

Placemaking Interventions in Palestine as Demonstration Effects on the Ground

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Abstract

The urban development and rapid urbanization that the West Bank, including occupied East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip have recently encountered have adversely affected the quality and availability of open spaces inside the Palestinian urban and rural areas. Public spaces are fundamental in the lives of any community striving to achieve a sustainable and inclusive environment and improve the quality of life of its inhabitants. In that respect, the prevailing planning practices fall short in terms of adequately addressing the provision of public spaces. Laws and regulations are designed to focus on limited physical properties of buildings (e.g. building design, elevation, heights, setbacks, parking, etc.) with little or no attention to the residual space, inevitably, created between those blocks. Lands are chiefly privately owned, and considered of a very high value due to the artificial land scarcity phenomenon resulted from the geo-political classification of the West Bank Existing public spaces are not welcoming to the general public. Spaces are misplaced and scattered, they offer pre-defined activities and an inflexible environment. Many parts of the society feel alienated to such public spaces, created by a top-down process with minimal integration of their needs and aspirations.

Keywords: Palestine, placemaking, public space

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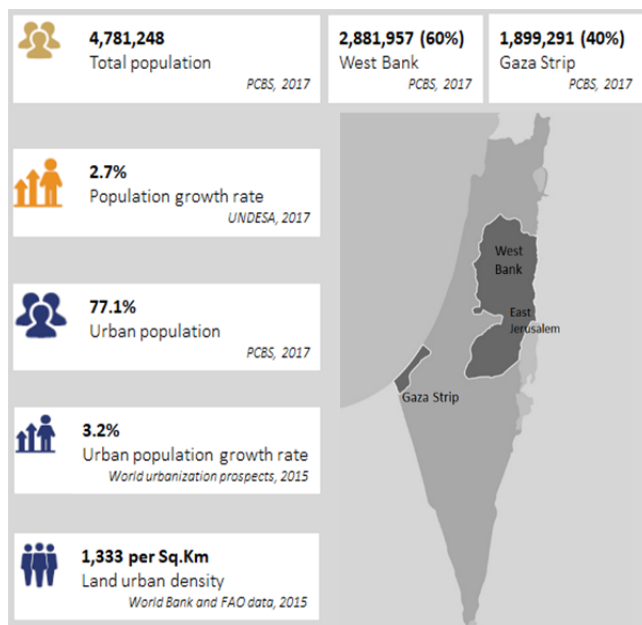
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The urban development and rapid urbanization that the West Bank, including occupied East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip have recently encountered have adversely affected the quality and availability of open spaces inside the Palestinian urban and rural areas (Figure 1). Public spaces are fundamental in the lives of any community striving to achieve a sustainable and inclusive environment and improve the quality of life of its inhabitants (Kent, 2019). In that respect, the prevailing planning practices fall short in terms of adequately addressing the provision of public spaces. Laws and regulations are designed to focus on limited physical properties of buildings (e.g. building design, elevation, heights, setbacks, parking, etc.,) with little or no attention to the residual space, inevitably, created between those blocks. With the scarcity of planning policies adopted by the Palestinian spatial planning system, there is no relevant policy that brings the public realm to the foreground and defines its tangible and intangible properties. The practice of planning, designing, managing, implementing and maintaining integrated public spaces with and for the Palestinian communities still need a lot of advancement and development.



Aside from the quality, Palestinian neighbourhoods and communities suffer from the lack of open public spaces, as it falls deep below satisfactory rates. Alternatives provided by the private sector are costly and inaccessible by the wider public. If we take Ramallah city as an example, according to the masterplan, 22.4% of the city's area has been dedicated to vehicle-roads, where most sidewalks are out of service because of objects blocking the path, including trees, poles, garbage bins, etc., placed at the centre of a pavement with an average width of 1.2 meters.

Figure 1. Factual Information on Palestine
Source: Author, 2019

Other than that, the masterplan identifies merely 0.6% as open public spaces, 7.1% for public facilities and services and merely 0.3% to pedestrian networks. Taking this under consideration, the average open public space in Ramallah city is 2.6 m²/person, while according to the World Health Organization (WHO) open green spaces in cities should exceed a minimum of 9 m² per person.

Land ownerships is another major challenge in Palestine to the development of public spaces. Lands are chiefly privately owned, and considered of a very high value due to the artificial land scarcity phenomenon resulted from the geo-political classification of the West Bank (United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 2018), hence, it is very difficult to dedicate land for public space usage. In Ramallah city, again,

open public spaces are 0.6% of the city's area which accumulates to 2.6 m²/person. However, in the rural areas where land is vacant and relatively cheaper in terms of market value, it is relatively easier for the community to donate adequate lands for public use. This can be seen in a sample of 36 detailed masterplans prepared in Area C¹, where 6 m² of open spaces per person is adapted to be the minimum. The total rates are as follow; residential (49.40%); public facilities (17.40%); archaeological sites (1.32%); green areas (31.21%); and commercial and industrial (0.67%) (MoLG - Ministry of Local Government, 2016).

Furthermore, existing public spaces are not welcoming to the general public. Spaces are misplaced and scattered, they offer pre-defined activities and an inflexible environment. Many parts of the society feel alienated to such public spaces, created by a top-down process with minimal integration of their needs and aspirations.

Purpose of the paper

This paper aims at influencing local communities, Local Government Units (LGUs), and relevant stakeholders to perceive the significance of urban and rural open public spaces, realize their role and responsibilities in developing and identifying methods to challenge the existing situation (Figure 2). The general public space policy should propose placemaking concepts as a high-level strategy for LGUs to localize relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as opposed to prescriptive interventions. The paper will assist LGUs to develop new public space practices and implementation strategies and guide the development of adequate public spaces within a wider cityscape. In such approach, built on evidences and practices, public space is considered a catalyst for development; it improves citizens' quality of life by ensuring the values of public participation, fairness, transparency, efficiency, accessibility, accountability and equity. These elements are vital to develop implementation strategies for public spaces. The focus of this paper will be on placemaking processes and ways of doing within the planning context of the West Bank, specifically in Area C.

Theory of Change

Placemaking is all about turning 'public' spaces into 'living' places that support the wellbeing of local communities (Toolis, 2017) and that can be managed and maintained by that community (Figure 3). In the context of Palestinian communities in the Israeli controlled Area C, placemaking is best realized as a DIY–Do It Yourself Urbanism approach to the planning, design, and management of public spaces to ensure they reflect a clear and broadly supported vision, organic orders, and proper functions. DIY, here is not understood as the antithesis of government, but is meant to reflect the principle of subsidiarity and promote any local Palestinian citizenry action that impacts public spaces with little involvement of Palestinian competent authorities, who lack planning jurisdiction over Area C, and thus would accede to citizen-led initiatives under a steadfastness framework that reciprocates with the practices of Israeli authorities in Area C.

¹ Area C accounts 60 percent of the West Bank total area and is under full planning, administrative, and security role of the Israeli authorities.

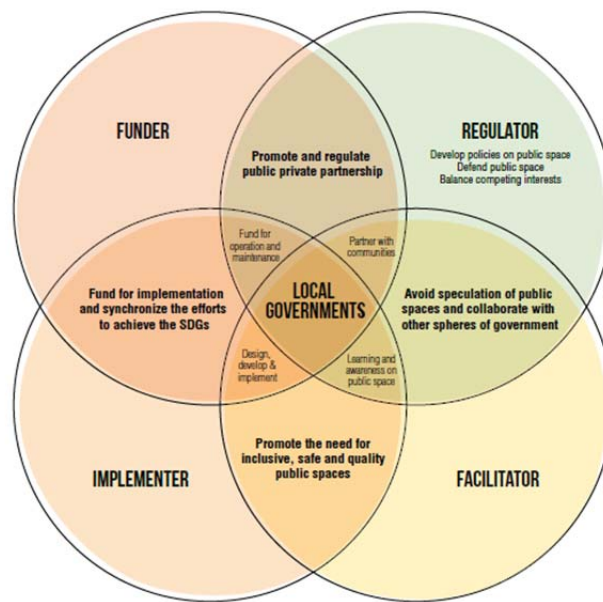


Figure 2. Niche between local governments and stakeholders in the placemaking processes.
Source: (UN-Habitat, Palestine, 2014)

Within the context of Palestinian communities administered by the Israeli authorities, DIY and ‘informality’ are interrelated, and the former could be regarded as a mode of the latter. It is argued that the informal mode of space production (informality), not only reflects a widespread mode of everyday life practices (DIY), but also could be considered a mechanism to unequivocally express the right to self-determination (Jabareen, 2014). This provides an important symbolism and this ‘rights-based approach’ to spatial planning and development is the take away for practice that is foreseen by advancing the concept of placemaking within the spatial planning practices of Palestinian communities.

Placemaking, as such aims at jumpstarting an engaged process to protect the rights and responsibilities of local Palestinian citizens vis-à-vis the prevailing Israeli geo-political planning orthodoxy. The questions of why to adopt such an approach and what is the expected added value are often bedeviling for Palestinian planners and those from technocratic bent. Nevertheless, studying international experiences teach us how relevant such an approach is and what are the parallels that could be singled-out, acknowledging the particular uniqueness of the Palestinian context that is affected by the capricious whims of the prolonged Israeli military occupation. To put it simply, the implementation of placemaking interventions will consolidate the masterplans prepared with and for Palestinian communities. Working closely entails that participatory processes will be sustained, and citizens will be encouraged to partake in the local development processes, and the authorities will be more responsive to future needs and aspirations of the citizens. This will result in improving the conditions of the built environment, foster social cohesion, build resilience and foster tenure security, and enable spatial development. This marks an amalgam between statutory and non-statutory approaches in realizing National Policy Agenda 2017-2022 and the 2030 Agenda in Palestine, noting the prevailing geo-political context.

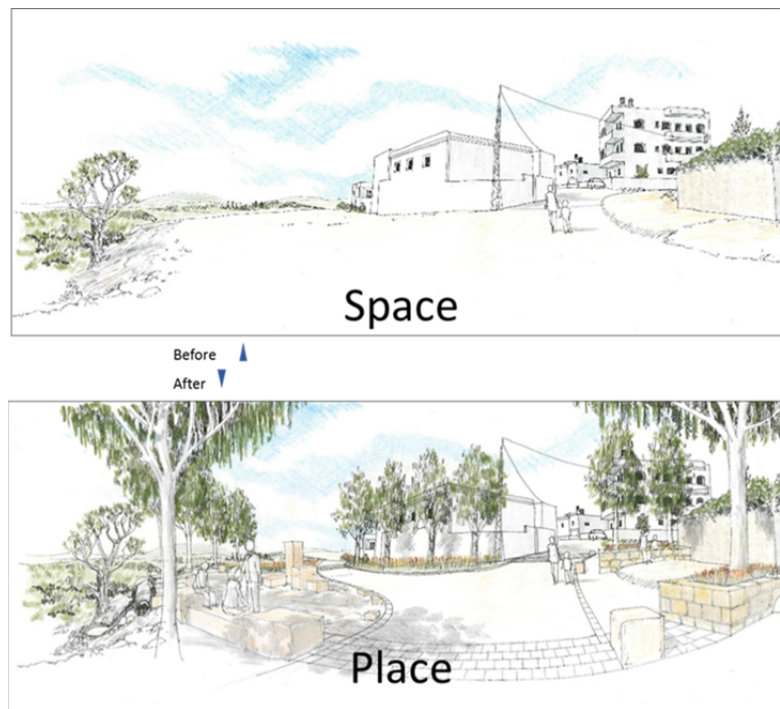


Figure 3. A small public space in Um Lahem, near Bethlehem. The community expressed an aspiration (amongst other things) to have a place for people to gather, a place for children to play and to create a legacy that they could be proud of, that reflected the esteem with which they held their village. They wanted shade and valued the contribution that trees made to the landscape. The community also expressed their concern about traffic accidents. This concept seeks to create a place where people will want to gather, that deters dangerous driving, “wins” previously rarely used land for community life and will enable local people to see their surroundings in a new light. Source: (UN-Habitat, Palestine, 2014)

Methodology and ways of doing

The methodological steps adopted during the Placemaking processes advanced in the West Bank, especially in the rural hinterlands (pervasively designated as Area C) are designed to be collaboratively-based and iteratively build on the previous steps to build-up a shared understanding of the issues, identify a direction and then formulate concrete proposals for implementation projects. More specifically, a number of consultation workshops (minimum 3) per intervention is usually held, in participation of many local inhabitants and stakeholders. The first workshop is designed to explain the concept and the process of Placemaking and make a commitment to the community to assist in realizing a sense of shared ownership. The outcomes usually are elaborated in graphic and geographical terms to reflect the ‘social landscape’ and the ‘design agenda’ (Figure 4).

In the second workshop, the main findings of discussions are presented to the participants for their consideration, amendment, and confirmation. The information gathered in this stage allow for some design concepts to be developed and envisaged in more details. In the third workshop these concepts are tested and explained in relation to how they would help address the issues identified in the first workshop. As a result, a placemaking report is prepared and shared with the community. As such, the interventions identified take stock from these collaborative efforts and build on it in the

implementation of the public spaces. Other tools may be utilized, such as Minecraft, in order to more suitably incorporate the youth, ensure a more inclusive participation and help the community better express their vision. It is important for the LGUs, with support from Ministry of Local Government (MoLG) to take the initiative of such interventions, in accordance with the masterplans, as a way to foster a bottom-up approach (Figure 5).

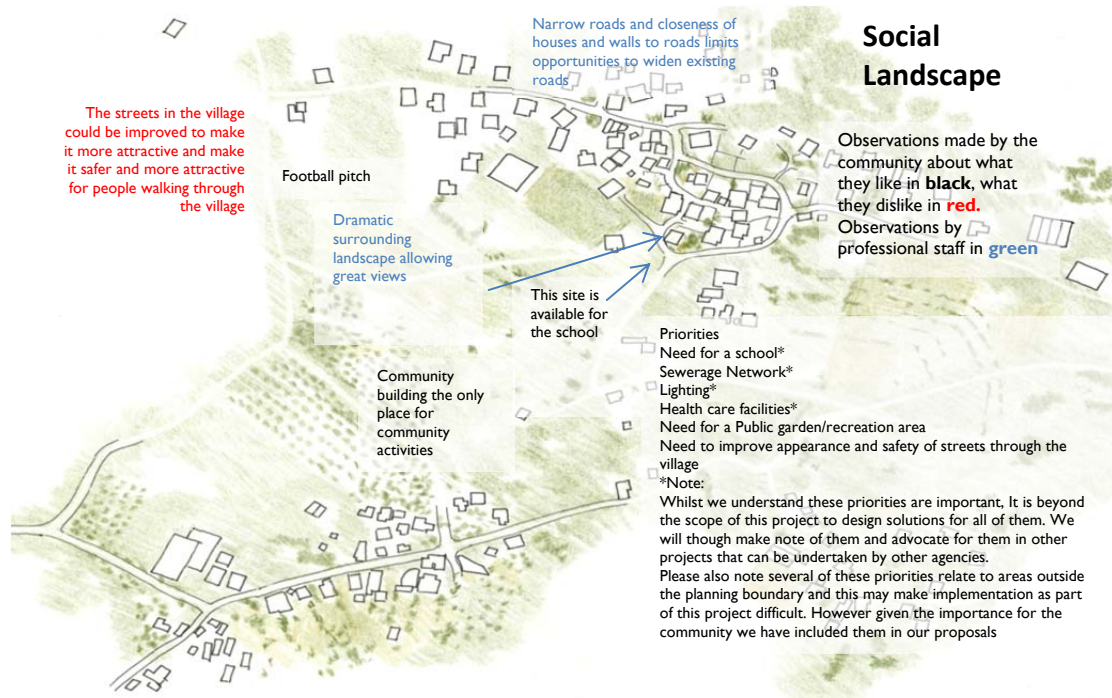


Figure 4. Social Landscape – Ras Tira, Qalqiliya Placemaking Interventions, February 2015.
Source: (UN-Habitat, Palestine, 2014)

There are a number of ways of implementing the interventions on the ground and the eventual model needs to be confirmed with the community. It has been documented that from UN-Habitat's experience within the Palestinian context, 'community contracting' model has been the most fruitful mode of implementation; where the community undertake this work with some technical advice and assistance (UN-Habitat, Palestine, 2014). This can provide an effective way of 'up skilling' locals and giving them confidence in future projects. This can also help optimize the degree to which the community feel a sense of ownership of the eventual outcomes and an ability to take the initiative when things need to change.

One of the issues to consider during the design of placemaking interventions is safety audits. The safety audits are usually performed in the proposed public spaces with the aim at formulating a better understanding of the safety aspects related to the semi-deserted enclosed public spaces under consideration. A good example is the case of Bruqin community, Salfit governorate. Bruqin has a population of 4,047 inhabitants and by and large is located in Area C of the West Bank. The safety audit at Bruqin for the

selected placemaking intervention site and its immediate context was done in September 2018.

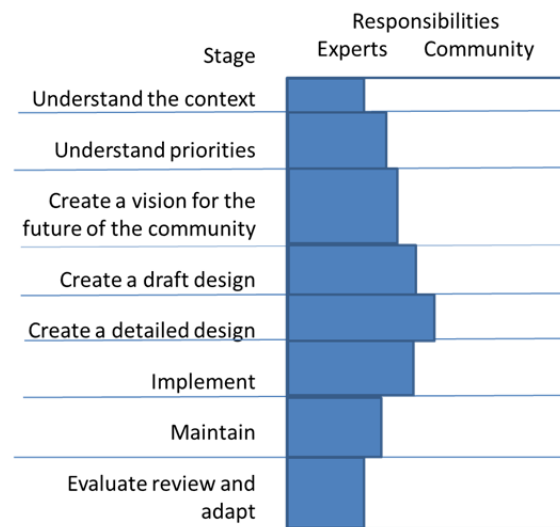


Figure 5. Changing balance of influence between community and designers (bottom-up approach)
Source: (UN-Habitat, Palestine, 2014)

The audit report done with inputs from municipality staff, local residents and urban planning students from An-Najah National University and written by UN-Habitat local experts included the following observations: “The first impression of local residents was the safety of the neighbourhood, its proximity and accessibility. It is an underdeveloped space in a central area of the community. The land is abandoned and full of rubbish; it was clear that no one is maintaining it. There are no designated lights for the target area, however, certain parts of it get lit from the adjacent football pitch. The area in general is poorly lit and feels unsafe at night. Almost no signage is visible in the area, and this can be misleading to visitors. It is a busy area, full of public facilities, such as: two public schools, the municipality building and the main mosque. However, the piece of land at hand, is not used at all, apart from infrequent parking spots” (Figure 6). This shows that the target area was poorly facilitated and underdeveloped, even though it is at a central location and busy area. This shows the potential as well and the impact foreseen and expected after implementing the project as a public space and playground.

Strategic Influences of the Placemaking Interventions

A key aim of the interventions was to have some demonstration effects on the ground by turning the masterplan, or part of it into a reality. Since 2013, UN-Habitat in Palestine implemented in Area C of the West Bank placemaking interventions targeting about 13,350 inhabitants with a total budget of more than USD 280,000, i.e. ca. USD 21 per inhabitant. Studies show that if these interventions didn't meet strategic objectives of the Palestinian Authority or resonate with the agendas of key funding agencies, they were unlikely to affect real change (Donovan, 2017).

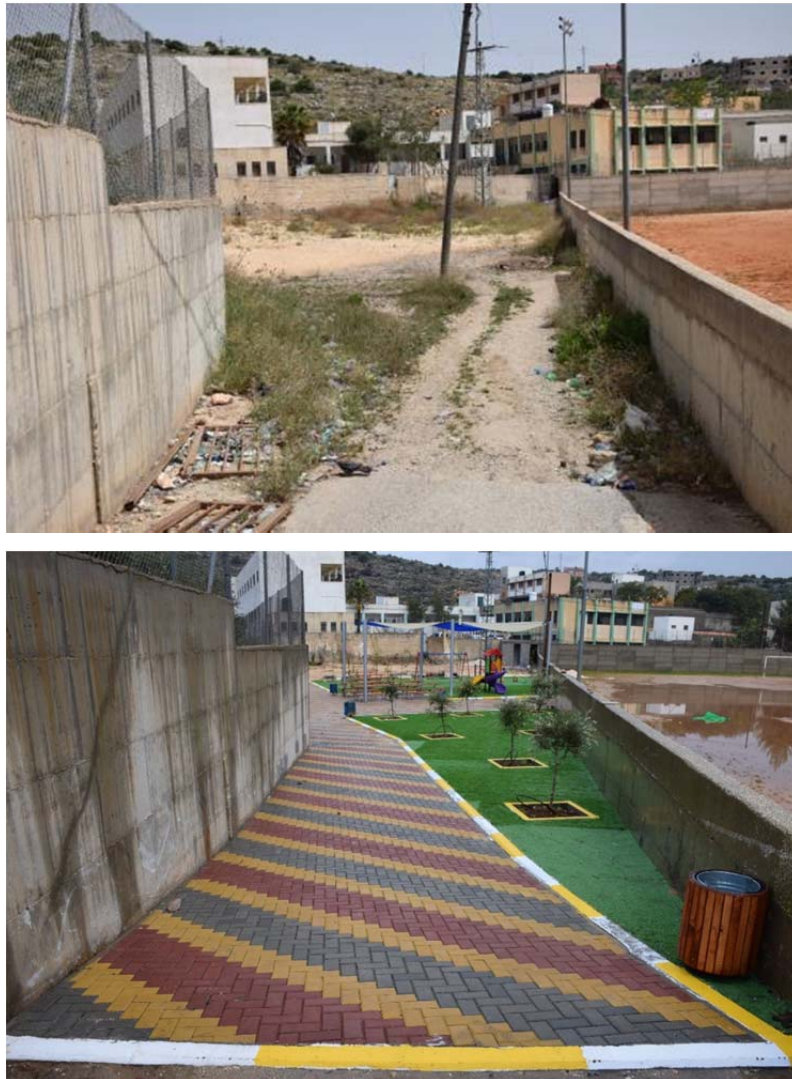


Figure (6): Bruqin proposed site at the time of the safety audit (September 2018), and after implementation (January 2019)
Source: (United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 2019)

To be specific, placemaking interventions helped in and contributed to empowerment of local communities and self-determination; provided sustainable development solutions; and mainstreamed human rights and democratic governance. In terms of empowerment and self-determination, the placemaking interventions were a mechanism through which local communities could control their built environment and giving them opportunities to exercise a degree of self-determination, noting that placemaking interventions enjoy the administrative protection measure offered by being within the boundary of the Palestinian masterplans, and required a relatively low threshold of permissions through the Israeli planning system. Furthermore, the placemaking interventions contributed to sustainable development by emphasizing the efficient use of local resources and unlock latent economic resources held within the communities, and by implementing them through community contracting their implementation supports local business and provided local employment opportunities. Last but not least, the placemaking process is

designed in a way to be transparent and participatory, where local communities have the chance to inform the decision-making process and substantially promote and advocate for their planning and building rights (Donovan, 2017).

Many Palestinian scholars believe that the placemaking interventions reciprocate with the prevailing land-equalizing and collective ownership system known as Al-Masha that is typically managed directly by the peasants and villagers (Said, 1978). In the recent past, Al-Masha was destined to become a state ownership (Eid, 2016).

Actually, the large swaths of Al-Masha designations have been facing a spatial contraction, since in 1914 during the Ottoman rule Al-Masha made up about 70% of land, while in the 1947 during the British Mandate it made up only 25% (El-Eini, 2006). Nowadays, the official figures of the Palestinian Authority show that Al-Masha makes up less than 2% of the West Bank, most of which designated as Israeli state land that is mainly reserved for future Israeli settlement expansion. In an outlook, it is argued that there is a professed need to readdress Al-Masha land in the West Bank within the geopolitical context that spawns it and consider the panoply of options at hand to use Al-Masha in the best value-for-money approach for the good benefit of the public (El-Atrash, 2014). It is argued that placemaking interventions serve little purpose in this respect.

Concluding remarks

The placemaking interventions have always been introduced as a way to support the implementation of public space interventions for and with vulnerable Palestinian communities to provide a safe, gender-sensitive, inclusive, and resilient built environment that would have a broader positive impact, especially on youth and women, who have been lacking for a protracted period the basic needs in the public realm (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2007). Important to mention that placemaking interventions focus on enhancing safety of local communities, by defining for instance pedestrian spaces in the street including sidewalks and pedestrian crossings, in addition to speed bumps. Relevant safety audit tools are utilized to achieve desired objectives. The implementation of a public space based on placemaking approach as a non-statutory planning tool will complement the work that has been initiated in partnership with local communities based on the statutory planning tool - masterplans - prepared and submitted to the Israeli authorities to respond to the demolition crisis and enable local development of social infrastructure. This planning approach confirms with the policy adopted by UN agencies working in Area C, as outlined in the 'One UN' Approach to Spatial Planning in Area C of the Occupied West Bank (2015) (United Nations, 2015).

The placemaking interventions fit with the Palestinian National Policy Agenda 2017-2022 and the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) 2018-2022 signed-off by the Government of Palestine and the UN in Palestine. More specifically, the interventions respond to pillar no. 2, Government Reform, national priority 4, Citizen-Centred Government, National Policy 8, Improving Services to Citizens. In the same token, the interventions respond to the UNDAF Strategic Priority 2: Supporting equal access to accountable, effective and responsive democratic governance for all. On a broader perspective, the placemaking interventions contribute to realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New Urban Agenda adopted by State of Palestine. More specifically, the interventions will contribute to localizing SDGs 5, and 11).

Finally, as previous studies have shown, e.g. (Najjar & Ghadban, 2015), there are enough leftover space, junk space, courtyards and enclaves that can be revitalized. LGUs, with collaboration of private and public bodies, should uncover these locations, open them to the public, provide accessibility and formulate strategies on dealing with such neglected areas. This will contribute in providing safe, gender-sensitive, inclusive, and resilient built environment that would have a broader positive impact, especially on women and youth.

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