



Call for Action: priorities for youth wellbeing and public space in urban Sierra Leone



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

**DREAM
TOWN**



**Urban
Synergies
group**

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BACKGROUND

There is a critical need to identify both the current wellbeing of youth living in informal settlements in Sierra Leone, and to identify and invest in community-scale interventions that have potential to support and build wellbeing among young people, where wellbeing challenges range from lacking a clear voice in the community, to 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, and others.

These challenges often leave youth living in informal settlements with little space for dreaming and little opportunity to increase their personal wellbeing. Addressing the needs of young people and investing in their potential is critical to national growth, development, and security.

This Call for Action describes some of the results of a survey undertaken for the “Creating spaces for young people in urban Sierra Leone” project. The project is a collaboration between Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone (YDC-SL) (Sierra Leone), Dreamtown (Denmark), Urban Synergies Group (Australia), University of Canberra - Health Research Institute (Australia), University of Makeni (UNIMAK) (Sierra Leone), and Civilt Society in Development (CISU) (Denmark, funding partner).

These partners seek to support youth wellbeing through community-led public space interventions in informal settlements. Urbanisation is increasing the importance of public spaces, because they impact the individual and social wellbeing of urban citizens and act as places that reflect collective community life.

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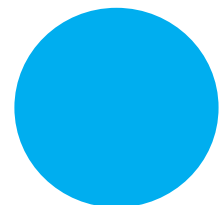
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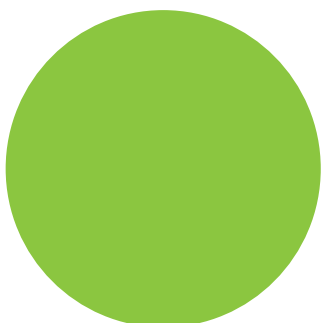
Youth
Dream
Centre
Sierra
Leone



**Urban
Synergies
group**



The provision
of access to
safe, inclusive and
accessible, green
and public spaces
is key to urban
wellbeing.



PROJECT: CREATING SPACE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN URBAN SIERRA LEONE

Across Sierra Leone, there is a lack of knowledge about the state of wellbeing amongst young people living in informal settlements, and about the potential role of public space in contributing positively to wellbeing. We want to address this knowledge gap and contribute to developing public spaces that support well-being with and for young people.

The research we describe in this Call for Action is part of the “Creating spaces for young people in urban Sierra Leone” project. This project seeks to support youth well-being through community-led public space interventions in informal settlements, while also examining the broader wellbeing status of youth in these settlements and key needs for further building wellbeing. We use the creation and improvement of quality public spaces for the most vulnerable urban youth as a tool to promote inclusion and safety of young people in the city and improve their overall wellbeing.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDG’S)
Our work and Calls for Action are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) of the United Nations, in that we contribute to, and call for more action to:

1. Improve access to safe and inclusive spaces (SDG 11.1: By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums; 11.3: By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries; 11.7: By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities).

2. Improve the wellbeing of young people in informal settlements (SDG 3.4: By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and wellbeing).
3. Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17.9: Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the sustainable development goals, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation; 17.16: Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries; 17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships).



PUBLIC SPACE: CONTRIBUTION TO IMPROVING YOUTH WELL-BEING

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” (UN-Habitat, Charter of Public Space, 2015). Urbanisation 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 a context of urbanisation, 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 Public Space Toolkit 13 highlights the benefits and potentials of public space development to a number of important aspects of urban life, including increased income and wealth generation, enhanced environmental sustainability, improved public health, enhanced urban safety, and social inclusion. The exact definition of ‘public space’ is contested, and can be particularly challenging in informal settlements, where a public space is rarely a formally delineated or regulated space. During this project, our team co-designed a specific public space definition with young community members in Freetown. This defined public space in the Sierra Leonean context as:



“A space available
to people of all ages
where they can meet everyday,
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.”

OUR RESEARCH

Our work and research focused on nine communities, three in Freetown (Bonga Town, Congo Town and Funkia), three in Makeni (Mabanta, New London and Renka), and three in Kono (Kainsay, Koeyor and Koakoyima). Through questionnaires, our survey collected data on the well-being of youth that can be compared to the broader population of Sierra Leone and to those in other countries. The survey has measured multiple aspects of well-being, as any public space intervention is likely to have specific impacts on particular aspects of wellbeing, rather than on a person's overall wellbeing. Data were collected using face to face interviews, captured on mobile devices.

A total of 1093 valid and complete survey responses were collected from people aged between 15 and 34 years of age. The survey findings were ground-truthed through an intensive three-day process in which the data collectors, supervisors, University of Makeni staff, YDC-SL staff and Dreamtown staff came together and evaluated the quality of the survey data and findings, and through visits to the communities.

SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING is a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life. Wellbeing is often lower during formative youth years, when psychological distress can be high. Given this is the case in many countries globally, irrespective of their development, it is likely to be more so for youth living in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Sierra Leone – the informal settlements. Initial meetings for this project identified a wide range of threats to wellbeing for these youth, ranging from lack of voice in the community, to 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, and others. These challenges often leave youth living in informal settlements with little space for dreaming and little opportunity to increase their personal wellbeing. Addressing the needs of young people and investing in their potential is critical to national growth, development, and security.



TARGET SAMPLE COMPOSITION AND PARTICIPATION RATE IN RESEARCH SURVEY

		Number of Respondents
	Total Sample	1091
Nine Communities	Congo Town, Freetown	111
	Funkia, Freetown	84
	Bongo Town, Freetown	88
	Koeyor, Kono	167
	Koakoyima, Kono	106
	Kainsay, Kono	109
	New London, Makeni	116
	Mabanta, Makeni	90
	Renka Community, Makeni	220
	Three Cities	Freetown
Kono		382
Makeni		426

OUR FINDINGS AND OUR CALLS FOR ACTION

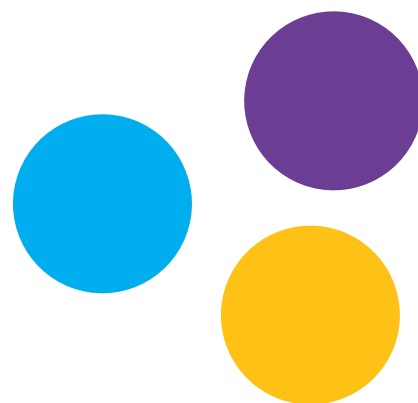
ACCESS TO SAFE INCLUSIVE SPACES

- Only 39% reported having a safe place or places where they can meet with other young people outside their home.
- 74.9% did not have a space where can go and be creative.

75%
do not have
places where
they can go and
be creative

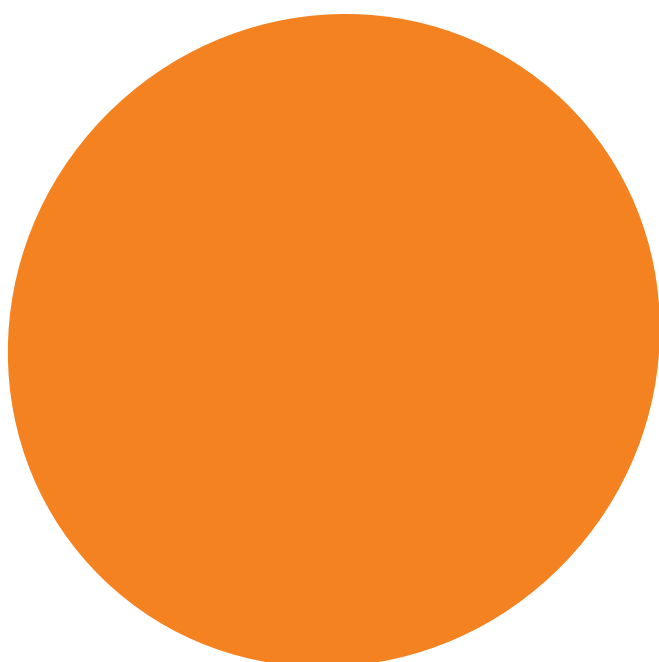


Of the aspects of public space related to access to safe and inclusive spaces, one in particular was associated with higher wellbeing: those who had the ability to spend time with others thinking of ideas for the future and working towards them had much higher wellbeing compared to those who did not. This highlights that while safety and creativity are important, it may be critical to use these to actively encourage building of future ideas and working towards them in order to build wellbeing.



CALLS FOR ACTION

1. National and Local Governments need to prioritise and invest in providing safe, inclusive, and affordable housing in informal settlements (taking the slum from the people, not the people from the slum), by upgrading informal communities with climate and disaster resilient houses.
2. National and Local Governments must factor in their annual development plans and budgets to support the development of safe and inclusive public spaces where young people can go and be creative.
3. National and Local Governments asked to provide support for equipment to be used for young people to engage in creative activities in the safe public space already developed by Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone and local community based organisations in nine communities in Freetown (Bonga Town, Congo Town and Funkia), Makeni (Mabanta, New London and Renka), and Kono (Kainsay, Koeyor and Koakoyima).
4. Community based organisations and youth groups in these locations need to constantly engage their peers and the communities on the benefits of safe and inclusive public space to their wellbeing.
5. Engagement must be prioritised with the Ministry of Lands Housing and Country Planning, community leaders and land owners to ensure they provide land spaces for the development of safe and inclusive public spaces in the informal communities.



ACCESS TO 'GREEN SPACE' AND PLEASANT PLACES

- 56.3% did not have pleasant places outside their home they can go to spend time in and relax.
- 62.3% did not have nature or 'green' (plant-filled) spaces they can safely spend time in.
- 59.8% did not have places with many trees and plants to spend time in.

Having access to pleasant places, nature filled places and safe green spaces was consistently associated with higher well-being. This suggests a need to ensure that design of public spaces considers ability to integrate vegetation and nature-based design, while also ensuring ability of residents to functionally use spaces during wet weather.

62%
have no access
to nature or
'green spaces'



CALLS FOR ACTION

1. Awareness raising on the contribution of green and pleasant places towards the wellbeing, resilience and sustainability of communities.
2. Inclusion and participation of youth groups and community-based organisations in the development of green public spaces
3. Local community and city planning must prioritise and budget for community greening by planting of trees and flowers around strategic locations in the communities – and youth groups and community-based organisations should be invited to participate in the process.
4. Awareness raising on the negative impacts of climate change and its social, economic, and environmental impact on wellbeing of people and communities.
5. Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone continues to build the capacity of youth groups and community-based organisation on how to design safe and green public spaces.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

- People stealing from others: 79.8% felt this was a big problem.
- Violence – people hurting others: 82.8% rated this a moderate or big problem.
- Men attacking women: 68.6% felt this was a moderate or big problem.
- Not being able to walk safely alone: 67.7% felt this was a moderate or big problem.

Not feeling safe in any situation was associated with much lower wellbeing – especially lack of safety in markets, school, and work were associated with much lower levels of wellbeing. This highlights that having access to safe public spaces in communities is likely to be a significant influence on a person's wellbeing, particularly in communities where many homes have limited amenities.

68%
believe that
walking safely
alone is a problem



CALLS FOR ACTION

1. Provide solar lights in strategic locations that are considered unsafe in the communities, especially at night.
2. Encourage and support youth groups to form community safety and security networks in close collaboration with state security to ensure safety and security of individuals, especially women and children in the informal settlements.
3. Hold consultative community dialogue meetings with duty bearers and community youths to develop community safety bye laws and suggest ways for how to implement them for the safety and security in all communities in close collaboration with national and local governments.
4. National and local governments must support the role and participation of youth in creating and maintaining peace and stability in their communities.

LITERACY, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

- 41.8% were not satisfied with education provided through schools.
- 40.9% were not satisfied with opportunities provided to learn outside schools.
- 56.6% were not currently involved in any education or training.
- 57.3% had received no support to learn how to talk to government and leaders.
- 63.9% had received no support to learn how to get a job.
- 45.1% had received no support to learn how to run my own business.



Those who were satisfied with their access to education generally had much higher wellbeing compared to those who were dissatisfied. Skills building and education opportunities in public spaces is likely to complement existing education opportunities in ways that support wellbeing. With many people having experienced severe disruption to their opportunities to access formal education, many have had to turn to informal means to obtain key skills. Additionally, some critical skills are not necessarily provided in most formal education settings, for example capacity building to enable youth to successfully communicate their needs and desires with leaders and decision-makers.

A majority had received no assistance in learning how to build ability to obtain employment with an employer, something that may become more common as Sierra Leone's economy evolves from many small businesses run by individuals to a more formalised business-based economy, and learning how to communicate with leaders. Having assistance to learn how to use the internet was associated with higher wellbeing, as was having assistance with literacy and numeracy.

CALLS FOR ACTION

1. Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone commit to continue the training of community-based organisations and youth groups in different skills (including local fundraising and resource mobilisation) so they can engage in self-empowering ventures.
2. Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone commit to cascade their non-formal education core competencies to community-based organisations and youth groups in the communities and continue give technical support to use the developed public spaces as centres for education and training.
3. Support must be given to facilitate the capacity building of young people on career planning, entrepreneurship, and diplomacy. This can happen through the support to local non-formal education and skills training initiatives in the communities.
4. National and local governments must support the establishment of skills building in the form of non-formal education opportunities (in public spaces) to complement existing education opportunities in informal communities to improve the wellbeing and opportunity of young people.
5. All actors must actively work to support young women overcome the cultural, social, and economic barriers that young women face in relation to education and job opportunities.

OPPORTUNITY AND SUPPORT

- 94.4% felt that 'lack of opportunities for young people' was a significant problem.
- 74.1% had not participated in community activities in the last three months.
- 42.1% did not have family who can provide them support in difficult times.
- 67.5% did not have friends outside their family who can provide them support in difficult times.

Those who were confident they could achieve the things they wanted to had significantly higher wellbeing than those who did not, highlighting the importance of building capacity to achieve desired outcomes in life. Those with no access to support from family or friends reported poorer wellbeing on average compared to those who had access to support. A person's social capital is important to their wellbeing: having strong social connection and people you can access support from is well established to be associated with improved wellbeing and quality of life.

95%
feel they
lack opportunity



CALLS FOR ACTION

1. Engagement with young people on how to build stronger social capital that provides them with the opportunities and support that they need in life.
2. Encourage young people to work in close collaboration and support them to engage in positive social activities that promotes the culture of supporting each other in times of difficulties to ensure wellbeing and quality of life for all.
3. National and local governments must prioritise giving support to community-based organisations, youth groups, and other types of support networks that can assist young people who struggle or lack opportunities.

GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

- 30.8% strongly disagreed that women should have all the same rights as men
- 35.1% feel young people are not listened to by community leaders in their area
- 58.0% felt that 'young people not being listened to' was a significant problem
- 39.7% felt that 'police arresting young people unfairly' was a significant problem
- 40.3% felt that 'police treating people unfairly' was a significant problem
- 94.0% felt that 'corruption in government' was a significant problem

Wellbeing was higher amongst those who felt women should have the same rights as men, who felt young people were listened to, and who felt young people are viewed positively. Having access to community organisations that supported youth was associated with higher wellbeing, as was fair treatment by police.

CALLS FOR ACTION

1. Community awareness raising on the need for and importance of gender equality for the improvement of the wellbeing of youth, especially young women.
2. Community dialogue meetings to be carried out by community-based organisations and community stakeholders, bringing together youth and duty bearers to create a platform and a participatory approach towards decision making on issues affecting young people.
3. Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone commit to train young people in leadership, conflict management, lobbying, and advocacy skills. This will enhance their capacity to actively participate objectively in governance and leadership affairs in their communities.
4. Community leaders should make decision-making transparent for and genuinely responsive towards inputs from young people in their community.
5. Local and national governments should make efforts to increase representation of young people in decision making and planning. Consultancy of young people in affairs that affect them and their fellow youth needs to be common practise.

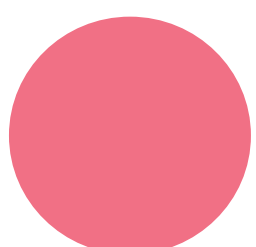

WHAT MATTERS MOST FOR WELLBEING?

Our research confirms that most youth living in informal settlements have poor subjective wellbeing. A majority lack access to critical opportunities, including education, employment, and social opportunities, and many lack a voice in their community. The findings highlight the importance of having access to opportunities for education and for actively working towards a positive future. Many of the other largest differences identified in wellbeing were related to (i) access to learning and education, (ii) being safe, and (iii) having access to key resources, including food. This highlights that public spaces can play a critical part in improving wellbeing if they are perceived as safe and create access to opportunities for skill building now and for the future.

Attention! This is a call to action! Investing in shared, public spaces that are accessible to all can support wellbeing through enabling young people to better work together for their futures. If these spaces are further invested in to ensure safety, and provide opportunities for ongoing education and learning, their impact on wellbeing is likely to be maximised, with those youth who have (i) ongoing education opportunities outside school and (ii) opportunities to think of ideas for the future and work towards them with others, having the highest wellbeing, something which often occurs alongside having the opportunity and safety to engage in these activities.

We invite all
actors to join us,
and help make public
spaces safe, inclusive
and youth friendly – to
improve the wellbeing
of all young people in
Sierra Leone!





The full research report is
openly available online at
https://issuu.com/dreamtown.ngo/docs/survey_baseline_report

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This Call for Action is based on extracts from:
SURVEY BASELINE REPORT
(ISBN: 978-0-9954095-3-8):
Creating space for young people
in urban slums of Sierra Leone
@ Urban Synergies Group, Australia 2020
@ Dreamtown, Denmark 2020
@ University of Canberra
- Health Research Institute, Australia 2020
@ Youth Dream Centre Sierra Leone,
Sierra Leone 2020

Design: Daniella Mews

Photography: Simon Sticker

