

Informal appropriation of public space for leisure physical activities in Lagos and Yaounde: analysis of space features, motivation and experiences, and health risks data from urban stakeholders

Given the rising burden of NCDs across Africa, evidence to support new contextualised initiatives for creating environments supportive of healthy active living for physical and mental wellbeing are urgently required, particularly in the context of socio-economic inequalities in large cities. Public spaces in African cities are increasingly used for leisure physical activities, but unfortunately, under hazardous conditions such as injury and toxic air pollution. The health risks of physical activity (exercise) undertaken in these public spaces are currently unknown.

This policy brief is an outcome of an international workshop on "**Urban Public Spaces and Leisure Physical Activities**", held on Tuesday, 14th and 21st September 2021 in Lagos and Yaoundé. Participants were from government, multinational organisations, civil society organisations, the sporting and academic communities, print and social media.

The workshop focused on understanding the features and health risks of public spaces that are informally used for leisure physical activity (exercise). It also sought to examine the experiences and motivation of users of these spaces in Lagos, Nigeria and Yaoundé, Cameroon; two cities in West and Central Africa that are rapidly urbanising and with an increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension, diabetes, and poor mental health.

The workshop is part of the research project on **Informal Appropriation of Public Space for Leisure Physical Activity in Lagos and Yaoundé** (<https://urbanbetter.science/alpha/>), led by the University of Cambridge, in collaboration with the Universities of Lagos and Yaoundé.

Introduction

Africa is experiencing rapid urbanisation alongside poorly governed infrastructure development and unhealthy living. These factors contribute to an increased burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and premature mortality, affecting economically active populations.

The built environment is a critical determinant of physical activity (PA), a risk factor for NCDs, but due to the unmet need for PA infrastructure, public spaces in African cities are increasingly appropriated for leisure physical activity (LPA) under hazardous conditions such as toxic air pollution, another NCD risk-factor.

As a result of a lack of surveillance data, the health risks of LPA in public spaces are unknown. This international workshop, conducted with various urban stakeholders in Lagos and Yaoundé, investigated the features of appropriated public spaces for LPA, motivations and experiences of users of these spaces, and injury risks that may negate LPA benefits. Engaging with multisectoral actors offers results that will inform urban infrastructure development strategies for safe, equitable LPA in public spaces and thus contribute to SDG 3 regarding good health and wellbeing and SDG 11 targeted at sustainable and inclusive cities and communities.

Workshop findings from Lagos and Yaoundé

This workshop, to our knowledge, is the first to engage multisectoral urban actors to identify and characterise informal public space use for physical activities based on typologies (e.g., on or under bridges, street, beach, park, square, waterways (rivers, lagoons, lakes, canals), their motivations and experiences of users across socio-economic contexts, and health risks involved when using such spaces in Nigeria and Cameroon.

Participating stakeholders identified that appropriated public spaces include areas around sports ground, community shared spaces, community centres, road medians and road sides, roundabouts, along bridges, natural spaces (beach, lakes, hills, mountains), railway tracks, open spaces or vacant plots of land, and even roads under construction, bank car parks and public parks). In fact, 55.61 and 37.96 percent of stakeholders in Lagos and Yaoundé respectively self-identified that they use the side of the road for LPA. Dominant activities include individual sports (walking, running and jogging) and team sports (aerobics, cycling, football and boxing).

Stakeholders are motivated to perform LPA in these spaces due to availability, affordability, relatively ease of access, opportunities for social interaction and perceived health outcomes. Limited dedicated recreational facilities in the cities are also a contributing factor.

Despite these motivating factors and the circumstances encouraging them to exercise in these ALPHA spaces, stakeholders also identified some risks attached to use of these spaces. These include poor security, vulnerability to harassment and attack by hoodlums, poor lighting, poor maintenance, lack of equipment and/or supervision, risk of accidents due to open manholes and exposure to reckless drivers and government bureaucracy that may term them as unlawful occupiers of such spaces.

Stakeholders also identified some past healthy public space initiatives such as *Parcours Vita* in Yaounde and *Neighborhood Sanitation competitions* in Lagos, but these were discontinued after some time. The lack of sustenance stems from lack of commitment, funding issues, safety issues, demise of promoters, and slow implementation of some of the initiatives, in spite of existing regulatory frameworks on public space, air quality, safety or health promotion in both cities.

These findings underpin the urgent need to (i). collaboratively design multisectoral policies/ operational guidelines and/or frameworks on public space governance that promote health, safety and sustainability; (ii) implement and/or scale up identified initiatives and policy priorities that can be leveraged to design healthier public space and urban environments.

Policy Recommendations

- To make an impact with public space investments in Lagos and Yaoundé, key actors must be involved in the deliberation processes from the infrastructure identification to the conceptualisation, co-design, advocacy, implementation and management. Some of the actors identified by stakeholders in both cities include formal and informal sports authorities, the government agencies and ministries in charge of physical planning and environment, security, health, youth and social development.
- The needs of special groups such as women, children and people living with disabilities should be considered in the design and management of public spaces.
- Existing initiatives such as the non-motorised transport policy, bike-sharing initiatives and climate action plan in Lagos and the Minsep: programme de developpement des infrastructures spàortives; strategie nationale de development(SND) 2020-2030 in Yaounde, all must be leveraged.
- Planned initiatives in Lagos such as the linear park project, the allotment garden at Oworonshoki and the draft non-motorised transport policy, and those in Yaoundé including the general clean-up of communities in yaounde 1-7, aménagement d un cours d'eau pour creer un espace cyclomoteur de 3 km environ a la mairie de Yaounde 5, must be operationalised immediately.

In implementing these recommendations, the following factors must be considered:

- Increased participation of local governments within a transparent, decentralised system
- Improved data management and sharing across agencies
- Improved citizen participation in the management of ALPA spaces through community development association
- Skills transfer from other successful public space initiatives and adequate financial resources to municipalities to cater to public spaces.

This brief was produced by the international research team of the Appropriation of Public Space and Urban Infrastructure for Leisure Physical Activities (ALPHA) project. The project is led by Dr Tolu Oni of the University of Cambridge (tolu.oni@mrc-epid.cam.ac.uk), Dr Felix Assah of the University of Yaounde (felix.assah@gmail.com) and Prof Taibat Lawanson of the University of Lagos (tlawanson@unilag.edu.ng).

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