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VIEWPOINT

UN-Habitat and its Public Space Mandate.
From Programme to Network

José Chong, Diego Vivas, Katriya Bulutoglu
UN-Habitat, Kenya
jose.chong@un.org | diego.huaccho@un.org | katriya.bulutoglu@un.org

Abstract
Over the past fifteen years, public space has gained increasing prominence within global urban policy discussions, particularly in relation to climate adaptation, urban liveability, and sustainable development goals. Despite growing recognition of its importance, cities continue to face increasing pressures from rapid urbanisation, land scarcity, and unequal access to quality public spaces. This paper gives a panorama of the evolution of the global public space agenda, with a particular focus on UN-Habitat's role in advancing policy frameworks, measurement systems, and operational programmes. It highlights the consolidation of SDG indicator 11.7.1 as a Tier I metric and explores persistent regional disparities in access to open public space. The analysis further traces the development of the Global Public Space Programme (GPSP) and its transition towards a more decentralised Global Public Space Network (GPSN). Finally, the paper discusses emerging priorities in legislation, governance, and financing as critical pillars for ensuring the long-term accessibility, inclusiveness, and resilience of public spaces.

Keywords: UN-Habitat, public space, Global Public Space Programme, Global Public Space Network, sustainable urban development

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The Mandate of Public Space

Over the past fifteen years, cities have entered a period of intensified environmental and social transformation. Awareness of climate change and the need for cities to become more resilient to future shocks has increased significantly. At the same time, concepts such as liveability, wellbeing and quality of life have moved to the forefront of urban policy discussions, supported by an expanding range of indicators and frameworks that help cities assess and improve their performance.

However, these advances have been accompanied by growing pressures on urban areas. Rapid urbanisation, rising land values and increasing competition for urban land continue to challenge the provision, protection and management of public space. Globally, housing insecurity remains widespread, affecting billions of people, while access to high-quality public space continues to vary significantly across and within cities (UN-Habitat, 2025a).

In this context, public space has shifted from being treated primarily as an urban design concern to being recognised as a structural component of inclusive and resilient cities. Against the backdrop of declining access to quality public spaces, the goals established through SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda remain as relevant as ever.

A key milestone occurred in 2011, when Member States at the 23rd Session of the UN-Habitat Governing Council formally called for stronger institutional attention to public space, through resolution 23/4 (UN-Habitat, 2011). This mandate encouraged a broader programme of work spanning policy development, technical support to cities, knowledge dissemination, and partnership building across different levels of governance (UN-Habitat, 2011).

Since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, particularly SDG 11.7, which calls for universal access to safe and inclusive green and public space, public space has evolved into a key concept and a measurable indicator for achieving sustainable development. As custodian of SDG 11.7.1, UN-Habitat has continuously advanced the way public space is understood, measured and integrated into urban policy and practice.

Global Monitoring and the State of SDG 11.7.1

Over the last two decades, there has been a concerted effort to measure progress towards SDG 11.7 globally. Collective engagement, campaigning and data strengthening by UN-Habitat and our global partners meant that in 2018 SDG 11.7.1 was upgraded to a Tier II indicator, and again to a Tier I indicator in 2023.

As a Tier I indicator, SDG 11.7.1 has been identified as conceptually clear with an internationally established methodology. It is now widely implemented, with regular reporting from a large share of countries across all regions where the indicator is relevant. Data is regularly produced by at least 50 percent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant. This achievement reflects the programme's impact on strengthening global monitoring and policy commitments to embed public space within the global development agenda. The indicator is now widely reported, with coverage extending to more than 180 countries and over 1,500 cities (United Nations, n.d.).

Despite this progress, significant challenges to monitoring remain. Much of the available information is still aggregated at city scale, which limits the ability to understand spatial

inequalities within urban areas. As a result, disparities in access at the neighbourhood level often remain invisible in planning and policy processes.

Global assessments indicate that access to open public space remains uneven. Recent data show that globally 16% of the built-up area in cities is open public space for all. Globally only 45% of people have convenient access to open public space within 400 meters of walking distance along the street network. Regionally, strong disparities remain in access to open public spaces within 400 meters (UN-Habitat, 2023). Australia and New Zealand show the highest levels of accessibility, with the majority of cities reporting that over 75% of their population has access to public spaces within 400 m. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand tend to have lower accessibility levels, where a large proportion of cities have less than 50% of residents have such access. Latin America and the Caribbean and Northern America and Europe display a substantial share of cities providing access to between 50% and 75% of their populations. On the other hand, Western Asia and Northern Africa, as well as Central and Southern Asia, present more heterogeneous patterns, reflecting considerable variation in accessibility levels across cities within these regions.

Diverse initiatives are being explored to tackle this gap, like the establishment of a Global Public Space Observatory, using UN-Habitat's existing urban observatory methodology (GUO-Net). These and other efforts are part of a commitment by UN-Habitat to strengthen the planning, monitoring, and management of public spaces worldwide, through UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Programme (GPSP). Over time the GPSP evolved from raising awareness about the importance of public spaces to developing comprehensive frameworks, tools, and partnerships aimed at improving their accessibility, quality, and inclusiveness across different urban contexts with the objective to create a wider public space network.

New perspectives: From Programme to Network

After the Governing Council provided UN-Habitat with the formal mandate to deliver on public space in 2011, the Global Public Space Programme was established. Since 2012, the Programme has supported the implementation of more than 150 safe and accessible public spaces in over 100 cities. In total 15.2 million people have benefited, 25,500 have been engaged, and 3,600 have been trained in public space assessment, design and maintenance methods (UN-Habitat, n.d.), with the Programme directly contributing to the upgrade of the 11.7.1 indicator to Tier 1.

Over the years, UN-Habitat GPSP developed a portfolio of practical tools to support cities and neighbourhoods in assessing, understanding and preserving their public spaces. This includes the Global Public Space Toolkit, the Public Space Site-Specific Assessment[1] and the City-wide Public Space Assessment Toolkit[2] as well as demographically focused methodologies such as the Her City Guide, supporting gender-inclusive urban planning and Block by Block, supporting youth-focused engagement and urban design. More

[1] More information: Public Space Site-Specific Assessment: Guidelines to Achieve Quality Public Spaces at Neighbourhood Level | UN-Habitat

[2] More information: City-wide public space assessment toolkit: A guide to community-led digital inventory and assessment of public spaces | UN-Habitat

recent collaborations include the normative work on Public Facilities as Enablers of Resilient, Sustainable and Adequate Housing for Urban Communities in collaboration with the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

As a transformative programme, the GPSP aimed to systematise knowledge, create tools and support local governments to achieve goals for the accessibility of public space. Nevertheless, as UN-Habitat enters a new phase focused on decentralisation, the GPSP has progressively shifted towards a network that empowers partners, regional offices, and country offices to take the lead through collaboration, co-production and partnerships (UN-Habitat, 2025b), capturing the dynamics and value of public space as they have transformed over the years to adapt to evolving global needs.

Optimizing this natural shift towards network building and capacity building, the Global Public Space Programme officially transformed into the Global Public Space Network (GPSN) in 2026. Focusing on strengthening existing partnerships, the Network has solidified a core group of regional experts acting as focal points across each region. Together, partners have worked with UN-Habitat to identify strategic priorities that will be taken forward over the coming years.

From data collection to professional capacity building, the GPSN seeks to consolidate expertise from more than 800 global members who work across academia, government, civil society and community-led organizations. Convening knowledge sharing activities and consolidating inspiring practice into guidelines and tools the GPSN aims to mainstream and focus on building local capacities on the role of public spaces in sustainable urban development.

Emerging Priorities

Cities increasingly rely on public spaces to provide shade and shelter in the face of a changing climate, bring diverse communities together to foster social cohesion and connection, and transform housing developments into sustainable, liveable, thriving neighbourhoods.

To meet these growing expectations, legislation, governance and finance have been defined as central pillars of effective public space delivery. Moving beyond a sole focus on design and construction, cities must consider how collaborative governance, long-term stewardship and strategic resource allocation can maximise the social, environmental and economic value of public spaces throughout their lifecycle. This requires thinking not only about short-term funding, but also about sustainable financing mechanisms that can support ongoing maintenance, adaptation and improvement. Protecting the lifecycle of public spaces and securing the greatest return on initial investments depends on ensuring that resources remain available long after a project is delivered.

To address these challenges, UN-Habitat (2025c) has recently identified four strategic goals and three main objectives to guide local governments' future action on public space. The Network's goals are: 1) 'Enhancing accessibility and inclusivity', 2) 'Building Public Trust and Transparency', 3) 'Sustainable Funding and Resource Allocation', and 4) 'Resilience to Climate Change'. Additionally, the three objectives aim to 1) 'Strengthen Legal Frameworks' by addressing gaps and inconsistencies in legislation and enforcement that limit fair and effective public space management in cities; 2) 'Enhance Governance Models', to support better coordination among stakeholders and promote multi-level

governance alongside decentralised decision-making; and 3) 'Ensure Sustainable Financing', to ensure public spaces remain active, well-maintained, and accessible through a variety of long-term funding mechanisms and models. These strategic goals and objectives aim to offer a roadmap for local governments to address emerging challenges and ensure that public spaces contribute effectively to sustainable urban development and community well-being.

The evolving landscape of public spaces around the world demands a corresponding evolution in the public space agenda. Legislation, governance and financing must sit alongside design as core priorities. Ultimately, the next chapter of the public space agenda is not only about creating more public spaces but about ensuring they remain vibrant, inclusive, resilient and well-managed assets for generations to come.

Looking Ahead: Public Space in a Changing Urban Future

As we enter a new phase of public space delivery, the challenges facing cities continue to evolve. Ten years after the adoption of the New Urban Agenda in Quito, the Quito+10 process provided an important opportunity to reflect on progress, identify persistent gaps, and renew commitments to creating more inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban environments. At the same time, with the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals rapidly approaching, it is increasingly clear that while significant advances have been made, many of the ambitions set out a decade ago remain unfinished.

Looking ahead, the Network aims to provide a platform to build on the achievements of the past decade while responding to emerging priorities. From financing and governance to climate resilience, housing, digital innovation and social inclusion, it will continue to connect practitioners and decision-makers working to ensure that public space remains central to sustainable urban development.

Although progress over the past decade is evident, significant challenges remain. The future effectiveness of public space policy will depend not only on expanding access, but also on ensuring durable governance systems, stable financing, and long-term resilience. In this sense, the next phase is less about defining new principles and more about strengthening the conditions required to implement them effectively.

Authors' statement on materials and methods

AI tools were used in the rephrasing and proofreading of the article.

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