

## Public Space for Urban Health

Key findings and policy recommendations from two multisectoral stakeholder co-design workshops on “Informal Appropriation of Public Spaces and Urban Infrastructure for Leisure Physical Activities (ALPhA)” in Lagos and Yaoundé

This policy brief summarises the central themes arising from two multi-sectoral stakeholders’ co-design workshops which were held on May 31 and June 7, 2022, in Lagos, Nigeria, and Yaoundé, Cameroon, respectively. These workshops are part of the research project on **Informal Appropriation of Public Space for Leisure Physical Activity in Lagos and Yaoundé (ALPhA)** (<https://urbanbetter.science/alpha/>), led by the University of Cambridge, in collaboration with the Universities of Lagos and Yaoundé. These two co-design workshops are a sequel to the first set of workshops held in both cities on Tuesday, 14th and 21st September 2021 (see reports: Lagos - <https://urbanbetter.science/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/REPORT-Alpha-Lagos-workshop-1-1.pdf> and Yaoundé - <https://urbanbetter.science/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/REPORT-Alpha-Yaounde-workshop-1.pdf>), and aimed to achieve the following: Validate and disseminate research findings to key stakeholders; explore the role of informal and formal actors in governing patterns of space appropriation for physical activity, as well as the legal and extra-legal implications of such actions; explore the potential for identified patterns of informal public space leisure physical activities to inform co-design and development of inclusive and sustainable public space interventions for the cities of Lagos and Yaoundé. The workshops were organised in collaboration with the UN-HABITAT Public Spaces unit.

Representatives from government agencies, academia, the built environment, physical fitness, wellness, and civil society organisations as well as local communities shared their insights and expertise on air quality measurement initiatives that they are aware of to support health in public spaces; on who is involved and who should be in improving air quality; on how to improve the public space to better support physical activity (PA) and what needs to be done to address risks of safety, injury and air pollution (Design intervention); on who would lead or need to be involved to make the intervention a success; on how neighbourhood contexts, characteristics, and assets can be leveraged to support the intervention; on what information or approach would be needed to get different actors on board to support the intervention; and on potential regulatory considerations that could (positively or negatively) influence feasibility or sustainability of the proposed intervention. The stakeholders suggested major recommendations for policymakers.

### Introduction

Public spaces in the city are vital to people’s health and well-being. We encounter them every day and are essential parts of our daily lives. These spaces such as public squares, sidewalks, parks, bridges, traffic intersections, and green spaces, support physical activity and can provide us with access to greenery and nature, allow for healthy public life and enhance social interactions; particularly when well-thought-out and well-designed. In fact, public spaces are part of the overarching goal of a city being liveable. However, with unprecedented urbanisation, especially in African cities, the need for healthy public spaces has become more apparent and important, particularly in the wake of an increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension, diabetes, and poor mental health; and in the absence of supportive formal urban infrastructure for physical activity. In Lagos and Yaoundé - cities in West and Central Africa with similar demographic and NCD risk profiles, the urban residents are devising informal means of appropriating public spaces for leisure physical activity (LPA) under hazardous conditions such as toxic air pollution, another NCD risk factor. This suggests the need for intentionally co-planned, co-created, co-renewed, and co-promoted public spaces in both cities. The public spaces require consideration and long-term interventions and solutions if they are to be healthy, safe, and equitable for LPA. This is the crux of the research project “**Informal Appropriation of Public Space for Leisure Physical Activity in Lagos and Yaoundé (ALPhA)**” which aims to re-imagine urban space for healthy, safe LPA in Lagos, Nigeria, and Yaoundé, Cameroon. As part of this endeavour, the project team held two multi-sectoral stakeholders co-design workshops on May 31 and June 7, 2022, in Lagos, Nigeria, and Yaoundé, Cameroon, respectively. The purpose of these workshops were to share study findings and to work with the stakeholders to re-imagine urban public spaces for safe inclusive physical activity.

### Key findings on public spaces and leisure physical activity in Lagos and Yaoundé which were disseminated to and validated by the stakeholders during the co-design workshops

- Leisure physical activities performed on appropriated public spaces in Lagos and Yaoundé are more spontaneous than organised;
- There is increased safety risk during physical activity on appropriated public spaces because users mostly exercise on the side of the road, middle of the road, on vacant/empty plots, etc. Poor lighting, poor organisation, and lack of adequate activity also increase safety risks;
- Appropriated public spaces are mostly used on Saturday and Sunday at early morning hours for leisure physical activities but are often inaccessible on weekdays; the roads used for leisure physical activities are often busy, and the spaces are regularly used for other purposes. Overall, users of appropriated public spaces would want the spaces to be friendly, healthy, safe, and accessible;
- There are many actors in Lagos and Yaoundé who are working to promote safe public spaces but many of them are not collaborating;
- Women are more at risk when performing physical activity in an appropriated public space;
- Exposure to poor air quality is an important risk factor for physical activity (PA) in public spaces;
- Emission sources and pollutant profiles are spatially heterogeneous (road traffic, refuse burning, industrial and residential emission) for both cities;
- Seasonal effects such as harmattan haze, wet/dry season, etc. impact exposure to public spaces when performing outdoor physical activity, despite that they are natural phenomena;
- The geographical localisation of Lagos and Yaoundé and their differential atmospheric pressure have an impact on the practice of physical activity in both cities;
- Air pollution has a negative impact on the IQ and thus the education of children, pregnant women, and babies;

- Knowledge of air pollution in the context of seasonal effects and temporal patterns can inform the planning of physical activity in public spaces;
- Physical activity and the appropriation of spaces can aid environmental justice associated with air quality and health equity if these spaces are fairly distributed across the city..
- Air pollution is at its highest during the day than at night in both Yaoundé and Lagos and the high levels of air pollution in both cities are a result of intensive economic activities and might differ due to their locations as one is inland (Yaoundé) and the other is at the coast (Lagos).

### Workshop findings from the stakeholder discussions in Lagos and Yaoundé during the co-design workshops

- Stakeholders were surprised to learn about the impact of air pollution on humans, especially with respect to child growth and development (IQ) and the similarities between Lagos and Yaoundé. However, the findings presented on air pollution in Lagos validated the assumptions that stakeholders already had about the risks of air pollution;
- The gender differences in the frequency of participation in physical activity were also a surprise to them as well as the vulnerability to safety and injury risks;
- Judging by the unprecedented population and environmental activities in Lagos, participants were not surprised that Lagos has relatively high particulate matter levels;
- Air quality monitoring station by LASEPA, Climate change plan by Ministry of Environment, LAMATA initiative on carpooling, green building initiative by Ministry of Physical Planning and Urban Development (MPPUD), and the US Embassy's continuous monitoring facilities in Lagos and Abuja are some of the air quality initiatives in Lagos;
- Climate change plan by Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, Climate change plan by Ministry of Environment, Operation 1 person 1 tree, Yaoundé City Council Project to install air pollution materials in the city, and Diagnostic Project on air quality in Yaoundé are existing air quality initiatives in Yaoundé;
- The consensus is that everyone including government actors, policymakers, academics/researchers, community organisations, citizens, trade unions, traditional leaders, etc. all has a role to play and must get involved in the efforts to improve air quality in Lagos and Yaoundé;
- The public spaces in Lagos and Yaoundé that are used for leisure physical activities are not fit for people of all ages nor are they people living with disabilities (PLWD) friendly;
- Public spaces in Lagos and Yaoundé lack key architectural communal features such as bike lanes, street lights, adequate landscaping, adequate signage, water and bathroom facilities, waste disposal facilities, etc. Such features would encourage complementary activities and promote health.

### Policy recommendations for policymakers

- Public space elements such as trees, street lights, good roads, dedicated bike lanes, pedestrian walkways, speed breakers, sensors and pollution monitors, and community parks are important features that could promote physical activity such as bike riding. These must be incorporated in urban space designs in Lagos and Yaoundé. The establishment of a bike renting scheme can help intensify a bike riding culture among people of all groups in Lagos and Yaoundé.
- Architectural and landscape features such as green lawns, trees, shrubs, changing and rest rooms, lighting, solid waste disposal, etc. in communal spaces would encourage people to use such spaces for physical and sports activities and hence promote health. These features must be included in design interventions in Lagos and Yaoundé.
- Initiatives and programs that involve the upgrade of existing public spaces, the provision of waste receptacles (colour coded), first aid boxes to counter the risk of poor air quality, safety, injury, and diseases, installation of air quality monitoring devices, and creating opportunities for competitions and non-competitive recreational sports would encourage more community members to use public spaces.
- Public spaces must be designed to be multifunctional by incorporating features that encourage food vendors to sell healthy foods, features, and facilities that encourage participation in outdoor sports and games as well as concerts.
- Ministries, departments, and agencies involved in managing public spaces must design a mechanism to encourage sanitation and hygiene in public spaces. These entities should design public spaces to be multifunctional by incorporating features encouraging food vendors to sell healthy foods to people, and which enable the public to participate in outdoor physical activity, games, and concerts.
- With many involved in performing physical activities such as jogging and walking in the face of fast-moving cars, it is pertinent to increase the height of existing sidewalks and provide parapets (a low separating wall) in public spaces to provide greater separation between users and motorists, while ensuring these spaces remain inclusive and accessible to all including persons with disabilities.
- To foster safe running and walking in public spaces, there is a need to equip green spaces with running tracks to provide users with alternative options of spaces for jogging (beyond just running on main roads). Relevant environmental agencies must plant more trees and keep existing water bodies around public spaces clean so that they act as natural sources for air purification.
- Creating opportunities for competitions and non-competitive recreational sports would encourage more community members to use public spaces. However, the types of physical activities to be practised in spaces should be cognisant of the various uses that such spaces can enable to ensure users understand the range of activities the space can support, while reducing risks to health.

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Further information on the project (including the detailed workshop report and other outputs) can be found on the project website: [www.urbanbetter.science/alpha](http://www.urbanbetter.science/alpha)

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