

Recognising Diversity in Participatory Urban Interventions

Andrea Rigon

This article consists of two parts. The first presents a framework for understanding and dealing with diversity in participatory urban infrastructure interventions. These are interventions related to any type of urban infrastructure and that seek to involve local residents in their planning and design. The article draws on Kenyan case studies related to housing in particular. However, examples for other types of urban interventions and locations would equally support the importance of taking into account the diversity of residents' aspirations and needs in designing urban interventions. It distinguishes three interlinked aspects of diversity: recognition, the diversity of needs and aspirations requiring different interventions; redistribution, the diversity of impact of interventions on different groups and individuals; and representation, the diversity in participation to decision-making. The second part of the article is made up of a photo essay which shows how we deployed this framework in the implementation of a participatory spatial interventions in Bar Elias, a Lebanese town currently undergoing significant changes due to mass displacement of refugees from Syria.

Often, urban infrastructure interventions in poor urban settlements in the Global South assume all residents have similar aspirations and needs. However, these localities are some of the most unequal settlements, and interventions with this assumption creates winners and losers. The argument that this piece makes is that urban developers have to take different dimensions of diversity into consideration when planning these interventions. This first piece is more about explaining the importance of diversity in urban interventions, while the second piece will more closely focus on the approach and methodology.

Diverse Identities

We all have multiple simultaneous identities, such as gender, class, race and ethnicity, citizenship or legal status, age, ability, sexuality, and life path/project (e.g. migration plan). Some of these are individual and others are collective, and they are fluid and in constant change.¹ A fundamental way to understand how these identities shape different experiences, needs, and aspirations is the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is how the combination and intersection of multiple dimensions of identity create unique experiences of oppression and discrimination. For example, one cannot understand the discrimination of black women in the US legal system by simply looking at the discrimination of black people or women.²

Different aspects of individual and collective social identities play a crucial role in social processes, shaping life chances. The relationships between these different identities are intertwined with power. There are consolidated hierarchies and power relations amongst these identities, such as between men and women, black and white people, etc. These unequal relations between identities contribute to inequalities and marginalisation processes. But these identities and the relationship between them change in different contexts and over time, which means they are not natural but are social constructs which we can deconstruct. Therefore, addressing these inequalities requires a relational and intersectional approach

focused on transforming power relations that are at the core of social identities, making the recognition of diversity a political process.

Inequalities and Participation

The other fundamental element is the understanding of the heterogeneity of poor urban neighbourhoods that scholars and officials often wrongly consider to host poor residents with similar vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations. However, in poor neighbourhoods in the Global South, not everyone is poor. For example, successful businesspeople may operate from these informal neighbourhoods to benefit from the lower regulatory constraints. In Kenya and elsewhere, wealthy landlords, sometimes owning large numbers of properties, live in these settlements with tenants who have little security of tenure and live in poor housing conditions. In South Africa, citizens living in these areas are entitled to government upgrading and housing programmes, while migrants are not.

Over the past three decades, there has been a push for community participation approaches to plan urban interventions in these contexts. However, community participation approaches tend to build on an image of a homogenous community. This leads to practices that seek to identify a unified consensus on interventions through community leaders or collective meetings. The internal inequalities and power relations stemming from different identities do not allow all residents to raise their interests in these processes. For example, landlords can evict tenants for speaking up against their (the landlords') interests, or social norms may prevent women from contradicting powerful male voices.. As highlighted by a large body of literature,³ these community participatory approaches often lead to the portrayal of specific elite interests as the community interest, and interventions as being equally beneficial to all.

Social Justice and Dimensions of Diversity

To frame the analysis of diversity and urban intervention, we use the work of Nancy Fraser.⁴ Her framework for social justice goes beyond distributional justice and takes into account diversity issues. Analyzing existing struggles for justice, she observes how many are about the recognition of different identities, on top of struggles for a better redistribution of material benefits. Moreover, she identifies representation as a third dimension and argues that social justice requires all of these dimensions, while injustice is the result of misrecognition, maldistribution, and misrepresentation. We propose three key interlinked aspects of diversity that broadly correspond to the three dimensions of social justice in Nancy Fraser's framework.

Recognition: Diversity of Vulnerabilities, Needs, and Aspirations Requiring Different Interventions

We discussed how residents of poor urban neighbourhoods are very diverse and live in very unequal settlements. Planners behind upgrading programmes often assume all residents need better housing, and argue that they can create better living conditions in high-density areas through multi-storey buildings or by relocating residents to peripheral areas of the city. However, this fails to recognise the diversity of residents' needs and aspirations. For example, in Kenya's informal settlements, housing often has a double function of both dwelling and shop.⁵ Therefore, multi-

storey arrangements destroy livelihoods because a window shop only works if the dwelling is at street level. Moreover, in this context, housing is a complex system of settings⁶ in which public spaces are part of the housing. What appears to the planners to be a very small dwelling, is adequate for a family given that they can also use the public space outside for washing and cooking. Moreover, for the complex and delicate livelihood systems of many residents, social relations are of the utmost importance. In the existing arrangements, residents can, for instance, leave their children under the supervision of neighbours and build systems of mutual support that are more difficult in housing types that do not include shared spaces. Relocations to new housing can easily disrupt such relationships, which are built over the course of many years.

Moreover, some of these programmes do not take into sufficient account the diversity of needs that the current housing arrangements satisfy. Many residents chose their housing for its proximity to good livelihood and education opportunities. The poor housing conditions mean relatively cheaper rent, which allows tenants to make a more valued investment in the education of their children, and which they rightly see as their best chance of social mobility. Many tenants are therefore not interested in investing their savings and time in a complex and risky process of trying to own a flat in an ethnically mixed area.

Redistribution: The Diversity of Impact of Interventions on Different Groups and Individuals

Urban development interventions have profoundly different impacts on different groups and individuals residing in the city. Analyses of existing interventions can counter narratives of win-win projects benefiting all community members, and present a more complex and nuanced perspective on who gains from what intervention. New analyses can also highlight the important political choices, inherent in any interventions, about which individuals and groups to prioritize. For example, in the 2011 upgrading programme of a Nairobi (Kenya) informal settlement, planners expanded and tarmacked internal roads, allowing the passage of cars and public transport into the settlement. Officials presented the infrastructure intervention as beneficial to all residents. However, for the large majority of the residents, who were tenants, this intervention activated market forces and rent changed from KES 250-400 for a room in 2008 to KES 2,000-2,500 in 2015—without any improvement in the quality of the rooms. The increased demand for housing also meant that it was easy to replace tenants, many of whom were no longer able to afford the new rent. Moreover, the value of plots of land also increased several times. This meant that property owners benefited enormously from the new infrastructure intervention while market forces displaced poorer tenants—supposedly the key beneficiaries of the project.

Representation: The Diversity in Participation to Decision-Making

Participation is often costly for people who need to support their families. Moreover, local governance structures often reflect unequal power relations at the settlement level. This makes it difficult to ensure that planning adequately represents the diversity of interests, particularly of the most marginalised women and men. It is important to design processes that acknowledge the main social divisions in each context, and build processes that take these into account from an intersectional perspective. In the

same upgrading programme mentioned above, two landlords, one tenant, one youth, one woman and one elder were supposed to form the elected residents' committee. However, as the woman, elder and youth were also either landlords or tenants, the committee ended up being dominated by landlords. The way in which officials designed participation failed to recognise the multiple simultaneous intersectional identities of residents, and the power relations between them.

We argue that as identities shape life chances of people, it is important that urban interventions consider these three interlinked aspects of diversity—recognition, distribution and participation—and implement a relational and intersectional approach to the participation of residents in planning and design processes. This means going beyond classifying beneficiaries into groups based on one dimension of identity, focusing on the relationships between residents and between different groups of residents, and thinking beyond the physical and material component of interventions in order to transform these unequal relationships.

Photo Essay: Co-Designing Urban Infrastructure with Refugee and Host Communities in Bar Elias, Lebanon

Joana Dabaj, Andrea Rigon, Hanna Baumann

This photo essay explores the characteristics of the participatory and diversity-sensitive methodology that the research team applied when implementing a Participatory Spatial Intervention (PSI) in the town of Bar Elias (Lebanon) as an activity of the project "[Public Services and vulnerability in the Lebanese context of large-scale displacement](#)". The PSI is a co-produced way to build capacity and generate knowledge through an experimental process, which aims to have an impact on the sustainable prosperity of the town. This activity was implemented by the team from University College London in partnership with the non-profit design studio CatalyticAction. We built on the framework for dealing with diversity in urban interventions above.

We implemented the framework in Bar Elias, one of the most vulnerable localities in Lebanon, located halfway between Beirut and Damascus, and only 15 km from the Syrian border. The Bar Elias municipality has been particularly welcoming towards displaced Syrians since the start of the Syrian civil war, and their influx has transformed the town. In addition to increased construction inside the town's urbanising space, over one hundred informal tented settlements dotted the outskirts of the city. As the number of refugees rose, there were increased tensions between the two groups and pressure on infrastructure and public services.

Representation



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Given the social tensions in the town, and the aim to identify interventions that could transform existing relationships, it was critical to set up a process through which multiple groups of residents could participate. The project recruited seven citizen scientists through an open and extensive process amongst the residents of Bar Elias—a mixed group of Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians from different genders and age groups. We trained citizen scientists throughout the project on social research methods, ethics and data management, participatory research, and design thinking and human-centred approaches. The citizen scientists played a major role in the research and implementation of the project, and owned the process. Their work helped identify the site for the intervention: the main entrance road to the town. This was the only public place used by the three communities living in Bar Elias, and a social hub with a number of health facilities and shops.



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An intensive one-week participatory workshop in October 2018 brought together citizens scientists and twelve other participants, ranging from nineteen to sixty-five years of age, to create a gender-balanced and diverse group of Bar Elias residents. While some men or families normally prohibit women from taking part to such public processes, the university involvement allowed female participants to frame the activities as an educational opportunity and thus obtain permission to participate. Moreover, the PSI provided a small payment to ensure that participants, particularly the poorest, could compensate the loss of income from other sources while taking part in the research activities.

Recognition



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During the workshop, participants learned and applied a range of research methods (including participatory mapping, semi-structured interviews, and street observation) in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how different users experience vulnerabilities with regard to infrastructures and the use of the road. Participants analyzed the data in groups, and then with the project collectively. Participants identified three interrelated categories of vulnerabilities: socio-economic vulnerabilities; health and environmental vulnerabilities; and safe and inclusive spaces for all. We divided participants into three groups to conduct an in-depth analysis of the causes of these vulnerabilities by drawing complex problem trees. For each component of the problem, we encouraged them to reflect on how vulnerabilities affected different individuals and groups differently, and why. We then asked participants to identify solutions, and to think about who would and would not benefit from them. The participants then developed a “visioning exercise.” Through a range of media including drawing and poetry, we asked them to imagine their ideal day in Bar Elias with their families or friends. We used this to counter adaptive preferences, which often push the most marginalised to lower their aspirations. The participants constructed a shared vision before moving to propose concrete spatial interventions. Different groups proposed different interventions that would simultaneously create solutions to problems and contribute to achieve their aspirations (as expressed in their vision).



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The group conducted an internal exhibition through which they identified key ideas that they then presented in a public exhibition on the street. Passers-by, as well as representatives of the municipality, gave their feedback on the proposals. The main output of the workshop was a design brief that participants used to translate their ideas into a plan for the spatial interventions. All the steps of the process reflected the social diversity of the residents, and how their different identities shaped their vulnerabilities and aspirations for the city. This pushed explicit conversations about who would benefit and lose from each proposed intervention. It led to the prioritisation of interventions addressing some of the most vulnerable groups, while fostering interactions amongst different communities. We presented the preliminary design to participants and the public for another round of feedback in December 2018. We also presented the findings and proposals to the municipality, with whom we negotiated implementation details and permissions.

Redistribution



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The implementation of the spatial intervention took place in May 2019. Physical interventions included a large circular and playful seating area built on a wide pavement next to the polyclinic, where patients often wait for their appointments, but previously lacked shade or benches. To create sufficient shade and some rain protection, a rectangular aluminium screen covers the seating area; it also contains phrases showcasing people's values and hopes.



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The PSI included several seats with smaller shades along the sidewalks and around the waiting area for taxis. The PSI also added trees and shades to the sidewalks to extend the time these could be used, as hot weather previously prevented people from using the area until the evening. The team painted floor games to allow children to play while parents shop. The design also conceived for children from different groups to play together, thereby compelling parents to talk to each other.



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A public green space, just off the main road that had once served as an important public space for the town, had become a deposit of debris from nearby construction works. The PSI rehabilitated the park, adding additional trees and wooden benches, painted in collaboration with children and fabricated by a local. It installed a Jasmine arch to mark the park's entrance, the smell of which reminded Syrians of the gardens in Damascus. The nearby polyclinic complemented the intervention with additional benches, planters and paving, and the municipality signalled intent to maintain the improvements by agreeing to water the plants in the garden.



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The sidewalk along the Bar Elias entrance road is up to 60cm high in some places, making it very difficult for pedestrians to navigate. Because of this, and because cars often park on the pavement, many pedestrians walked on the road, exposing themselves to speeding cars. The PSI installed ramps to facilitate access, especially for the elderly, wheelchair users, and parents pushing baby strollers. In addition, the PSI installed speed bumps on the road to discourage speeding in this area. The PSI added street signs to locate important landmarks and spotlights to make it safer at night. This way, the project and its participants made the town center more welcoming and accessible for groups made vulnerable by the previous spatial arrangements.

The intervention converted a public space into a social space and helped to change the narrative from refugees presenting a burden on Bar Elias to refugees helping the town to become a beautiful city to be proud of. More importantly, the intervention enabled residents to analyze their own problems and work together to identify solutions, while mediating with different authorities. The way we implemented the intervention also allowed individuals to see that their voices and capacities were recognised. The intervention also transformed some social relations by bringing people into the process on equal terms, including people who would not otherwise have been able to take part in such processes. For example, while the municipality explicitly said they would not allow a project on women's rights, two female Lebanese architects led the intervention on the ground. This leadership allowed participating women to experience social relations in new ways, as they repeatedly noted, and created a space of freedom to design an intervention and be involved in its implementation.

Quotes

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Tags participatory planning, Lebanon, displacement, Bekaa, Bar Elias, diversity

Bios

[Dr Andrea Rigon](#) is an Associate Professor at UCL's Development Planning Unit whose research work focuses on how power relations affect the participation of different people and social groups in decision making processes that have an impact on their lives. Concerned with processes of citizen participation at various scales from neighbourhood to global levels, he is particularly interested in how urban development projects manage residents' participation, particularly in informal settlements, and what are its effects on in/equality and social exclusion. His ongoing research involves informal settlement and humanitarian actions in Sierra Leone, Lebanon, and Nigeria.

Joana Dabaj is an architect and urban designer. She is co-founder and principal coordinator at CatalyticAction, a charity based in London that works to empower communities through strategic and innovative spatial interventions. She has valuable experience in architecture in development, sustainable design, cultural heritage, migration and human rights in the Middle East. Her recent work revolves around working closely with displaced and host communities in Lebanon to develop inclusive educational spaces; this includes participatory planning, design, and implementation of playgrounds, public spaces and schools.

Hanna Baumann is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Bartlett, University College London. Having completed her PhD on the infrastructures of im/mobility in East Jerusalem at the Cambridge Centre for Urban Conflicts Research in 2017, her current work examines the role of infrastructures in processes of urban exclusion and participation of refugees and other non-citizens in Beirut and Berlin: How do public services influence urban politics on embodied, affective, and symbolic registers? How are collective claims made around the common goods distributed by urban networks?

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