

## Transforming Life for Young People. Public Space Action in Informal Settlements in Sierra Leone

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### Abstract

The paper makes a *posteriori* contribution as part of the active place-making discourse in the African context within two dimensions: First, it substantiates how public spaces can be transformed when shifting the focus from place-based to a process-oriented approach framed around the empowerment of the human condition to improve subjective wellbeing. Second, it provides rich insights into a case study on several informal settlements in urban Sierra Leone, West Africa, based on our project aspiration to create safe and conducive spaces for one of the most under-prioritized population groups - the urban youth. Together, both dimensions provide an invitation to evaluate ways how the UN-Habitat Global Public Space Toolkit can be effectively implemented at a local level and upscaled to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11.7.

Philosophically, the mixed method action-research project received inspiration from Henry Lefebvre's social production of space which informed the design of the dream-catching process and was translated into a unique social research methodology that bridges the disciplinary divide from public health, anthropology, and urban design. The role of process-oriented approaches to place-making, in this context called space-making, is the key element of this paper. However, the empirical baseline data on subjective wellbeing collected from 1091 young people function as the foundation method to identify and validate the possible impact factor of the public space interventions to improve their environmental conditions. The conclusion reflects on the emergence of new epistemologies associated with the idea of urban loveability as it embraces the public space as an open-ended process to place-making in the African context to transform not just a place but the human condition - in this case, marginalised urban youth.

**Keywords:** public space, space-making, youth wellbeing, Sierra Leone, informal settlements

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## **Introduction**

Around the world, people migrate to urban areas in the aspiration of a 'better' life that offers them possibilities for economic success, education, and better overall health and wellbeing. However, urban life often does not deliver on these hopes, and the dream remains out of reach for many and manifests in very little improvement to those classified as resource-poor. The severity of this issue should not be underestimated, as currently one billion people around the world live and actively engage in 'informal' urban practices which include public spaces within settlements (United Nations, 2019b). People that reside in those 'informal' settlements stand very little chance to break the cycle of poverty in pursuit of economic gain as there is a lack of nurturing conditions in a multiplicity of critical dimensions. For example, due to land tenure issues poverty struck residents are often urged to engage in transgressive activities such as unrest out of shire necessity for survival (Dovey, 2013). Admittedly, a shift towards a change in perception and framing of poverty has been proposed by several scholars (Huchzermeyer and Karam, 2006, Amin and Thrift, 2017). Hence, we conceive the argument of economic prosperity as only one of those strong pull factors for people to move to areas of urban practices and question the assumption that it is not the most effective way to create equitable spaces that achieve youth wellbeing. Once the dwellers inhabit areas with inferior infrastructure provision, so-called negative socioeconomic and spatial tension result in alienation, segregation, and marginalisation that mainly become evident in their state of health and wellbeing. On the United Nations level, this concept has been considered concerning the collective narrative of the city-making processes under the term of 'leaving no one behind' (United Nations, 2017). Unlike common 20th century practices to improve living conditions linked to top-down upgrading of informal settlements, we interrogate the nexus through a different window- subjective wellbeing. To be specific we examine criteria used to measure degrees of subjective wellbeing of one of the most vulnerable population groups: young people in the age range of 15-35 (UNFPA, 2017) as the starting point to improve living conditions through 'soft' post-structuralist approaches that localize sustainable development solutions to deliver improvement for everyday life in transformative ways. The established argument that young people participate less in formal politics as they have no well-defined place in their respected society (Abbink, 2005) does equally apply to young people in informal settlements as they the majority feels that they lack opportunities to take part in society and do not have places to even go to and meet (Schirmer et al., 2020). For the purpose of this paper, our place-making approach is inspired by Henri Lefebvre's potent conceptual triad of space which theorises ways how space is socially produced (Lefebvre, 1991b). The cognitive capacity of the human mind is addressed in Lefebvre's representations of space which is also commonly understood as conceived space. While the spatial products are contained within the representational or lived space and the collective meaning-making aspect is embedded in the perceived or spatial practice space. The usefulness of concept of space and time in the context of urbanization has been convincingly discussed by scholars such as Harvey (1990) or Dovey (2008) and successfully applied by scholar such as Mews (2022) and Stevens (2007). The idea of 'space-making' naturally evolved out of the theoretical framing of Lefebvre's (social) space for the very reason as it overcomes limitations of phenomenological theories by reconciling the lived space with every day (Dovey, 2008) while overcoming the conceptual division of the object and subject through a set of relations (Lefebvre, 1991a). As the more 'soft' process-oriented approaches (van Melik, 2020) focus on the space of ideas (dreams) and their ongoing potential for realisations in public space, we seek to celebrate the balance of cognitive capacity of human minds to positively transform space that is not just evident in spatial products, rather

something which is closely connected to collective meaning-making as a pathway to improve wellbeing. Hence, this type of 'place-making' activity shall be referred to as 'space-making' and applies to open-ended ways of modifying materiality including grassroots community engagement methods, co-production, self-empowered education, and micro-level incentive schemes such as public space challenges (Ottosen and Mews, 2019).

The question of whether urban 'poor' are allowed to take on a positive role full of agency as part of urban practice, will be empirically substantiated with this case study. We contest that only top-down architectural approaches related to functional 'aesthetics' can achieve the aim of creating 'better' cities through 'beautification' of public spaces. In these cases, certain user groups such as under-prioritized population groups (urban youth) are often design out and the full potential of public spaces not realized (Stevens, 2007, Mews, 2022, Shirtcliff, 2018). In the following, we will provide the context of our case study in Sierra Leone by outlining contemporary conditions of urban youth and the state of public space. Then we will interrogate the space-making process and further qualitative learnings from our case study to achieve improvements concerning i) Access to safe and inclusive spaces; ii) Access to green and pleasant places; iii) Safety and security; iv) Literacy, education, and skills, v) Opportunity and support; and vi) Governance and leadership.

## Context

### *Sierra Leone*

Sierra Leone has for decades been one of the most impoverished countries in the world with more than half of its 7,97 million population (Worldbank, 2021) living below the international poverty line of 1.90 US Dollars a day (United Nations, 2019a). The economy remains challenged by pervasive corruption and undeveloped human capital. The country has experienced its share of hardships over the past 30 years including a devastating civil war from 1991-2002, recurrent flooding, the outbreak of the Ebola virus in 2014, the 2017 mudslides in Freetown, and as of the pandemic of Covid-19 in 2020. Democracy is slowly being re-established after the civil war that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than 2 million people. Sierra Leone has a young and growing population and is experiencing rapid urbanisation which is putting enormous pressure on cities to accommodate an increasing number of young residents in particular. Thus, many of Sierra Leone's young city dwellers grow up or settle in slums and informal settlements. An estimated 60% of the population is below the age of 25, and the age group 15-35 makes up almost 40 % of the total population (UNDP, 2018). Sierra Leone is further labelled as 'Low human development' in UNDP's human development index (UNDP, 2020).

### *Urban youth*

Sierra Leone's population is dominated by youth. After the lengthy civil war from 1991 to 2002, rapid population growth and one of the world's lowest life expectancies mean that as of 2015, more than 40% of the population was aged under 15, and 80% were aged 35 or younger (UNFPA, 2017). The cities have a particularly high proportion of young residents. One of the reasons for this is the migration of youth to the cities from rural areas. Sierra Leone is a country in which the process of urbanisation is putting pressure on existing cities to accommodate a growing number of, especially young, residents. The Sierra Leone civil war between 1991 and 2002 fuelled urbanisation, as life in the city was perceived as safer than in many rural areas. The movement of young people from rural to urban today is motivated by the search for better livelihood opportunities, both economic and social. Life in the city carries promises (although often unfulfilled) of education, employment, a higher

living standard, less social control and expectations contrary to traditional lifestyles and pressure from older generations, etc. In this regard, cities are natural attractors to youth, however, the promised freedom of urban life can be far from the experience of an average young person in the cities of Sierra Leone, particularly those living in informal settlements. The large proportion of youth growing up in and migrating to cities challenges urban infrastructures and governance, and many youths experience challenges such as social exclusion from livelihood opportunities and meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This exclusion can lead to pathways where young people experience a lack of social control, have limited support systems, and urban youth can live in what are effectively parallel worlds to mainstream society.

#### *Public space*

Public space can be defined as “*all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive*” (Garau et al., 2015). Urbanization is increasing the importance of such spaces because they impact the individual and social wellbeing of urban citizens and act as places that reflect collective community life. In the context of urbanization, the provision of access to safe, inclusive, and accessible, green and public spaces (SDG target 11.7) is key to urban wellbeing. The UN-Habitat 2015 Global Public Space Toolkit highlights the benefits and potentials of public space development to several important aspects of urban life, including increased income and wealth generation, enhanced environmental sustainability, improved public health, enhanced urban safety, and social inclusion (UN-Habitat, 2015). The focus on public space emerged from the growing understanding of the critical influence of urban design for the wellbeing of those living in urban areas, and in particular the importance of shared public spaces that provide space for the formation and enactment of communities. For several decades, since seminal studies on public life and the role of public space, there has been growing recognition that space is (i) socially produced, and (ii) a critical influence on human experience in an urban context (Dovey, 2013, Dovey, 2011, Butler, 2012, Lefebvre, 1991a, Lefebvre, 1996, Merrifield, 1993, Watkins, 2005, Zieleniec, 2018). Following the argument provided by Jane Jacobs, “*Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody*” (Jacobs, 1961), we embarked on the initial process journey to co-create a shared understanding and culture-specific definition of public space as a concept. We found that ‘public space’ was either perceived as an abstract concept from the western world or remained a foreign concept to many residents of the informal settlements until the project team co-produced the meaning with the participants.

The youth in the pilot settlement Funkia in Freetown co-created the following definition: “*A public space is a space available to people of all ages where they can meet every day socially and comfortably. These spaces are safe, accessible, free of cost, inclusive, free of discrimination, enjoyable, and encourage idea-sharing. Such spaces will contribute to our collective wellbeing.*” Subsequently, this definition was peer-validated in the eight other communities across Sierra Leone as part of the overall creating space for young people project.

#### **‘Space-making’ process: an open-ended process focuses to place-making**

Whilst access to safe and inclusive public spaces in urban Sierra Leone remains very limited, and individual living conditions for young people in urban areas remain poor – the need for recreation and socialisation also remains often unfulfilled. The overall aim of the action research project is to ground proof a theory of change that is based on the laudable work of Henry Lefebvre’s social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991b) and the right to the city

(Lefebvre, 1996). However, the emphasis of this paper only focuses on the hypothesis that a process-oriented approach to place-making (van Melik, 2020) that prioritizes the collective right to co-produce space can enable tangible pathways to improve the subjective wellbeing of young people in informal settlements. The open-ended process started with a specific co-design process, which can be referred to as a dream-catching tool as part of the space-making. We developed a tailored co-design method to collect data, called the dream-catching tool. The following section will first outline the design of the method before delving into the wellbeing survey data and then the case study findings.



Figure 1: Blessing from Bonga Town engaged in a community mapping workshop.  
Source: Dreamtown.

### **Dream-catching tool**

Deployment of the tool takes approximately three days. On the first day, community participants will be introduced to the context and public space as a concept. Groups engaged in spatial community mapping (see figure 1).

On the second day, participants dream together and engage in a rigorous process that narrows the intervention down to something tangible – to ideas for public space interventions. On the third day, the top three ideas are being modelled and exposed to a vote that subsequently results in the top collective dream for a public space design. The aim is to identify the most feasible and impact-effective space-making project for the young people in each community (figure 2).

A process that starts with a joyful encounter within a flat hierarchy - a meeting of people at a mutual level. Trust building is an integral part of the process and introduced through a range of targeted activities that are culturally appropriate (such as playful activities and dance) (see figure 3).

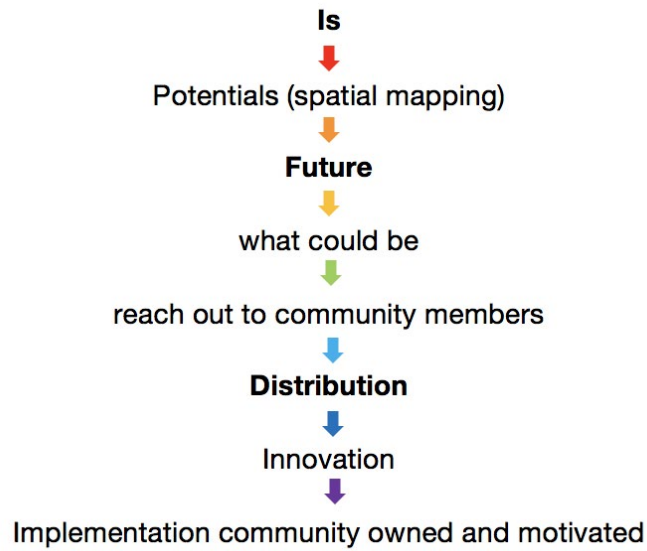


Figure 2: Dream-catching process (Source: Urban Synergies Group / Dreamtown)



Figure 3: Trust-building exercises with the community.  
Source: Urban Synergies Group / Dreamtown.

The “Is” phase asks questions about what kinds of spaces already exist in the community, and the potential to embed an intervention. The next step focuses on the future, asking questions of what could be (blue-sky thinking). We asked participants to rank all their ideas at a scale from the high level of fun to the low level of fun (Figure 4).





Figure 4: Ideas ranking. Source: Urban Synergies Group / Dreamtown.

As the next step, participants had to focus on the ideas that were situated at the higher fun spectrum and place them on the graph that allowed us to identify three ideas that fit within the high impact and low effort part of the graph (see figure 5). Ultimately, helping us identify those dreams that were expected to have the highest possible impact in the communities, at a cost and effort level possible within our project scope.

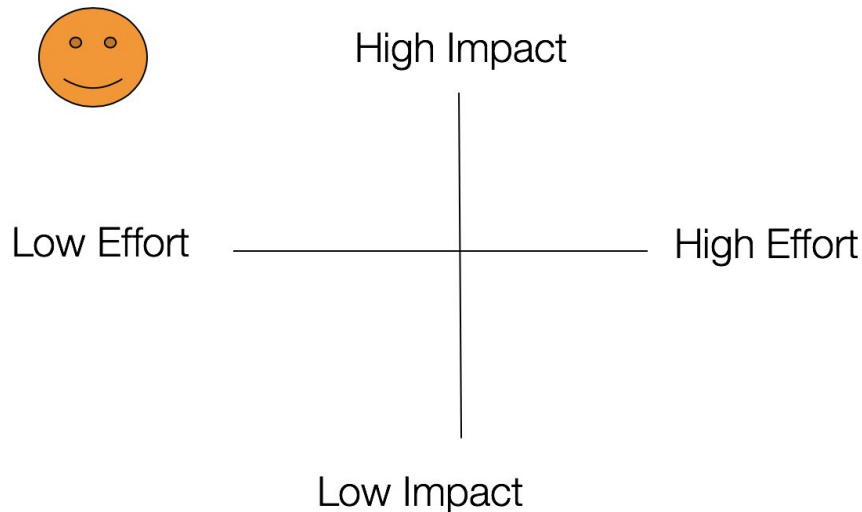


Figure 5: Ranking scale. Source: Urban Synergies Group / Dreamtown.

Once the top three ideas were identified and agreed upon at the end of the second day, we asked participants to reach out to other community members overnight that did not necessarily take part in the process to get feedback/ validation on their ideas for the community. The last step was all about the distribution of the agreed vision, that the

residents themselves with their collective knowledge, skills, and networks could implement. This ensures community ownership and motivation to realize innovation that can last sustainably.

### **Subjective Wellbeing: data to validate the impact and nature of the public space interventions**

To ensure that the idea can achieve the most impact with limited resources, the concept of 'subjective wellbeing' was introduced. The technical term 'subjective wellbeing' is defined as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life (Diener et al., 2002).

Further, the empirical process around survey data collection was carried out by the project partners and led by the academic institutions. Noteworthy is that the collection has been carried out with locally trained students from the University of Makeni, all of which speak Creole and meet participants at an equal standing. All interviewers first explained the purpose of the survey, how long it would take (15-20 minutes), followed by an explanation of the rights to confidentiality and privacy. In addition, people's age and eligibility had to be confirmed before consent was given to take part in the survey. If a person was unable to read and write, informed consent was obtained before the commencement of interviews. If the person was able to read and write, participants signed the form. At the end of each survey, participants were asked to consent to provide their contact details for follow-up surveys. A range of different threats to subjective wellbeing for these youths was identified, including:

- lack of voice in the community,
- lack of access to education,
- lack of employment opportunities,
- social exclusion spatially as well as in decision-making processes,
- exposure to poor housing conditions,
- (sexual) violence,
- early pregnancy,
- no access to health services,
- drug and alcohol abuse,
- criminal activity.

In total respondents 47.8% were female and 52.2% were male; 30.8% of the survey participants were aged 15-19, 31.2% aged 20 to 24, and 38.0% aged 25 to 35 (Schirmer et al., 2020). The data from the youth wellbeing survey revealed that 68 percent of the 1091 surveyed youth believe that walking safely alone is a problem (Schirmer et al., 2020). Further 62 percent reported that they have no access to 'nature' or 'green space' and 75 percent of the young people do not have places where they can go and be creative (Schirmer et al., 2020). While 58 percent felt that young people are not being listened to 95 percent felt that they lack opportunities to take part in society (Schirmer et al., 2020). Both factors are highly relevant to determine the level and role of process-oriented approaches as part of place-making. Therefore, our space-making process included:

1. Youth wellbeing survey – identification of local context-specific data on subjective wellbeing
2. Dream-catching – identification of youth priorities for public space
3. Space development - implementation of community-driven public space action
4. Advocacy- continued momentum through the strategic application of youth parliaments to empower young people in those settlements.



At the end of the dream-catching process and the empirical baseline data collection on subjective wellbeing, we were in a comfortable position to determine the nature of the public space intervention to improve 1) Access to safe and inclusive spaces; 2) Access to green and pleasant places; 3) Safety and security; 4) Literacy, education, and skills, 5) Opportunity and support; and 6) Governance and leadership.

### **Case study: Creating Spaces for young people (Freetown, Makeni, and Koidu)**

The overall project takes place in eight communities situated in three urban areas in Sierra Leone: Freetown in the Western Urban Area, Makeni in Bombali district, and Koidu in Kono district, where the project's lead partner, Youth Dream Centre-Sierra Leone (YDC-SL) have their three office units. The following section provides a synopsis of the target communities where the project is undertaken.

The *Freetown communities (Funkia and Bonga Town)* are the most 'urban' in their construction, being characterized by very closely built small buildings. With limited available land, these informal settlements are typically located on land with poor drainage and a high frequency of flooding, frequently being reclaimed areas created through dumping waste and piling mud in areas of estuaries and drainage areas. Access to electricity varies, but an average of 79% of the Freetown communities have access to electricity at home (Schirmer et al., 2020). There is typically little to no vegetation growing within the densely populated communities, although some steep hillsides are draining into the community that has vegetation growing on them (and are also a source of flooding). *Funkia and Bonga Town* communities, respectively, border ocean and mangrove wetland. *Funkia* was built partly on solid ground and partly on areas where waste disposal has created new areas. The communities have a very high density of small residences, typically tin, wood, or brick shanty construction. Flooding is common in the wet season with poor to no drainage and drainage of water to the ocean during large rains affecting the communities.

The *Makeni communities (Renka, Mabanta, and New London)* are characterised by more widely spaced homes than is the case in Freetown, with greater space around homes for vegetation, and in many cases large numbers of trees and shrubs (although not in all parts of the communities). While homes are larger than is the case in Freetown, they typically house larger numbers of people, with very crowded housing common. *Renka, Mabanta, and New London* communities are characterised by homes made of brick and stone, often with large numbers of people living in them. For example, in *Renka*, 36% of youth live in a household with 15 to 19 people, and 21% in a household with 20 or more residents. In the *Makeni* communities, an average of 66 % of youth have access to home electricity (Schirmer et al., 2020).

The *Koidu communities (Kainsay, Koakoyima, and Koeyor)* are located in the Kono district, which is well known for its diamond mines. The communities are all characterised by small to moderately sized buildings, often with some space between them, and some vegetation often including trees, occasionally of reasonable size providing some shade in parts of the communities. Electricity access is not high in the three communities, with only, on average, 28% of youth having home electricity (Schirmer et al., 2020). In *Kainsay, Koakoyima, and Koeyor*, household sizes vary a lot but tend to be a little smaller compared to *Makeni*. Young people living in urban informal settlements experience inequality at several levels. At a societal level, they are marginalised under where they live. And in the informal settlement, they are marginalized under whom they are – young people. Significant change requires

action both at a societal and community level. At the end of the project, it is the ambition that young people are better organised, empowered to take lead on urban transformation, and participate in the decision-making processes in the eight communities. In the target communities, based on the dream and design process outlined above, the youth decided to build or rehabilitate community centres in the heart of their communities (figure 6 & 7).



Figure 6: Koevor community centre as a public space for youth.  
Source: Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone.



Figure 7: The public space for youth in Kensay community.  
Source: Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone.

### Participation, ownership, and impact

In support of this process, eight community-based organisations strengthened their capacity within project management and advocacy, and, together with YDC-SL, took part in presenting and discussing their Call to Action based on youth development priorities with the community and local (at district level) authorities. Community youth groups played a critical role during the project. In the establishment of the public spaces, by contributing to the labour and construction work, providing local procured building materials, safeguarding the materials and the spaces during the construction phase, fetching water, and cooking food. Youth were also mobilised to bridge gaps between youth and community stakeholders on issues that would affect the project, through frequent engagement during and after the establishment of the centres. The project has helped shift the mindset of youths (social production of space) and allowed them to identify with project-related roles and responsibilities. As a result, more young people started to play a proactive role as community stakeholders, lobbying on matters affecting their lives and wellbeing, and minimising community disputes through dialogue. In several communities, there has been an increase in the visible inclusion of youth (figure 8). For example, in Koidu, beneficiaries of the three youth spaces have established a coalition and registered with District Youth Council, and in Makeni, youth reported increased recognition by community stakeholders and are now invited to community decision meetings. Across eight communities the evaluation of the first parts of the project revealed that construction of the youth public spaces engulfed community support and participation also from non-direct project beneficiaries (men, women, other youth, and community stakeholders).



Figure 8: Renka community youth meeting.  
Source: Desert women.

To substantiate the level of impact of the space-making project as a process-oriented approach to place-making at the community level the following qualitative data includes the following statements from the youth and community stakeholders:

*“In regard of the existing peaceful co-existence in this community, my recognition of youth as a legitimate huge fraction of our community population has significantly increased.” (Community chief in Makeni)*

*“With the construction of the youth public space at Koeyor, we started having planned meetings at the center where we could express ourselves freely and constructively. Due to frequent meetings in the public space, my approach and mannerism to issues changed. Additionally, I have gained and developed skills in hosting and chairing meetings, resolving conflicts, lobbying with co-youth and community stakeholders to effect favourable decisions, and taking actions on matters that stand to benefit youth and the community; and my communication has improved too. With these attributes, I was moved to vie for the position of Town Chief of Koeyor, a position that has never been won by any youth in past decades.” (Town Chief in Koidu)*

*“During the implementation of the youth space project, I had witnessed demonstrable changes in my community. Key among others include youth male and female had regular fruitful project planning meetings with community stakeholders at all facets of implementation.” (Youth in Makeni)*

*"Community elders realised the need to work with us as responsible youth to make our dream (establishing youth public space) a success. I must confess that our youth public space project's key anticipated outcome is that it has bridged our relationship with our senior community stakeholders." (Youth in Kono)*

In Freetown, community stakeholders' responsiveness to the project has been lower compared to Makeni and Koidu, and there have been more challenges in the collaboration with community stakeholders and authorities. According to our evaluation, this has been due to low community stakeholder involvement and support, lack of capacity building for youth, low management capacity, and inadequate structure among partner community-based organizations (CBOs). These challenges are now followed upon in the second phase of the project, where the focus is increasingly on improving these collaborations in the two target communities in Freetown.

The developed community youth centres through the space-making project are now used for a wide variety of community activities including the following examples:

- Spaces are used to meet, deliberate, and decide on matters concerning community development. In essence, the public spaces are being used as common community grounds for consultation, engagements, planning, and decision-making.
- Across the target communities, youth informed that the public spaces are used for capacity building training, dispute resolution, and community meetings about their development plan. In Koidu, skills training is being conducted at the three centres.
- Local community administrators use the public spaces as local courts to resolve disputes. It has led to a substantial decrease in conflict and the manifestation of unity and peace among youth and community elders.
- Youth used the spaces to educate and disseminate information on preventing and eradicating COVID-19 and other public health best practices.
- In Makeni, community youth now offer free counselling services on drug abuse and



health best practices at the centres.

- Youth in Makeni conduct remedial classes for Junior and Senior Secondary School levels to contribute to their educational pursuits.
- In the Mabanta community, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation uses the youth spaces on a routine basis to administer vaccination and distribution of mosquito nets.
- In Bonga Town, a member of one of the youth groups conducts literacy classes.

### **Posteriori reflections on case study**

The space-making project is now moving in a direction of much more direct collaboration with local youth groups in each of the eight communities, to increase young people's ownership. 40 youth groups (five in each community) are now actively engaged in running the centres and will take part in a wide range of trainings and actions to positively transform, not only the centres and the space around them, but also other areas of their communities. In this process, they will be empowered through pieces of training and action projects that will be framed around making their communities safer, greener, and more creative. A key focus of the process-oriented place-making will be on strengthening capacities to engage in local fundraising and resource mobilization at the community and city level, in support of the continued sustainability of the youth centres.

While getting access to and maintaining the land rights to spaces in the communities, in itself, can be conceived as a success considering the scarcity of urban spaces and contestation over land use, there is an identified need to invest in perceivable ownership of the centres. Continuing the project, the youth community centres continue to act as hubs for the youth groups to engage in community transformation. At the same time, they strengthen the CBOs and organizational structures of the youth groups. To emphasize agency among the youth groups directly, they will each be in charge of implementing micro-projects, based on technical training that are facilitated as some shared responsibilities of all the project partners. These steps are taken based on the assumption that increasing local ownership over the process among the youth will amplify the impact of the project and strengthen sustainability. In addition, too many youths in the communities, having the opportunity to be part of a network, and be active in community work, keep them off the streets, and can build their skills.

The physical artifacts associated with the development of community spaces became a tangible and visible effect of the space-making process as part of the strategy to provide a platform for youth-led advocacy towards the improvement of their wellbeing. This reinforces the fact that young people in the communities need to continue to collaborate on finding solutions for, and advocating key duty bearers on, issues that affect them. An example of such a platform is the community youth parliaments (Dalton, 1996), which are facilitated at the community level regularly. Youth parliaments in the Sierra Leone context are an established forum for youth to engage in dialogue with key stakeholders and authority representatives, keep them accountable, and show them that young people are willing to – and capable of – joining the solutions. The project, therefore, continues to tackle community development from a spatial and urban design perspective, along with empowerment initiatives, and advocacy efforts for the improved wellbeing of youth across all the communities.

## Conclusion

The interrogation of our perhaps unconventional theory of change to implement a bottom-up vision to deliver not just liveable but loveable environments (Mews, 2020) for urban youth, we found that they can improve everyday life experiences of under-prioritized population groups. While place-making projects lend themselves to empower specific groups and deliver outcomes/ improvements with a sense of immediacy, the underlying process is key to enabling conditions for long-term prosperity as well as improvements to the collective wellbeing of community groups. In addition, we also found that the prevailing paradigm to improve informal settlements and their development patterns seems to be doomed and caught up in an endless circle of not being able to keep up with demand as part of conceptual dualism. While urban areas continue to rapidly grow, system responses remain stuck in a dualism around the production processes and products associated with top-down economics and large infrastructure projects, that continue to create divisions between those who have and those who have not. As Mumford eloquently put it "*The city should be an organ of love, and the best economy of cities in the care and culture of men*" (Mumford, 1961). With this posterior contribution, we were able to substantiate and contribute to an argument that calls for the transformative potential in under-prioritised population groups that upholds ethics, values, and care of the culture of mankind as equals coming together to socially produce spaces that deliver Lefebvre's vision of the right to the city. Deploying a process-oriented approach to place-making as part of this 'space-making' project can achieve impact among under-prioritized population groups. Small local Non-government-organisations (NGOs), strong CBO and collaborative multidisciplinary teams that focus on grass-roots action, building trust through joy and collective dreaming, while committed to pushing the paradigms in non-linear and innovative ways are in a position to effectively pilot novel approaches and upscale such as process-oriented approaches as part of implementation the New Urban Agenda (United Nations, 2017) and the Sustainable Development Goal 11.7.

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