; strengthening cross-sector collaboration and policy advocacy; and generating evidence to support scale-up. Practical training materials were developed for teachers, digital and mass media communication campaigns were run nationwide, and competitions – including shuffle dance, folk dance, online sport challenges, and a "How Sport Changed Me" contest – engaged communities across the country. The initiative also introduced the "School Sports Ambassador" model, empowering students – particularly girls – to lead physical activity initiatives within their own schools and communities.

Funding, governance and management

The initiative is supported by the IOC's Olympism365 strategy and is delivered under the WHO-IOC technical cooperation framework. It is funded by the IOC and implemented by PATH in collaboration with national and provincial authorities across the sport, health, and education sectors.

Governance is structured at the national level through a multi-sectoral technical advisory group bringing together Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Viet Nam Authority of Sports, the Viet Nam Olympic Committee, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Training, WHO and PATH. This group guides implementation, coordinates priorities, and supports policy advocacy and resource mobilization. At the provincial level, the Nghe An Department of Education and Training leads the delivery through schools, ensuring that activities were embedded within existing educational systems and could continue beyond the project period.

A key strength of the model is its operational focus on improving existing education spaces and social infrastructure by embedding and linking health-enhancing sport and physical activity interventions. By formally linking the sport, health, and education sectors, the initiative avoided siloed delivery and built shared ownership of outcomes. Capacity-building was a core component, with teachers, schools, healthcare workers and partners receiving practical training and technical support throughout. The initiative's deliberate activation of existing school spaces and social infrastructure contributes to cost-efficiency and supports long-term sustainability.

Impact

Implemented over the 2025–2026 period, the initiative achieved significant results across Nghe An province and nationally:

- More than 1.2 million people reached with behaviour change communication messages promoting physical activity for health.
- 229,000+ students and community members supported in maintaining regular physical activity.

- 20.6 percent increase in the proportion of students achieving sufficient and regular physical activity across 10 pilot schools.
- Hundreds of teachers, schools, and partners received capacity-building and technical support.
- At the provincial level, the Nghe An Department of Education and Training (DOET) issued a policy requiring schools to incorporate both in-school and after-school sport and Physical Education, recognizing the importance of sport for health. The policy promotes the use of school facilities beyond school hours to support after-school activities, requiring the establishment or maintenance of at least one sports club per school. Funding is expected from local government education budgets, combined with mobilized social resources and sponsorships. The policy further encourages investment in facilities and sports equipment through public funding and explicitly allows integration of donor-funded projects (e.g., Community Sport and Health Cooperation Initiative).
- The total number of schools in Nghe An is 945 (488 primary schools, 370 secondary schools, and 87 high schools). The total number of students is 662,928 (according to the report in the 2022-2023 academic year). The policy applies to all schools.
- Nationwide competitions and engagement activities expanded the reach of the initiative beyond the pilot province.
- Multisectoral collaboration strengthened, creating a foundation for sustainable sport-for-health models.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Invest in programmes, not just infrastructure:** Expanding access through activities, coaching, and outreach – delivered in existing spaces – can achieve faster and more equitable impact than building new facilities.
- ✓ **Leverage existing public spaces:** Activating schools, schoolyards, and community facilities contributes cost-efficiency and strengthens long-term operational sustainability, while making sport part of everyday life for children and families.
- ✓ **Empower young people as agents of change:** The School Sports Ambassador model shows that students – especially girls – can lead and sustain physical activity initiatives when given the right support and tools.
- ✓ **Connect sport, health, and education:** Cross-sector governance is essential. Embedding physical activity promotion within school systems and public health frameworks increases reach, credibility, and long-term sustainability.
- ✓ **Embed inclusion from the outset:** A focus on reaching underserved groups ensures that programmes deliver equitable access to sport and physical activity.
- ✓ **Generate evidence from the outset:** Measuring outcomes, such as changes in student activity levels, builds the case for scale-up and provides a replicable model for other provinces and countries.
- ✓ **Use targeted investment as a catalyst for system change:** time-bound, partnership-driven and innovative initiatives can build lasting systems for sport and physical activity, turning schools and community spaces into everyday environments that support healthier, more active lives.

From Value to Implementation

Taken together, the evidence and case studies point to a consistent conclusion: investment in public facilities and healthy environments is not a cost pressure, but a long-term fiscal and social asset – enabling significant savings for municipalities later down the line.

Scaling up primary health care interventions across low and middle-income countries could save 60 million lives and increase average life expectancy by 3.7 years by 2030 and an estimated 75 percent of the projected health gains from the Sustainable Development Goals could be achieved through primary health care. According to WHO and World Bank estimates, every dollar invested in primary health care yields up to 10 dollars in economic benefit. WHO (2021) shows investment in healthy environments can create a 5-fold benefit, whilst interventions for active living, healthier lifestyles and early screening for non-communicable disease prevention represent an average cost-effectiveness score of 86 percent (WHO, 2017).

Yet, capturing this value depends on how facilities are planned, delivered, and managed. The central implementation lesson for city leaders, developers and planners is that outcomes are shaped less by individual buildings and more by the systems they sit within. Public facilities are most effective when embedded in the everyday geographies of people's lives, located where need is greatest, connected to safe and accessible public realms, and supported by programming that reflects how different groups use space over time. This requires moving beyond siloed delivery towards integrated neighbourhood planning, where health, housing, mobility, education, and social infrastructure are coordinated from the outset. It also requires recognizing a broader ecosystem of provision, including markets, streets, and community-managed spaces, alongside formal facilities.

Financing and delivery models must recognize this. Major capital investments, including those linked to large-scale culture or sporting events, offer a significant opportunity to expand access and improve healthy environments when leveraged strategically. With the global sporting economy projected to reach USD 8.8 trillion by 2050, large-scale events, particularly international sporting events, can act as catalysts for expanding access to public facilities if planned with legacy in mind (World Economic Forum, 2026). Collaboration with organizations such as the International Olympic Committee, pledging USD 650 million between 2025 and 2028 for the promotion of positive sporting impact worldwide, demonstrates how existing investment in sports infrastructure can be aligned with grassroots provision, supporting community access, inclusive programming, and long-term use of facilities beyond a sporting event in itself. This approach shifts the focus from one-off capital delivery to sustained public value.



Healthcare services including vaccination, Gaza, State of Palestine © Palestinian Housing Council

7 MAXIMIZING SYNERGIES & IMPLEMENTING



SESC Pompeia (Cultural and Social Centre) São Paulo, Brazil. © H. Tieben

7 | Maximizing Synergies and Implementing

Opportunities and frameworks for practical implementation

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that public facilities are far more than individual pieces of urban infrastructure. When planned, financed, and managed as part of an integrated urban system, they become powerful enablers of equitable, resilient, and inclusive development. However, achieving this potential requires moving beyond isolated projects and sector-specific interventions towards coordinated, city-wide approaches that align housing, transport, health, education, public space, culture, climate resilience, and local economic development. Such an approach demands strong governance arrangements, cross-sectoral collaboration, and mechanisms that enable different levels of government, communities, and the private sector to work towards shared urban outcomes.

This final chapter sets out how cities can maximize these synergies and scale successful approaches. It begins with a case study that demonstrates how a holistic, place-based strategy can embed public facilities within wider urban development processes. Rather than delivering facilities as standalone investments, the case illustrates how integrated governance, coordinated planning, and collaboration across policy sectors can create mutually reinforcing outcomes for housing, public space, social infrastructure, environmental resilience, and community well-being.

It provides a practical example of how cities can move from fragmented interventions towards cohesive urban strategies that strengthen both neighbourhoods and city-wide systems, before drawing together the report's key recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

At its core, the chapter advances a simple proposition: **public facilities deliver the greatest impact when they are planned as part of an integrated urban system**, rather than as standalone projects.

Implementation therefore requires coordinated action across planning, governance, finance, design, and long-term management.



Public space connection in Lisbon, Portugal. © João Rafael Santos

Case Study: MetroPublicNet, Lisbon

Scaling a metropolitan strategy for public facilities

How it works

The MetroPublicNet project explores how public space can be planned at a metropolitan scale to strengthen urban cohesion, climate resilience, and low-carbon mobility across the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. It moves beyond viewing public space as isolated parks or squares, instead treating it as a continuous territorial network connecting green and blue infrastructure, transport corridors, and neighbourhood spaces

The project combines retrospective mapping (1998–2023) with forward-looking design tools to understand how nearly 20 million m² of public space interventions have shaped the region. A key focus is linking fragmented suburban areas, particularly social housing neighbourhoods, through walkable routes, mobility hubs, and ecological corridors, ensuring housing areas are embedded within a wider system of services, mobility, and public life.

Funding, governance and management

MetroPublicNet is a research initiative led by Research Centre for Architecture, Urbanism and Design, University of Lisbon (CIAUD) and funded by the Portuguese national science foundation. It operates as an academic–policy interface project, working closely with the 18 municipalities of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area to analyse and inform territorial planning practices.

Governance of public space in Lisbon is highly decentralized, reflecting strong municipal autonomy. This results in varied design standards and investment approaches across the metropolitan area. The project responds to this fragmentation by proposing a shared analytical framework, the Public Space Atlas, and a Territorial Design Toolbox to support coordinated action across jurisdictions.

While funding is primarily research-based, the work draws on EU-aligned urban regeneration and infrastructure investment cycles that have shaped public space delivery since the late 1990s. Its success lies in translating fragmented municipal interventions into a coherent metropolitan perspective, helping align housing-led regeneration, mobility planning, and green infrastructure investment.

Impact

The Public Space Atlas mapped nearly 20 million m² of interventions across Lisbon (1998–2023), showing a steady increase in investment and a shift toward networked, landscape-based planning. Around 50 percent of interventions focus on green space, while a growing share supports linear systems such as cycle routes and waterfront regeneration.

Importantly, the analysis shows that 73 percent of residents live within 400 metres of a qualified public space, indicating relatively strong spatial accessibility. However, only a small proportion of interventions (around 7 percent) are located in public housing neighbourhoods and 12 percent in informal or self-built settlements, highlighting ongoing inequalities in spatial quality.

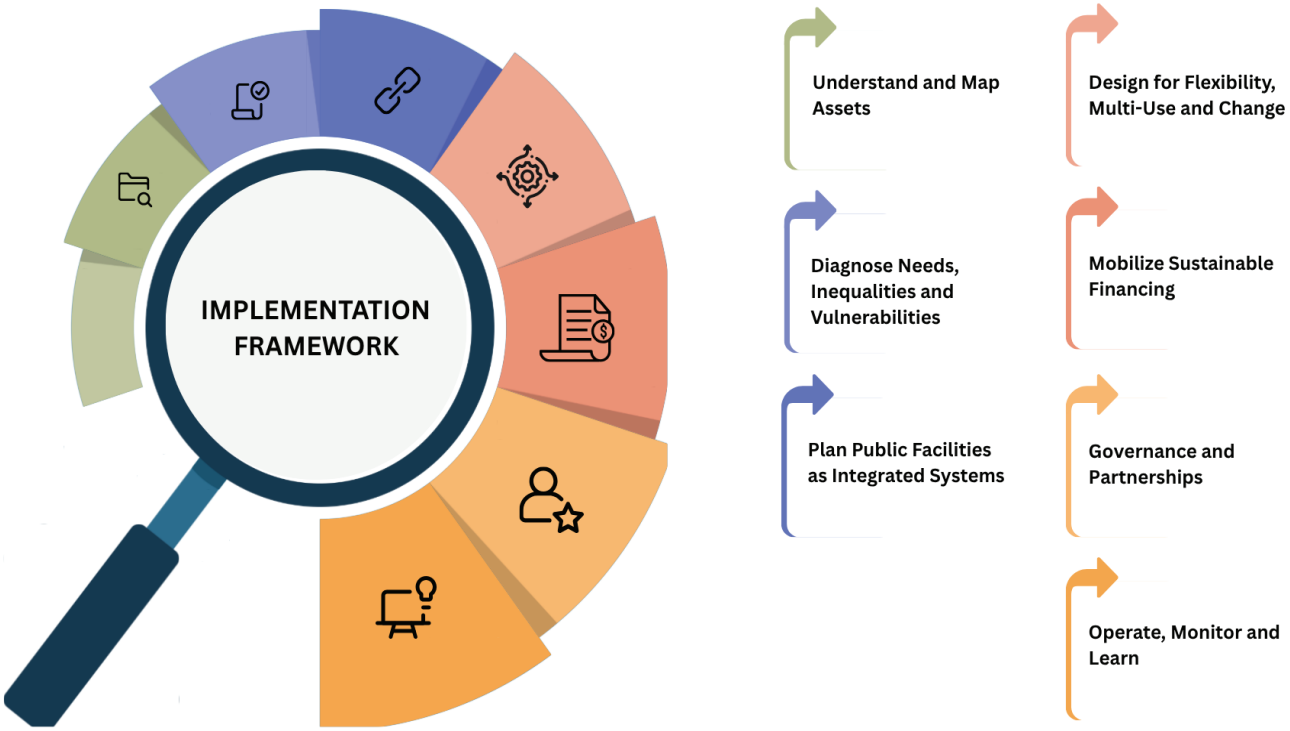
Case studies such as Brandoa and Alfornelos demonstrate tangible impacts: upgraded parks, pedestrian links, and metro extensions have helped integrate formerly fragmented or marginalized housing areas into the wider metropolitan fabric. These interventions have improved mobility access, public realm quality, and social cohesion, particularly in areas previously defined by infrastructural isolation.

Implications for policy and practice

- ✓ **Housing must be treated as part of a wider territorial system:** Social and affordable housing areas benefit most when integrated with public space, mobility, and green infrastructure rather than planned in isolation.
- ✓ **Public space is a structuring infrastructure, not an amenity:** At metropolitan scale, it functions as a connective system that links housing, jobs, and services across fragmented urban regions.
- ✓ **Targeted investment is essential for spatial equity:** Disadvantaged and informal housing areas require prioritized public space upgrades to address long-standing structural inequalities.
- ✓ **Mobility and public space should be co-designed:** Transport nodes (metro, rail, bus) become civic spaces when integrated with pedestrian networks and housing environments.
- ✓ **Incremental, network-based planning works in fragmented cities:** Rather than masterplans, layered interventions can progressively build metropolitan cohesion.
- ✓ **Landscape and identity matter:** River corridors, hills, and ecological systems help create shared metropolitan identity beyond administrative boundaries.

7 | 1 An Implementation Framework for Cities

Effective delivery of public facilities follows a shared pathway, regardless of context. While specific solutions must respond to local conditions, successful cities tend to adopt a common sequence of actions that link diagnosis, planning, investment, delivery and learning.



Step 1: Understand and Map the Existing Asset Base



Most cities already possess a substantial portfolio of public facilities. However, these assets are often poorly documented, undervalued, or unevenly distributed. The first step is therefore to establish a clear and spatially grounded understanding of what exists.

Key actions include:

- Creating an inventory of public facilities across sectors (education, health, culture, markets, sports, community services)
- Mapping facilities spatially to understand proximity, coverage and overlaps
- Identifying underused, vacant or poorly performing assets
- Assessing physical condition, functionality and accessibility

Asset mapping allows cities to shift from reactive project delivery to strategic asset management, revealing opportunities to upgrade, repurpose or better connect existing facilities before investing in new ones.



Step 2: Diagnose Needs, Inequalities and Vulnerabilities

Distribution alone is not enough. Cities must analyse who is served, who is excluded and why. As shown across chapters on housing, health, safety and livelihoods, access to public facilities is deeply shaped by income, gender, age, disability, migration status and tenure security.

Key actions include:

- Overlaying asset maps with social, demographic and vulnerability data
- Identifying service gaps in underserved neighbourhoods, including informal settlements
- Incorporating lived experience through community engagement and participatory tools
- Prioritizing investments based on need rather than administrative boundaries

This step ensures that public facilities contribute to reducing spatial and social inequalities, rather than reinforcing them.

Step 3: Plan Public Facilities as Integrated Systems

Public facilities deliver the greatest value when they are embedded within wider neighbourhood and city systems. This requires aligning facility provision with land use planning, housing strategies, mobility networks and environmental infrastructure.

Key actions include:

- Integrating public facility requirements into local plans, zoning and development frameworks
- Coordinating across sectors such as housing, transport, education, health, culture and environment
- Planning facilities at the neighbourhood scale, informed by proximity and accessibility principles
- Supporting mixed use and multi-functional facilities that serve multiple social functions over time

As demonstrated in earlier chapters, proximity, walkability and safe public realm connections are critical. Facilities must be reachable, visible and embedded in daily life if they are to fulfil their social roles.





Step 4: Design for Flexibility, Multi Use and Change

Cities operate under conditions of uncertainty, including demographic change, climate stress and fiscal constraints. Public facilities should therefore be designed to adapt over time, accommodating changing uses, users and operational models.

Key actions include:

- Designing facilities for shared use across sectors and time periods
- Encouraging mutualization of services (e.g. schools, libraries or sports facilities used beyond standard hours)
- Supporting adaptable layouts and modular construction
- Enabling temporary or transitional uses of vacant or underused facilities
- Integrating digital infrastructure to extend access and improve management

Flexible design not only maximizes social value but also improves long-term financial sustainability.

Step 5: Mobilize Sustainable Financing Across the Lifecycle

Many municipalities struggle not only with capital investment, but with ongoing operation, maintenance and renewal costs. Treating public facilities as long-term assets requires a lifecycle financing perspective.

Key actions include:

- Distinguishing clearly between capital expenditure and operational costs
- Strengthening own source revenue generation from public facilities
- Enhancing developer responsibilities through incentives and requirements including developer contributions and density bonuses
- Exploring blended finance, combining public budgets with donor, philanthropic or private investment
- Ensuring that financing mechanisms support long-term stewardship, not just construction

Financial strategies should reinforce, rather than undermine, accessibility and equity goals.





Step 6: Deliver Through Appropriate Governance and Partnerships

Public facilities are delivered and managed through diverse governance models, including municipal provision, public–private partnerships, community led management and hybrid arrangements. No single model is universally applicable.

Key actions include:

- Clarifying institutional roles and responsibilities across levels of government
- Strengthening coordination among municipal departments
- Identifying when partnerships can enhance delivery, management or programming
- Supporting community participation in governance and stewardship where appropriate
- Embedding accountability, transparency and public oversight

As highlighted across multiple case studies, institutional anchoring within local government is critical for coordination and long-term viability.

Step 7: Operate, Monitor and Learn



The value of public facilities is ultimately realized in use. Yet post delivery evaluation is often weak or absent, limiting learning and adaptation.

Key actions include:

- Investing in management, staffing and programming
- Conducting post occupancy evaluations and user assessments
- Monitoring access, usage, equity and social outcomes
- Feeding lessons back into future planning and investment decisions

Learning oriented approaches enable cities to refine strategies, respond to change and scale what works.



Shared Opportunity

The diagram above sets out a wheel of recommended actions to be taken by city leaders and policymakers, developers and investors, built environment professionals and community organizations.

Across all groups, the central opportunity is to shift from delivering individual facilities to shaping integrated systems of access, care and opportunity. Public facilities achieve lasting impact when they are planned strategically, financed sustainably, governed collaboratively and designed to evolve over time. The implementation framework provides a common pathway, but success depends on each actor understanding and fulfilling their role within it.

7 | 2 Recommendations and Opportunities

Effective delivery of public facilities depends on coordinated action across multiple actors. While the implementation pathway remains broadly consistent - from diagnosis and planning to financing, governance and learning - each stakeholder group plays a distinct role in enabling success. The following recommendations translate the implementation framework into targeted opportunities for action.



City Leaders and Policymakers - Create the enabling conditions for integrated, equitable and long-term delivery

City leaders and policymakers are responsible for establishing the strategic, regulatory and institutional foundations that allow public facilities to function as essential urban infrastructure.

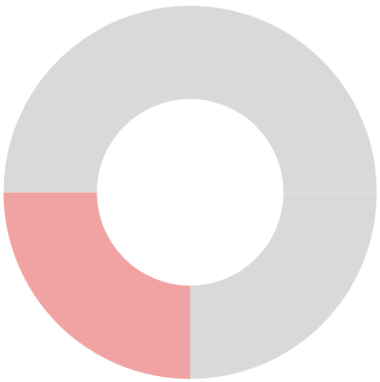
1. **Build evidence-led systems for decision-making:** Establish city-wide inventories and spatial maps of public facilities to understand existing assets, service gaps and opportunities for repurposing. Combine this with demographic, vulnerability and accessibility data to prioritize investment where need is greatest.
2. **Embed public facilities into policy and planning frameworks:** Integrate facility requirements into land use plans, housing programmes, mobility strategies and climate adaptation frameworks. Public facilities should be treated as a core component of neighbourhood planning, not as secondary amenities.
3. **Enable flexible and adaptive delivery models:** Reform regulations to support temporary use, shared programming and multi-functional design. This includes enabling interim uses of vacant buildings, extending opening hours and supporting digital service delivery.
4. **Secure lifecycle financing:** Move beyond one-time capital expenditure by establishing funding models that cover operations, maintenance and renewal. Use developer contributions, density bonuses, land value capture and blended finance to support long-term stewardship.
5. **Strengthen governance and accountability:** Clarify roles across levels of government, coordinate across departments and establish transparent oversight mechanisms. Support decentralized management structures where these improve responsiveness and local ownership.



Developers and Investors - Deliver public value alongside financial return

Developers and investors have a critical role in integrating social infrastructure into urban growth and ensuring developments contribute to long-term community well-being.

1. **Plan developments around service ecosystems:** Assess how new projects connect to existing public facilities and where additional provision is required. Incorporate social infrastructure needs early in feasibility and master planning processes.
2. **Design for shared and multi-use value**: Deliver adaptable spaces that can accommodate multiple services over time, such as community rooms, flexible retail, green space or public-facing amenities within mixed-use developments.
3. **Contribute to lifecycle sustainability:** Support operational models beyond initial construction through maintenance agreements, programming partnerships or revenue-sharing arrangements that sustain public access and quality over time.
4. **Leverage incentives for higher-impact delivery:** Work proactively with municipalities to align with density bonuses, inclusionary zoning requirements and public benefit agreements that reward the provision of community infrastructure.
5. **Use investment models that value long-term resilience:** Recognize that high-quality public facilities can strengthen place attractiveness, reduce risk and improve asset value through stronger communities and better urban environments.



Built Environment Professionals - Translate strategy into inclusive, adaptable and operationally viable spaces

Architects, planners, engineers and urban designers play a central role in shaping how public facilities function in practice.

1. **Design from lived experience:** Start with community knowledge, participatory methods, and cross-scale mapping to understand real needs, barriers, and everyday use of facilities.
2. **Embed facilities at a human scale:** Prioritize small, distributed, and ground-level facilities that are close to daily movement routes, easy to see and access, and integrated into everyday life.
3. **Use facilities to connect neighbourhoods:** Design facilities as visible anchors that link fragmented urban areas, connect to public space and transport, and bridge formal and informal settlements.
4. **Plan for multiple uses, risks, and climates:** Combine everyday functions with emergency, climate, and resilience roles so facilities serve communities year-round and act as safe havens during crises.
5. **Build adaptively with communities and local resources:** Co-create facilities using local materials and skills, enable phased and modular growth, incorporate digital readiness, and support long-term community stewardship and maintenance.



Community Organizations – Advocate, activate and steward public facilities for long-term community benefit

Community organizations, neighbourhood associations and grassroots groups play a vital role in ensuring that public facilities respond to local needs, remain vibrant over time and are accessible for all.

1. **Activate public facilities through programming and partnerships:** Work with local governments, schools, cultural organizations, and civil society partners to develop activities that maximize the social value of facilities. Cultural events, markets, educational programmes, sports activities and health initiatives can transform public facilities into vibrant centres of community life.
2. **Advocate for equitable access:** Champion the needs of underserved communities and promote the fair distribution of public facilities across cities and settlements. Community organizations can collect local evidence, document lived experiences, and work with public authorities to ensure that investments prioritize neighbourhoods facing the greatest need.
3. **Promote accountability and transparency:** Monitor the quality, accessibility and distribution of public facilities and work with public authorities to address service gaps and inequalities. Community organizations can play an important role in collecting local evidence, documenting lived experiences and advocating for investments that prioritize underserved neighbourhoods and vulnerable populations.
4. **Build local capacity and resilience:** Invest in community leadership, organizational capacity and technical skills to enable local groups to participate effectively in planning, governance and maintenance. Strong community institutions are essential for sustaining facilities and adapting them to changing social, environmental and economic conditions.
5. **Strengthen local stewardship and management:** Support community-led management models that enable local organizations to participate in the operation, maintenance and programming of public facilities. Shared stewardship can increase local ownership, improve responsiveness, and help facilities remain active, safe and well-used over time.

7 | 3 Conclusion and Next Steps

The evidence in this report points in one direction. Public facilities are not a secondary add-on to housing and urban growth. They are the infrastructure through which people reach services, earn a living, connect with others and recover from shocks. From Bogotá's Care Blocks to Mexico City's UTOPIAs, from Redo Merezzate in Milan to the Kibera Book House, the cases show that facilities deliver the most value when they are planned as part of an integrated system, financed across their lifecycle, governed collaboratively and designed to adapt.

The challenge is no longer demonstrating why public facilities matter, but turning that knowledge into delivery. Many cities still face fragmented responsibilities, limited access to municipal finance, competing demands for land and too little investment in operation and maintenance. The seven-step framework and twenty recommendations in this chapter set out a common pathway. **What cities now need are tested, financeable models, and partners willing to help prove them.**

We invite partners to act:

1. City leaders and policymakers to use the framework and recommendations in local planning and budgeting, and to share their experience.

2. Developers, investors and built environment professionals to embed public facilities in projects from the outset and to help test new financing and management models.

3. Funders and development partners to support pilots, technical assistance and learning that will turn these recommendations into practice.

4. Community organizations and grassroots groups to advocate for and activate public facilities, stewarding sites so they stay responsive to local needs.





Social Housing Project Redo Merezzate in Milan, Italy. © Fondazione Housing Sociale

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United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)
P.O. Box 30030 00100
Nairobi GPO Kenya