Closing the Infrastructural Gap in Marginalized Urban Communities

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Upgrading Infrastructure: The Governance Challenge

Latin America faces a considerable shortfall of environmentally-sound urban infrastructure. The lack of adequate sanitation, clean water, waste management, energy, and transport is particularly evident in marginalised settings. In these settings, it is more expensive for service providers to start operating, and there is a lack of incentives to improve public infrastructure. For residents of informal settlements, traditional communities, and hazard-prone locales, officially-provided services do not permit a decent, healthy way of life. In the context of an infrastructural gap and systemic socio-political barriers, how can development organizations and practitioners support marginalized communities in their urbanizing process? In this policy brief, we address this question by building on four years of research in urban areas of Latin America.

Research Background

The ADAPTO research project was conducted in Colombia, Chile, Haiti, and Cuba from 2017 to 2021. It involved a multidisciplinary group of researchers from five universities and one NGO. ADAPTO explored responses to climate change and variability in informal settings[1] in small and medium-sized cities. ADAPTO findings suggest that reducing climate risks in the Global South requires an understanding of socio-cultural dynamics and the vulnerabilities that exist in conditions of informality.

1. Informal settings, for ADAPTO, refers to the time, places, and circumstances in which people use their own initiative—outside or in parallel to institutionalized procedures and standards—to respond to local conditions, secure access to shelter, livelihoods, or services, and improve their general wellbeing in the face of hostile conditions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. When upgrading urban infrastructure in marginalized communities, the territory must be considered as a 'living' social space, with its own governance mechanisms.

2. Upgrading efforts need to build on existing community institutional arrangements. This can be done by:

   a. Supporting platforms that advance community decision-making and priorities.

   b. Providing continuous organizational and financial support.

   c. Going beyond working solely with 'local leaders' to incorporate the diversity of 'local voices'.

1. Closing the Infrastructural Gap of 'Living' Social Spaces

In response to the infrastructural gap, dwellers of marginalized communities in urban areas often organize themselves to build public infrastructure and arrange for basic services. Community-led projects must follow urban regulations which are already in place. But these regulations rarely align with the residents' own objectives and visions for infrastructure upgrading. This misalignment increases uncertainties on whether the project(s) will be granted permit(s). The implementation of several ADAPTO projects took more time than expected and a few 'failed' to produce tangible results. These 'failures' were rarely related to the lack of leadership or commitment from local communities. Rather, they often revealed infrastructure and governance deficiencies in marginalized settlements.

To varying degrees, governments and aid agencies invest in providing urban services in marginalized urban communities where infrastructure projects sometimes collide with the residents' use of space. The projects are designed to solve current deficiencies in informal settings to improve people's lives. In practice, projects add a physical layer to an existing social space that has meaning and is particular to the locale. Technical solutions that only focus on the physical needs can hinder integration of the multiple social meanings and uses of public space (see Canaan case below). Projects that consider the meanings that people assign to space are better accepted and also make more sense when being implemented (see Concepción case below).

Roads in Canaan, Haiti

After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the city of Canaan was established by people fleeing their devastated communities. As a new self-built settlement, Canaan needed entirely new public infrastructure and services. The international community responded to this enormous gap by supporting infrastructure, including the road network. The new roads of Canaan were designed following international standards. Though this was planned in order to improve mobility, it was a poor fit for a Haitian city. The road design overlooked the multiple uses of roads as places for walking, socializing, trading, playing, carrying animals, and riding a variety of vehicles.

Bridges in Concepción, Chile

The activities of the ADAPTO project in Chile were led by the Universidad del Bío-Bío. The focus was on nature-based approaches to climate change and on harmonizing human-built and natural environments. A significant outcome was an alliance of community, state institutions, and academia. Together, they developed collaborative and inclusive approaches to infrastructure development policies that respond to the needs and opportunities of rural localities. The university held "Neighbourhood Studios" where students along with local residents designed projects seeking solutions to problems. For example, in 2020, students designed footbridges to reconnect the two sectors of the Nonguén valley, to date, divided by an estuary. Reconnecting the two sectors promoted social relations and increased people's presence in the estuary, and its recovery.

Photo: Anne-Marie Petter

Photo: Entorno Educador del Valle Nonguén School/ ADAPTO-Chile

2. Supporting Communities' Governance

Urban deficiencies and regulatory contradictions that exist in marginalized urban communities significantly complicate the implementation of disaster risk reduction projects. These deficiencies not only increase infrastructure project costs and risks, but also require sustained community engagement. ADAPTO's research findings show that addressing these deficiencies falls upon residents.

Who is governing Canaan, Haiti?

The Haitian state and local elites perceive Canaan as a problem and envision a top-down approach to governing the new city. However, the state is largely absent and residents have their own urbanizing agenda. In this context, who should practitioners work with? Are self-proclaimed leaders' visions aligned with communities' priorities? And, who is respected by residents?

In Canaan, ADAPTO researchers found self-proclaimed leaders whose authority is based on tacit recognition of their community involvement. To develop Canaan, leaders have put a great amount of time and effort on organizing their new settlement, making it a 'functional city under construction'. Community leaders manage health, sanitation, education, security, conflict resolution, and other social issues. Leaders have organized the territory, dividing plots and reserving land for public spaces. They have also initiated urban work with the support of local residents. In this context, community leaders have guided new settlers in the construction of a new city.

Who are the leaders in Nonguén, Chile?

In the valley of Nonguén, in the Concepción metropolitan area of Chile, disasters have a long history. Since the 1960s, settlers have been reporting about flooding events. Disaster risk management has documented the physical hazards that Nonguén has experienced over the last 60 years. However, this documentation has been based on a partial recollection of experiences and knowledge, as women's experiences have not been considered in this process. Meanwhile, women lead coping responses to the disasters that affect their families and the communities' wellbeing.

Thus, to better inform policies and projects that address infrastructure gaps in marginalized communities, women's local memory and knowledge are key to consider. Organizations should not only work with official community leaders, but intentionally include a diverse representation of the community.
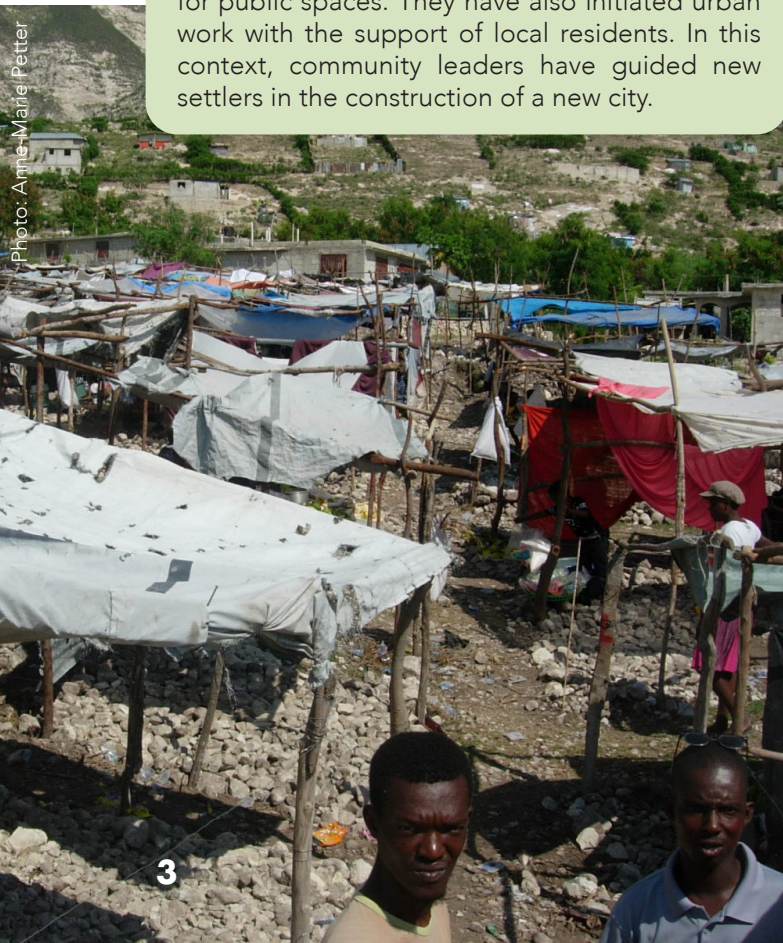
In the absence of the state, community leaders and their allies spend large amounts of time fostering the institutional relationships and networks necessary to mobilize resources and initiate local action. Such activities are crucial for the existence of these informal communities and for responding to development deficiencies caused by inappropriate and inefficient state intervention. In such contexts, non-governmental organizations can assist communities in developing the institutional arrangements needed for self-governing (see Canaan case above). In doing so, the following should be taken into consideration:

a. **Communities benefit from safe decision-making platforms with procedures that incentivize dialogue** between residents and foster appropriate action. Community dialogue has long been prioritized in international development efforts. Within such spaces of knowledge and experience sharing, it is important to mobilize the implementation of community agreements through mechanisms that enhance action.

b. **Communities benefit from continuous organizational and financial support.** As communities invest their time in seeking solutions to the infrastructural gaps, they also face other day-to-day challenges, and their efforts can be slowed down or interrupted due to external influences. In these circumstances, communities can move forward when they have the certainty that they can reinitiate their efforts without losing organizational and financial support.

c. **Communities benefit from projects that build on a diversity of community perspectives and experiences.** Projects will be better received if practitioners are listening to diverse voices. While it is common to work with community leaders in local projects, in certain contexts (e.g., patriarchal communities) there is a need to intentionally seek out those individuals (e.g., women) who are leading efforts that benefit the whole community but are not publicly recognized as leaders. If not, policies and projects would miss the opportunity to learn from marginalized groups, and would fail to recognize existing leaders in disaster risk management and urban development.

ADAPTO is a multidisciplinary research project funded by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and coordinated by the Disaster Resilience and Sustainable Reconstruction Research Alliance (Œuvre Durable) from 2017-2021. It investigates climate change adaptation in informal settings in understanding and reinforcing bottom-up initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean. For more information, see: http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en_index.html

Resources

› ADAPTO Agents of Change: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EwJj6Ag0sU
› ADAPTO Women's role in adapting to climate change: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZoXfiPLXT4
› Petter, A. M., Labbé, D., Lizarralde, G., & Goulet, J. (2020). City profile: Canaan, Haiti-A new post disaster city. Cities, 104, 102805.
› Saavedra, J., Rubio Carrasco, C., Valenzuela Contreras, K., & Balboa Jiménez, V. (2019). Local Memory and Climate Disaster Management: Women's Leadership Experience in Nonguén. Región y sociedad, 31.