UN HABITAT
The United Nations Human Settlements Programme

Topic A: Preserving and Recovering public spaces through law enforcement and adequate planification.

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Universidad de Monterrey
División de Educación Media Superior
Academia de humanidades y Ciencias Sociales
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On 1 January 1975, the UN General Assembly created the United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation (UNHHSF), which was the first UN’s foundation dedicated to urbanization. On December 19, 1977 as a result of the conference Habitat I, the precursors of UN-Habitat were created: the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, also referred to as “Habitat”. On 1 January 2002, through General Assembly Resolution A/56/206, Habitat’s mandate was strengthened and its status elevated to a fully-fledged programme in the UN system, giving birth to UN-Habitat, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

UN-Habitat was assigned by the UN General Assembly to achieve sustainable human settlement development providing adequate social and environmental shelter for everyone. UN-Habitat has been operating for nearly 40 years providing solutions for problems regarding human settlements, as a result, this programme has obtained a recognized expertise in all situations related to urbanization. UN-Habitat aims to contribute in the finding of answers and solutions for ongoing challenges confronted by the world, focusing on building a brighter future for villages, towns, and cities of all sizes.

Topic A: Preserving and recovering public spaces through law enforcement and adequate planification.

I. History of the Topic

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme states that “public spaces are sites which are accessible and enjoyable by all without a profit motive and take on various spatial forms, including parks, streets, sidewalks, markets and playgrounds” (UN Habitat, 2015) Public areas have, throughout history, constantly been overlooked by urban authorities. However, public spaces have been critical sites of cultural, political, and economic life from early civilizations to the present day. They have been used since ancient times, the history of open urban spaces
dates back to the ancient Greek agora. As the ideas of the Renaissance and Enlightenment expanded, so did public spaces, but urban parks started to appear until the nineteenth century.

The Charter of Public Space (2015) provides the following definition: “Public spaces are all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive.” Also, it states that “public spaces are a key element of individual and social well-being, the places of a community's collective life, expressions of the diversity of their common, natural and cultural richness and a foundation of their identity.” (Charter of Public Space, 2015). Depending on their geographic, demographic, and social characteristics, they serve different purposes to society. In 2010, a public space investigation conducted by Gehl Architects and EMBARQ, found out citizens considered that public spaces weren’t accessible enough, didn’t promote sufficient historical values, and weren’t attractive or multifunctional.

II. Current Issues

Public spaces have increasingly been considered the ‘backbone of cities’, however, nowadays they are found at risk. Many factors obstruct the proper use, creation and preservation of public areas. Therefore, it has been a major focus in several countries to provide proper assistance and reinforce their own legislation in order to promote the reconstruction and recovery of public areas. Unfortunately, different issues deplete the actions of the countries themselves and the ones done by the civil society. Some of them are the following:

Financial support
A clear obstacle in the management of public areas is authorities decreasing the resources destined to the creation and maintenance of these areas due to a lack of income or an inefficient administration of resources. Financial resources are important for public spaces, when the necessary resources aren’t used to provide efficient communal spaces, these suffer from bad maintenance and become eventually useless and eventually abandoned.
Inadequate use and lack of safety
Currently, a great problem found in many cities is the undesirable transformation of community areas. Many public spaces face vulnerability to inadequate uses, for example, public squares are often transformed into parking lots. Furthermore, some citizens don't feel appreciation towards public goods and therefore misuse them and generate a space for frequent acts of vandalism and a feeling of insecurity. The improper transformation and use of these spaces is usually found to be due to a lack of correct law enforcement, which also causes spaces to be declined, abandoned or not used often, resulting in not fulfilling their purpose.

A feeling of safety should exist in public spaces, especially for vulnerable groups, but currently this protection does not prevail in many areas. As mentioned by UN Women (2017), women and girls are subjects of sexual violence in public spaces, specially due to harassment, which until today remains as one of the major challenges that are required to address.

Improper planification and accessibility
Planning is a crucial part in public spaces, unfortunately, at the present time many of this areas face design choices that ignore multifunctional criteria and structural connections. Studies conducted by UN-Habitat in 2015 demonstrate that the amount of public spaces which have proper conditions and programmes to be protected and maintained are limited. Moreover, it has become a common trend in developing countries to privatize these spaces in order to prevent crime, but it also creates segregation within the community (UN-Habitat, 2015).

Many public spaces are not accessible to everyone, this can be caused by the inefficient planning of infrastructure which usually prevents handicapped citizens from accessing this places. Another cause is the absence of proper directions or references, which causes disorientation. Public areas should be made available to every citizen, especially when these areas provide great natural or historical value. Additionally, UN-Habitat (2015) considers that the lack of support in planification also interferes in the full development of public spaces. Another situation that has not been clearly addressed is the one of the periphery cities and the non-metropolitan areas, which get even less financial support and, therefore, the proper planning cannot be achieved (UN-Habitat, 2015)
III. UN Actions

The United Nations acknowledges the existence of problems regarding urbanization, such as population growth, urban sprawl, poverty, inequality, pollution, congestion, as well as urban biodiversity, urban mobility and energy and supports counties in developing new strategies and systems to address these current issues. In 2011 UN-Habitat launched the Global Public Space Programme, with the objective of improving public spaces and their planification, and adopted a resolution on sustainable urban development through access to quality urban public spaces. This Program currently works with more than twenty countries, specially in cities in developing countries, and provides the necessary help at a local and international level to properly create and planificate public areas.

On September 2015, the UN launched the Sustainable Development Goals, which highlight the importance of public spaces. Goal 11 “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” focuses on sustainable cities and communities and its target number seven states the following: “By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.” (United Nations, 2015)

IV. Conclusions

Public spaces are found at risk, adequate planification and law enforcement need to be implemented for the creation and recovery of optimal public spaces. Countries should adopt measures to ensure the adequate planification of public areas, since, as mentioned before, these are crucial for society’s development.

Not recognizing the importance of urban planning today will only bring bigger issues in the future. Resolutions that provide an adequate equilibrium between urbanization and the preservation of public spaces are needed as well as regulations for the inclusion and access to every citizen and protection of natural, historic, architectural, cultural and artistic heritage. Nevertheless solutions for the
current problem are urgent and should involve the active participation of both citizens and their governments to put into action the necessary means for recovering public spaces.

V. Important questions

1. Has your country taken any action to protect public spaces?
2. Are there any NGOs working in your delegation to eradicate this issue?
3. Which are the public areas in your country with the greatest historical or natural value? Do they experience any problems?
4. Does your delegation count with the necessary income to manage public spaces? If so, do authorities in your country properly administer the resources destined for public areas?
5. How does your country protect public spaces from inadequate uses and provide security for citizens?
6. How is adequate planification ensured and implemented in your country?
7. What mechanisms or policies does your delegation have to guarantee the creation, protection and maintenance of public spaces?

VI. References:

• UN-HABITAT (No Date) Planning and Design. Retrieved on May 26, 2017 from: https://unhabitat.org/urban-themes/planning-and-design/