**Co-designed child-friendly urban neighbourhoods and their potential for improving young refugee children’s wellbeing and social cohesion: Critical perspectives from selected projects in Lebanon**

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines whether participatory projects, notably those involving children, in urban areas in Lebanon can help improve refugee children’s wellbeing, including by enhancing social cohesion between diverse residents. Drawing from urban studies, child psychology, and other literature, it outlines Syrian refugee children’s circumstances in Lebanese urban areas, and the risks and protective factors they face as a result of their experiences. Centred around urban space, its theoretical framework links concepts of spatial justice, environmental child psychology/socio-ecological models, and social cohesion. Fundamental to its overarching exploration, it adopts a relational and psychosocial definition of wellbeing, which also recognises children’s unique characteristics and experiences. It considers practical evidence for its exploration in two projects in Lebanon, after briefly looking at children’s reimagining of urban areas outside of formal processes. It concludes that there is strong evidence that, when processes are meaningful and address participants’ priorities, as well as successfully engage local authorities, they have significant potential to contribute to children’s wellbeing and improve prospects for social cohesion. The challenge is in creating genuinely inclusive processes that have multiplying, lasting effects – i.e. that they can serve as the ‘glue’ that binds residents in pursuit of the urban commons – and that trigger ongoing, collective actions by a cross-section of residents, which can convince strategic, powerful stakeholders of their importance. Given the acute crisis Lebanon faces, such processes remain more important than ever, while remaining sensitive to the socio-political and economic realities affecting millions across the country.

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# **Introduction**

Building on the work of participatory design programmes and organisations or design studios such as Catalytic Action and associated researchers, this dissertation considers whether co-designed child-friendly spaces can, under the right conditions, improve urban outcomes and enhance Syrian refugee children’s wellbeing in neighbourhoods in Lebanon. It examines the theoretical and practical evidence for whether such processes and interventions can also improve conditions for all residents of an area and help enhance prospects for social cohesion. Put differently, it sets out to explore whether, in addition to spatial improvements to communal areas, children and their parents or guardians’ involvement and leadership in participatory projects and “citizen science” (Mintchev et al, 2019, p.110 and 115) can help to strengthen or restore refugee children’s sense of agency, allow for greater civic engagement, and enhance community relations.

The acute challenges and pressures faced by diverse residents in many Lebanese urban neighbourhoods make such enquiries timely and important. This exploration is set against the serious political and economic crisis facing Lebanon, which has only deepened since the October 2019 Revolution and been cruelly compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the August 2020 Beirut Blast. The severity of Lebanon’s current financial and economic crisis in 2021 led the World Bank to describe it as ‘likely in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century’ (World Bank, 2021, p.xi).

Since the start of the Syrian crisis, many of the refugees who arrived in Lebanon settled in already deprived urban areas, which were often overcrowded and characterised by multiple forms of spatial injustice. These areas were often already the site of contestation between disadvantaged Lebanese, other communities and more powerful actors, and the arrival of high numbers of displaced Syrians risked generating new tensions or disputes. While many Syrians describe initially being made to feel welcome by Lebanese residents, over time this solidarity tended to turn towards resentment (Atrache, p.4) and as Lebanon’s crisis deepened, reports and incidents of growing hostility and racism also increased (Abou-Zahr, 2021). Even if the picture is often more complex, these dynamics tend to worsen social inequities and spatial injustices, as well as create risks and vulnerabilities for all residents.

This dissertation will consider whether inclusive child-centred participatory approaches can help improve urban conditions and foster a greater sense of common purpose amongst residents of diverse backgrounds, and if such approaches can contribute to addressing the roots of spatial injustice and, in turn, help transform urban relations and spatial realities. In a context such as Lebanon, characterised by informal processes and weak State-led planning (not least around the question of refugees), it will examine how and whether creating alliances between resident Lebanese, refugee communities and other players, can also help local authorities find innovative or more appropriate solutions. Throughout its analysis, it will consider how children, who often become intimately connected to the areas they live in and are highly imaginative in the uses they find for them (regardless of formal processes), can play a crucial role.

The neighbourhood scale can be contested and presents certain analytical drawbacks, not least in the Lebanese context (for instance given how such boundaries may exclude key areas or people more arbitrarily, or overlook the particular transience Syrian refugees face in urban spaces in Lebanon, amongst other shortcomings) (Sanyal, 2021). While acknowledging these concerns, this dissertation will explore the above hypotheses by looking at more pre-defined urban neighbourhoods or central areas where participatory projects took place. While remaining conscious of the scales and confines of interventions, it seeks to critically consider the inclusiveness (or exclusiveness) of such processes, and what can be learnt from these.

## Structure and Methodology

The dissertation first gives an overview of refugees’ circumstances in Lebanon and the common conditions and challenges that Syrian refugee children face in urban neighbourhoods where their families have settled. It considers findings from the field of child psychology and outlines key risks and protective factors, drawn from literature and illustrated, where possible, by children or their families’ accounts, as these were shared with local or international agencies or researchers.

The dissertation then sets out its theoretical framework, leaning on Edward Soja’s concept of ‘spatial justice’ when considering the different and unequal human geographies in Lebanese urban neighbourhoods. It considers whether a right to the city approach (the quest for greater spatial justice) could serve as the ‘glue that binds’ children and families across nationalities. When considering children’s wellbeing in these urban environments, and how meaningful participatory processes and co-designed spatial outcomes might help enhance this, the dissertation adopts a definition of wellbeing that draws both from individual and relational ontologies, and notably from psychosocial and relational understandings of wellbeing. To consider this in practice, it draws on evidence from the fields of child and environmental psychology, and from socio-ecological models. Gordon Allport’s contact theory – and notably its more participatory elements – helps to explore if interventions, beyond enabling punctual interactions and dialogue, can lead to new relationships, longer-term cooperation and organisation around shared interests for more child-friendly, inclusive and welcoming neighbourhoods.

The dissertation then considers select interventions in urban areas, notably in Bar Elias in the Bekaa Valley, and in the Naba’a neighbourhood in Bourj-al-Hammoud in Beirut. In these areas, agencies sought to create inclusive social infrastructure or to make neighbourhoods more child-friendly by engaging young children and/or parents and other residents in their design (different forms of participation were used during these interventions, which help to determine their effectiveness). It analyses the evidence and findings available, examines the key factors that seem to make them successful, as well as their limitations or missing information and areas for further empirical enquiry.

# **Syrian refugees in Lebanon**

The war in Syria, and the extreme nature and levels of its violence, has led to some of the highest levels of human displacement since the Second World War (NRC 2021). By early 2021, 6.7 million Syrians had fled their homeland, while the same number remained displaced within Syria (Ibid). Of the Syrians who sought refuge abroad, an estimated 1.5 million resettled in neighbouring Lebanon, which also hosts more than 16,000 Iraqi, Ethiopian, Sudanese and other refugees, and 200,000 Palestinian refugees (UNHCR Lebanon, 2021). (The official number was 855,172 in 2021, as the Lebanese Government instructed UNHCR to stop registering new arrivals in 2015). The Syrian war gave the small coastal country the highest per capita refugee population in the world (Ibid).

Despite hosting so many refugees, Lebanon is not a signatory to the United Nations’ 1951 Refugee Convention, as the Lebanese constitution prohibits integration (Lebanese Crisis Response Plan, 2021, p.11), nor has it signed its 1967 Additional Protocol. Refugees’ status is thus one of ‘temporarily displaced persons’ (Gemayel, 2020), who are put ‘at the mercy of the local hosting community’s hospitality’ (Chatty, 2017, p.337). While many refugees from Syria, which in 2011 was classified as a lower-middle income country, came with various levels of resources and wealth, their insecure status and prolonged displacement pushed thousands into illegality and highly precarious situations. At the end of 2020, only a fifth of Syrian refugees above the age of 15 (the age from which this is required)[[1]](#footnote-2) had legal residency in Lebanon, while only a tenth of families had legal residency for all their members (Interagency, 2020 p.40). Their prevailing irregular status has impacted economically and socially on both refugees and resident Lebanese communities, and profoundly altered the country’s landscape.

In Lebanon, children represent more than half (54.4%) of the Syrian refugees on UNHCR’s books (UNCHR, 2021) and are considered to represent a similar proportion of the actual overall figure. While a heterogenous group, they are affected in many ways by Lebanon’s policy structure and by their families’ lack of legal residency (Gemayel, 2020, p.251). Gemayel found these two factors to be directly linked to incidences of poverty, child labour, early marriage, lack of adequate provision for schooling, fear, and increased surveillance (Ibid).

In July 2021, UNICEF released a stark survey illustrating how children from all communities bear the brunt of Lebanon’s ongoing crisis (UNICEF, 2021). Syrian children appear to be the most hard-hit. The survey finds, for example, that 77% of households do not have enough food or money to buy food (this percentage increases to 99% for Syrian refugee households), 9% of children are sent to work (22% in the case of Syrian refugee children), and 15% of families stopped their children’s education (35% in the case of Syrian refugee families) (Ibid, p.4).

The experiences and stories of Syrian refugees during the war and their flight, post-flight and resettlement vary widely. This diversity was well illustrated through the stories of displaced Syrian families captured by researchers during discussions, map-making and walks in neighbourhoods in Beirut, the Northern Governorate and the Bekaa Valley (GAWRG, 2017). Families interviewed recalled witnessing extreme violence by different armed perpetrators in their home cities, having relatives arrested or ‘disappeared’, losing loved ones or seeing one’s home or neighbourhood reduced to rubble, as well as frightening journeys navigating multiple checkpoints to reach other parts of Syria and then Lebanon (Ibid).

Refugees’ past lives were juxtaposed and intimately connected to the ongoing and very difficult circumstances and uncertainties they faced in Lebanon. Despite now residing in places of comparative security[[2]](#footnote-3), different factors affected their overall sense of safety and stability. Families commonly described experiencing hostility from other residents, shared their concerns about their lack of papers and fear of arrest, concerns about harassment and their children’s wellbeing and safety, as well as their struggles with unaffordable healthcare, feelings of helplessness at their current poverty, and hopelessness about the future (Ibid and Kim & al 2020, p.2).

These concerns also help explain how and why parents may limit or control children’s mobility as a result of their environments. Safety concerns are commonly referred to in different studies on Syrians settling in populated areas, not just in Lebanon, and often result from a lack of familiarity and trust towards surrounding residents (Yaylaci, 2018, p.1927). Syrian refugee parents cited concerns about bullying or abuse from local children or residents and believed that disagreements between their children and Lebanese children could jeopardise their presence in the area (Sim & al, 2018, p.23). These concerns led parents to restrict their children’s movements and freedoms and even to confining children in the home, contributing to isolating them further (Ibid) and affecting their (free-flow) play opportunities, which are so key to children’s development (Bruce, 2020, p.147-8).

## Syrian refugees in urban areas in Lebanon

Lebanon is a largely urban country: 87% of its population lives in urban areas (Carpi, 2017, p.12), which have long been shaped by post-war-reconstruction processes, displacement and migration. While the State’s predominant approach to urban land has been to exploit it intensively for real estate and other economic purposes (Fawaz, 2017c), it has proved unable to develop and harmonise a national Lebanese housing or urban policy (Fawaz, 2017b and 2017c). After the mass arrival of Syrian refugees, the Government banned the establishment of formal camps on its territory, fearing a repeat of the Palestinian refugee experience (Sanyal, 2017, p.1).

Syrian refugees were left to settle where they could afford accommodation or join relatives. In the absence of a national response strategy, Syrians ‘sought shelter, work, and other vital ingredients of livelihoods through the same channels as other destitute social groups present in the country, including Lebanese as well as Palestinian, Iraqi, and other refugees, and foreign migrant workers’ (Boustani & al 2016 p. 14). These areas were often the poorest or most systemically disadvantaged or under-resourced neighbourhoods, suffering from overcrowding, a lack of natural light or functioning services, with poor or no access to parks or open areas where children could play safely.

This altered Lebanon’s urban landscapes and neighbourhoods. In Beirut’s poorer or more informal areas for example, entire streets were transformed into de facto Syrian settlements (UNHCR, 2014), just as Syrian refugees were exposed to exploitation by profit-hungry estate agents, who increased asking prices and sub-divided apartments, raising the local cost of living (Fawaz, 2017b, p.106). As a result, just as refugees were forced to rent overpriced and unsuitable accommodation, many poorer Lebanese residents became displaced when they could no longer afford the higher rents (Fawaz, 2017b). This was one amongst other typically reported sources of tension between Lebanese residents and Syrian refugees (Mady, 2019 p.167).

State institutions effectively ‘delegated’ urban responses to ‘relief agencies, solidarity movements and landlords’ (Fawaz, Harb & Al-Hage, 2021, p.2). Many Syrian refugees settled in urban or peri-urban areas, notably in or around Lebanon’s main cities (Carpi, 2016, p.20). Three distinct, prevailing ‘geometries’ emerged from their settlement in urban areas: neighbourhood densification, housing compounds, and tented settlements (Fawaz & al, 2021, p.3-5). These illustrate the different, multi-scalar urban processes involved in producing refugees and other residents’ realities and provide a sense of the cramped and substandard conditions in which these different communities live, side by side.

## Refugee children’s emotional and mental wellbeing: insights from psychological studies

*“If traumatised refugees need to heal, they need to trust again. In order to trust again, they need to feel safe again. The process of regaining the feeling of safety is not only achieved through psychological therapy. It is achieved through being with other people in communities where you feel safe.”* (Ghasmiyani, 2017).

A child’s emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing depends on numerous, highly interrelated factors and individual children will have very different ways of coping with similar experiences. Children, even within the same family and facing similar circumstances, can be both vulnerable and resilient (Watters & Derluyn, pp375-6). Just as every child is unique, there is no singular refugee experience and Syrian children are far from homogenous populations (Yaylaci, 2018, p.1932). While this dissertation foregrounds spatial factors when considering children’s wellbeing, there are some salient findings from child psychology which should be borne in mind.

Specialist evidence outlines that the violence, loss and upheaval child refugees may have faced in their home countries, combined with their flight and resettlement in a new country, make them more vulnerable to developing specific emotional and mental health conditions than other population groups (Blackmore et al, 2020). Refugee and asylum-seeking children have been found to have higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and anxiety (Ibid, p.705). A review of research findings on the psychological functioning of Syrian refugee children noted that “stress factors for [Syrian refugee] children included discrimination, fears related to war, worries about family members they left in Syria, their traumatic experiences, concerns about education, violence in the family, parental stress, economic difficulties, and confinement to home” (UN Women, 2013, quoted in Yaylaci, 2018, p. 1925).

Post-flight factors are commonly underlined as playing a crucial role in helping child refugees manage, overcome and recover from their traumatic experiences. Studies on child refugees’ longer-term mental health in Denmark found that their individual or family experiences of traumatic events only determined their longer-term mental health to a limited degree (Montgomery, 2011). Ghasmiyani, a child psychologist who was herself a refugee as a girl, underlines the importance of a safe and trusted environment in helping children to overcome their experiences.

Children’s direct environments present key protective and risk factors. A practitioner review of assessments and treatments of refugee children and adolescents (Ehntholt and Yule, 2006) frames these factors into four main categories, illustrating how these influence their levels of psychological distress or resilience (either positively or negatively). These include, firstly, a child’s *exposure to traumatic events*, a key risk factor (including severity of the trauma, whether they were exposed to such events several times, their perception of the degree of personal threat, level of personal involvement); secondly, *a child’s individual characteristics* (where pre-existing vulnerabilities are a risk factor, whereas their disposition and beliefs can play a protective role); thirdly, *the role of the family* (poor parental mental health and being unaccompanied are key risk factors, whereas family cohesion and adaptability are considered protective factors); and fourthly, *the* *post-migration environment* (where low levels of social support and post-migration stresses are key risk factors, whereas high levels of social support play a protective role) (Ehntholt and Yule, 2006, p.2000).

While the first two risk and protective factors may require specialised clinical interventions, this dissertation will consider how wellbeing measures can be enhanced at the family and environmental levels. In countries of refuge such as Lebanon, Syrian families face a host of serious challenges which can exacerbate and deepen their trauma or suffering. Finding ways to help them regain a sense of control over their lives will contribute to the whole family’s wellbeing, something considered here through the prism of urban space.

# **Theoretical framework**

## Linking spatial justice, relational concepts of wellbeing and the radical commonisation of urban space

If spatial justice “involves the fair and equitable distribution in time and space of socially-valued resources and the opportunity to use them” (Soja, 2009, in Tsavdaroglou, 2020, p.232), what might young children, of both refugee and host community backgrounds, value and perceive as being particularly important to their day-to-day lives in urban Lebanese neighbourhoods? How might Syrian children, who like most refugees “end up living in peripheral slums with the urban poor, who are also socially and economically marginalised” (Rigon, Dabaj & Conti, 2021, p.3), be actively involved and contribute to fostering greater spatial justice? And what might this process represent and mean for their own emotional, mental and physical wellbeing, as well as for fostering and improving relations between residents of different backgrounds and legal statuses?

In its exploration of the above questions, this paper draws from three conceptual frameworks, linking them through their spatial aspects: firstly, it uses a spatial justice lens when considering refugees and other urban residents’ right to the city, and the relevance of organising and mobilising across difference when seeking to overcome spatial injustice. Building on Soja’s concept, Chatterton’s adoption of the language of the (urban) ‘common’ to describe urban dwellers’ pursuit of greater spatial justice, is also helpful, both as ‘a political imaginary and vocabulary’ and ‘a material aspiration and organising tool’ (Chatterton 2010, p.626). Such framing helps to consider how these urban spaces are produced and reproduced, and how stakeholders can aspire to make them safer, more accessible and child friendly. By engaging in participatory processes that aim to (re)design urban spaces, the dissertation will consider whether they help achieve, as Chatterton described, a “radical commonisation of the production of urban space and everyday life in the city” (Chatterton 2010 p.628).[[3]](#footnote-4)

As Soja underscored (Soja, 2010), the *spatial* dimension of justice does not underestimate or refute the social or historical dimensions of urban justice, as they are always intrinsically connected. There are very evident expressions of these dynamics in Lebanese towns and cities, as market-driven urban planning (and making exceptions) (Fawaz, 2017a) or major events attest to, not least the ongoing Palestinian and Syrian refugee crises, Lebanon’s protracted civil war, the 2006 war with Israel, and the fear of what *could* happen (Bou Akar, 2018). Soja’s description of a socio-spatial dialectic argues that people’s spatiality, sociality and historicality are mutually constitutive, with none inherently privileged a priori (Soja, 2010, p.18). Foregrounding their spatial dimensions provides a means of understanding urban dynamics in specific ways, which underline the dynamic connections between residents and their environments.

A spatial justice lens also helps consider all residents’ right to the city (including those in “transit” or who settled more recently, such as refugees or other migrants, whose other rights differ from Lebanese citizens). Resident Lebanese also face severe spatial injustices and identifying and outlining pre-existing structural and other spatial injustices in neighbourhoods where refugees have settled is important, specifically how these may have worsened. Spatial (in)justice can usefully serve as an organising and mobilising “linchpin” or the “glue” that binds residents across their differences (Soja, 2010, p.109, quoting Mark Purcell). Such mobilising processes can be triggered or facilitated through successful participatory spatial interventions, as the experience of Bar Elias involving diverse groups of residents demonstrated (Rigon, Dabaj & Baumann, 2021).

#### *Figure 1: A conceptual framework to understand the ecological and chronological determinants of mental health in forcibly displaced children. A redrawing of Reed et al’s diagram, 2012.*

Secondly, when considering how urban spaces can contribute to enhancing children’s wellbeing, this dissertation draws from empirical and theoretical findings from environmental psychology (e.g. Roger Hart’s work, notably on children’s participation) and socio-ecological frameworks (e.g. Urie Bronfenbrenner's 1974 socio-ecological model, and Bree Akesson and Myriam Denov’s work on children affected by armed conflict, 2018). These models and findings add credence to the proposal that neighbourhoods’ design can help foster a sense of safety, positive identity and belonging, reduce tensions generated by competition over urban areas and space, and provide protection from traumatic symptoms in children (Akesson & Denov, 2017, p.140). This also highlights the benefits of involving children in the design process.

Putting the child at the centre, Bronfenbrenner's 1974 socio-ecological model delineated micro- and macro- level features (e.g. individual, familial, social, cultural, and political perspectives) shaping children’s lives and described how they interact. Reed et al adapted this model to child refugees, overlaying the temporal stages of a child’s migration journey to the different socio-ecological layers. (Their model is redrawn above). This visual helps to capture how a child’s wellbeing and emotional and mental health are dynamically related to their environment, and how this environment is itself determined by interacting features and players. (White’s relational definition goes further, adopting different ontologies of wellbeing, as illustrated later).

The physical characteristics and design of urban neighbourhoods, including outdoor and common spaces, play areas and amenities, influence or impact on a child’s daily life, but crucially should also be analysed according to whether they enhance opportunities for positive and purposeful community gatherings and encounters. These include opportunities for children to meet and play in a free and safe manner. It is important to underline the role of play in enabling relations between children and in fostering their wellbeing*.* Play is widely acknowledged to be paramount to children’s learning and development (Friedrich Froebel, the founder of the first kindergarten and pioneer of early child education, and his contemporary Tina Bruce, who further underlined the importance of free-flow play, are widely quoted on this) (Maciver, p.426).

This dissertation considers how children’s neighbourhoods can either contribute or hinder their ability to play, meet and socialise with other children, regardless of their legal status. It looks at practical examples of how children have contributed to co-creating the “urban commons”[[4]](#footnote-5) and the related benefits for them, their families’ and other residents. Here, the urban commons may take on a variety of forms: from playgrounds, parks and public infrastructure to neighbourhood streets and sidewalks, not precluding the repurposing of ‘interstitial spaces’, such as was done in Al-Mina in Tripoli (Mohareb & al 2019).

The third core theoretical basis concerns the analysis of social cohesion, understood broadly as ‘the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper’ (Stanley, 2003). This willingness to cooperate, as an ideal, translates into a voluntary desire to form partnerships that have a reasonable chance of realising goals and are characterised by a mutual desire to share the fruits of their endeavours equitably (Ibid, 2003). Stanley’s definition, which underlines the importance of both process and outcome, can be usefully applied when considering relations amongst diverse residents and the pursuit of spatial justice in urban neighbourhoods (including Chatterton’s radical commonisation of urban space).

To analyse how greater social cohesion can be achieved, Gordon Allport’s 1954 “contact theory”, and particularly the contact theory-based participatory approach, is one way of analysing how such processes can bridge divides between diverse residents and contribute to a greater sense of understanding and solidarity. In 1954, Allport outlined the idea that contact between different groups and people could reduce intergroup prejudices, following the logic that when they become more familiar with one another, cultural and media stereotypes can be broken down (Yassim, 2019, p.510). Allport’s theory is premised on intergroup contact being characterised by certain optimal conditions, notably equal status, cooperation, common goals, and institutional support (Turner, p.215).

Since Allport first published his theory, there have been numerous studies to explore and test it in practice, not least Pettigrew and Tropp’s well-known, comprehensive meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. This found that intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice and that the benefits of such contact were typically generalised beyond those in direct contact, to entire groups (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Their research also found that Allport’s optimal conditions were not a prerequisite to the theory working (i.e. contact in less optimal conditions could still have these benefits), but that they helped improve the quality of such outcomes. This dissertation therefore posits that, given their objectives, processes and methodologies, participatory approaches *can*, in the right circumstances, be a particularly effective way of achieving meaningful, sustained and purposeful contact (Yassim, 2019, p.510).

Through the analysis of practical case studies, this paper will consider if the contact enabled through participatory approaches enabled people ‘to come together to express views, share ideas and foster trust, and a sense of belonging within their communities’ (Yassim, 2019, p. 517), and translated into sustained and purposeful contact. Recognising the diversity of identities and power relations, the crucial challenge – to ensure the right impact – is to make such engagement as inclusive and as meaningful as possible, recognising that “presence is not the same as voice” (Levy, Rigon and Castán Broto, 2021, p.215).

This relates closely to the theorisation of wellbeing as fundamentally relational, both between residents, and between them and environmental, social and political processes. Before exploring practical cases, the dissertation adopts a definition of wellbeing that captures these dynamic dimensions.

## Defining wellbeing in a relational manner: focus on the dance, not only the individual dancers**[[5]](#footnote-6)**

The concept of “wellbeing” is commonly referred to across multiple disciplines, from health and psychology, anthropology and the social sciences, to social work and child protection. It however lacks a standardised, agreed definition (Jones, LaLiberte and Piescher, 2015 p.15), which makes it difficult to capture and measure. The common thread is how different fields define wellbeing in multidimensional, interactive and dynamic terms.

Medical or therapeutic approaches to wellbeing often focus on identifying vulnerability or psychiatric disorders and are commonly criticised for relying too heavily on western psychology, while overlooking other cultural interpretations of wellbeing (Watters and Derluyn, 2018). They also risk overlooking how people affected by adversity, insecurity and conflict might interpret wellbeing or define their needs (White & Eyber, 2017 p.9). Other authors highlight how mental health is fundamentally shaped by social and political determinants, including ‘upstream factors such as political violence, social disadvantage, inequity and discrimination’, and therefore attempts to address poorer wellbeing outcomes require approaches that ‘go beyond the mental health sector to include economic and social factors and improved living and working conditions’ (Kienzler, 2019, p.547).

This dissertation draws from two conceptions of wellbeing, which it believes reinforce each other and relate well to the concepts in this study: firstly, a *psychosocial* conception of wellbeing (commonly adopted in humanitarian settings), and secondly, a *relational* conceptualisation of wellbeing (White, 2017 and Jha & White, 2021). Both underscore the importance of adopting a contextualised and people-centred approach, i.e. of centring definitions of wellbeing around how people themselves define it (i.e. refugee and other children in urban areas in Lebanon). While the first centres the individual and their personal trajectories in a holistic approach, the second emphasises the fundamentally interactive nature of wellbeing in relation to others, the environment, and social and political processes. Both approaches can be linked to socio-ecological and spatial justice factors and can contribute to a dynamic understanding of social cohesion.

The psychosocial wellbeing approach emerged partly in reaction to prevailing trauma-focused definitions (White and Eyber, p.9)[[6]](#footnote-7) and is understood in terms of the ‘dynamic relationship that exists between psychological and social processes, each continually influencing the other’ (UNICEF, 1997, in Bragin et al, 2021, p. 5). This approach connects individual psychological factors (thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, values, cognition and ways in which people perceive themselves and others, captured through the prefix ‘psycho’) and the individual’s relationships with others and with their external environment (including the material world and the socio-cultural context in which they live, captured through the suffix ‘social’) (Ibid.) More generally, psychosocial wellbeing is often related to human capacity, social ecology, and culture and values (White and Eyber, p.9) and thus considers how a broad range of factors can impact on mental and emotional wellbeing (Watters & Derluyn, p. 374).

The psychological studies previously referred to remain pertinent, as they consider key mental health characteristics in Syrian refugee children in urban environments, yet the *psychosocial* terminology helps to capture children’s (and notably refugee children’s) agency and competencies.

While psychosocial definitions of wellbeing are still based, in White and Jah’s terms (White & Jah, 2020 p. 209), on an ‘individualist ontology’, *relational* wellbeing helps to consider how refugee children’s wellbeing is dynamically intertwined in their relationships with others, both in an emotional and material sense, and in their relations with their physical environment (Ibid, pp. 208-9). Their wellbeing is thus co-constituted by and through relationships, as well as by and through horizontal and vertical processes. White’s *relational wellbeing* is centred around the dynamic interaction between this relational self, societal structures and the natural (physical) environment. This ‘complements’ the emphasis on the individual (White, 2017, p.18) and illustrates how wellbeing is ‘the outcome of accommodation and interaction that happens in and over time through the dynamic interplay of personal, societal and environmental structures and processes, interacting at a range of scales, in ways that are both reinforcing and in tension’ (Ibid, p.23).

In urban areas in Lebanon, refugee children’s sense of selves is fundamentally relational, both to others (their families, friends, neighbours), as well as to their environment and wider social, cultural (where cultural ties between Syrians and Lebanese are generally closer than in Turkey, for instance, another major host country for refugees) and political (e.g. their insecure status) dynamics. Adopting both psychosocial and relational wellbeing lenses helps to consider individual and relational dimensions, and how they connect to participatory processes, spatial justice and social cohesion (for instance, in exploring how refugee children interact with other children, residents and their environments, how they find and create spaces to play and socialise, and how this contributes to their and others’ wellbeing).

# **Exploring these concepts in practice in Lebanon**

The next section of the dissertation explores evidence for our key enquiries in select projects and urban areas in Lebanon. While examples of solutions co-designed with refugee children and host populations remain limited overall (or highly localised), there are several notable initiatives, including ones which have built on previous approaches. The examples considered include co-designing social infrastructure specifically for (and with) children and their families (such as playgrounds or parks), as well as improving infrastructure serving the whole community (such as sidewalks, town entrances and streets). While zooming in on two projects in more depth – one which involved children directly and the other which focused on adults (but built on previous successful participatory projects with children), it also refers to other examples to illustrate certain lines of enquiry.

Before outlining the projects, the dissertation briefly looks at children’s natural and more spontaneous engagements with their surroundings in different low-income areas of Beirut – notably through free-flow play – which provide valuable insights on their agency and their relationships with their environment.

## Children’s proactive reimagining of the urban spaces around them: insights for participative approaches

“We would do well to try to integrate our thinking on children’s formal participation with what is known of children’s informal participation and culture-building through play with their peers.” (Hart, quoted in Gill, 2021 p.15).

Children do not need much (or any) help to reimagine and repurpose the physical spaces around them, even in the most cramped or unlikely conditions: they use their creativity, resourcefulness and intimate knowledge of their surroundings to turn spaces into opportunities for play and encounter.

This is well captured in two recent studies on refugee children’s play habits in Beirut: firstly, in Khoury and Ardizzola’s study of displaced Syrian children in Beirut (Khoury & Ardizzola, 2021), where the researchers observed the informal play areas and patterns that groups of marginalised children created in the centre of the city and in the Burj Al-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp. The authors are careful to caution against implications that such areas are healthy environments for children and describe the safety risks and potential negative impacts (including how children’s games may at times irritate and potentially exacerbate existing tensions with neighbours) (Ibid, p. 478).

Secondly, Gemayel’s PHD thesis and ethnographic study of 4 to 8-year-old Iraqi and Syrian refugees’ experiences of play in the northern suburbs of Beirut illustrates the hardships they face, and the constraints imposed on them, such as on their mobility and time spent outdoors (Gemayel, 2020). But it also shows how play provided them with “an escape from their liminal, polluting, and invisible status into a heterotopia where they could create alternate realities and transform power structures” (Gemayel, 2020, p.272). It illustrates the excitement and positive emotions the children feel when they were able to play with other children, as well as how virtual play opportunities helped them to escape their physical environments and provided them with a sense of agency and power (Gemayel, p.257).

These studies underline the importance, for children’s wellbeing, of play and meaningful engagement with others, notably for children who have experienced displacement and loss. Ensuring attentiveness to subjectivity and agency is key to achieving inclusive prosperity in contexts of displacement (Mintchev & al, p.114) and child play is also understood as a necessary space within which children do civic action (El-Haj & al, 2018). At the same time, these studies speak to children’s intimate knowledge and perhaps unique perspective on their environments, and their ability to productively reimagine and repurpose neglected urban spaces.

Engaging children in urban design processes (formally or informally) is one way to capture such perspectives. Such processes have great potential, as evidenced extensively in literature (Gill, 2021, p.179), to achieve multiple, crosscutting benefits: to improve children’s urban environments (helping ensure they are welcoming, safe and inclusive), enhance their wellbeing and sense of self (also through free-flow play opportunities), create meaningful, unregimented connections with children from their own and different backgrounds, and even help improve social cohesion through increased and meaningful contact between different groups. This is even more vital for children or refugee children living in deprived areas, who cannot vote and who have no other means of shaping the world around them (8 80, 2019, p.3). Crucially, the very difficult conditions refugees face in Lebanon can also mean that children have less mental, physical and emotional capacity to focus on play (The Froebel Trust, 2020), and refugees’ transience in locations can be another challenge.

Participatory processes should engage children in meaningful, scalable ways, and involve other stakeholders, such as their families, carers and local municipalities. These must be genuine and iterative (without which they can frustrate and alienate participants), even if at different levels. Roger Hart’s Ladder of participation (Hart, 1992) is one useful way to think about how this is done, especially if considered in a non-hierarchical manner (Mohareb & al, p.105) and focusing on the five models that involve genuine participation (Hart, 1992, 11-14). Inspired by Arnstein’s 1979 adult participation model, Hart’s five ‘genuine’ participation rungs are: assigned but informed; consulted and informed; adult initiated, shared decisions with children; child initiated and directed; child initiated, shared decisions with adults (therefore leaving aside, but learning from, the three models of non-participation, i.e. manipulation, decoration, and tokenism). Hart also underlined the importance of choice and that programmes should ‘maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability’ (Ibid, p.11).

Where possible, participatory processes can build on ethnographic case studies like Gemayel’s or Khoury and Ardizzola’s, or on related studies. Socioecological research methods also provide highly valuable insights and data (take for instance the place-based methods explored with Palestinian children and their families in the West Bank and East Jerusalem by Akesson and Denov, which helped unpack their complex relations with their environments (Denov & Akesson, 2017, chapter 6)). Map making, as one method, illustrates how children build meaning and a sense of identity around places, notably their homes, school and play areas, and how their friends and the people around them contribute to this. Fundamentally, ‘a sense of place can ensure that children can grow, survive and thrive despite all odds’ (TEDx McGill, 2011), and enabling children the opportunity to co-create and redefine these spaces can help them to manage experiences of loss and displacement, build relations and refashion their sense of identity. Capitalising on such approaches and existing research can improve participatory objectives.

## Case studies in vulnerable urban areas in Lebanon

This dissertation will specifically consider two participatory urban initiatives involving or benefiting refugee and Lebanese children and their families, including one carried out by Catalytic Action, a design studio established in 2014 and currently a leading player in these forms of participatory design initiatives in Lebanon. Describing itself as a charity that ‘works to empower vulnerable children and their communities through participatory built interventions’ (Catalytic Action website), Catalytic Action believes firmly in the value of participatory design and co-creation and has partnered with several local and international organisations to implement projects, as well as with researchers and universities such as the American University of Beirut (AUB) and University College London (UCL). From its first pilot playground, which inspired similar spatial interventions in Lebanon, Syria and France, Catalytic Action has developed and carried out 26 participatory initiatives in some of the most deprived and vulnerable areas in Lebanon and the Middle East (Conti, 2020).

In 2015-16 Catalytic Action’s pilot *Ibtasem* playground (“smile” in Arabic), aimed to respond to Syrian refugee children’s need for a safe play area in the border town of Bar Elias (Dabaj & Conti, 2020, p.222), something that was cruelly lacking. Designed with refugee children, teachers and other stakeholders, it used local knowledge, skills, technologies and materials, which helped to create bridges with the wider community (Catalytic Action website). This laid the ground for a subsequent and wider participatory spatial intervention in Bar Elias, carried out in partnership with the Bartlett School of Urban Development Planning (UCL). Having nourished its local networks and become highly familiar with local needs and dynamics (Dabaj & Conti, 2020 p.239), Catalytic Action and partners recruited seven local researchers from amongst Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian residents, and trained them as “citizen scientists”. This included training on research methods and tools, participatory design thinking, and thinking and questioning the conditions and needs of their built environment, notably its social role and how it could be improved (Catalytic Action, 2020). Twelve other residents were recruited for the participatory design stage, to help identify communities’ priority concerns and build a collective vision for improving public areas.

The extensive participatory process, which lasted between August 2018 and August 2019, found that a lack of safe public spaces for all residents was a core area of urban vulnerability, alongside socio-economic and pollution and health vulnerabilities (Dabaj, Rigon & Baumann, 2020, p.53-4). Before considering spatial solutions, participants outlined core problems and effects (such as the lack of seats, shading, children’s playgrounds, and a generalised lack of respect for pedestrians, wheelchair users and traffic laws) (Ibid, p.55). As the only location used by all nationalities (for a diversity of purposes), the entrance road to the town was chosen as the main site of intervention. The process then saw participants develop collective visions and propose solutions, which Catalytic Action and UCL integrated into an intervention plan, which they presented back to residents. The partners ensured close collaboration and coordination with Bar Elias municipality throughout the process.

The second case study is a collaborative initiative to co-design a public space with Lebanese and Syrian residents and local authorities in the densely populated and marginalised Beirut neighbourhood of Naba’a (with an estimated 26,000 inhabitants per 0.5km). Led by UN-Habitat and the Block by Block Foundation, the project engaged residents from a diversity of ages and backgrounds to identify and redesign a rare and (eventually) vacant local public plot. It also ensured coordination and engagement with the local Bourj al Hammoud Municipality. School-aged children, housewives, cooks, students and social workers (Block by Block 2021), as well as people who were homeless (Mady, 2019), were consulted in the process. From the outset, the project clearly intended to enhance community cohesion, given intercommunal tensions in the area (Mady, 2019, p.159).

By using Minecraft, a popular computer game likened to digital Lego, residents were able to propose uses, features and designs for the new public garden. Public consultations began in 2016 and *Naba’a’s Garden* was inaugurated in August 2017. These were organised in seven stages, starting with the selection of an appropriate site with the Municipality; dissemination and community mobilisation and the creation of a local, representative Committee; awareness-building amongst local residents, notably through orientation sessions; selection of participants for the Minecraft training; delivery of the training; production of the final design and validation with participants and community members; and finally, the implementation phase (UN-Habitat Presentation, March 2017). UN-Habitat noted the importance of ensuring ongoing local ownership and engagement and in 2018 planned to upgrade the space with the help of residents (Nazzal & Chinder, 2018 p.143), although there is little information about this second stage.

When considering the above cases and this dissertation’s analytical framework, participatory *processes* (and diverse engagements with children, residents and refugees) are clearly just as important as desired *outcomes* (i.e. the reduction of spatial injustices and improved common areas on the one hand, as well as potential improvements for children’s wellbeing and wider social cohesion). Based on the information and analysis available, the below will consider how and if the interventions in Bar Elias and Naba’a contributed to these objectives, and what could be learnt from them for future endeavours.

## Spatial injustices in Naba’a and Bar Elias

### **Naba’a: a highly vulnerable neighbourhood in Northeast Beirut**

Naba’a is an increasingly informal area close to the Beirut port, and illustrates the huge challenges residents face when already neglected and overcrowded urban areas are impacted by mass displacement (UNHABITAT, 2017). Situated in Bourj al-Hammoud, a municipality that hosts one of the largest concentrations of Syrian refugees in the city (UNHCR, 2016), some estimates put the percentage of Syrian residents in Naba’a at 80% (Fawaz, 2017).

Naba’a is characterised by “a chaotic urban structure”, with haphazardly built shelters that are disconnected from public services (ACTED, 2020, p.6) and generally unhealthy or hazardous housing conditions (before the Beirut blast in 2020, whose epicentre was nearby, 35% of housing in the area was identified as already requiring either major repairs or emergency interventions; more than 67% of residents living in such housing were Syrian refugees) (UN-Habitat, 2017a p.14). The area is also characterised by a lack of social infrastructure, and unsafe or overcrowded streets. Children seek out play opportunities wherever they can, while the area also reports high rates of school dropouts, especially amongst Syrian refugee children.

The spatial development and population diversity of Naba’a, which attracted waves of migrants and refugees throughout its history, resulted in social fragmentation (Mady, 2019, p.162). Its crumbling and overburdened infrastructure and services, combined with high population densities, meant that the neighbourhood was also prone to conflicts (Dagher & Samaha, 2016 p.7) and Syrian refugees were commonly discriminated against (Boustani & al, p.36). Despite this, Syrian refugees have reported feeling safer in the area because of extensive social networks (Ibid, p.34). Several political groups and armed movements such as Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army are present in the area (Ibid, p.33), while the municipal Government is reportedly weaker (UN-Habitat, 2017), factors which can all influence how urban development and community engagement initiatives play out.

### **Bar Elias, a border town profoundly altered by mass displacement**

A town in the Bekaa valley, Bar Elias is located half-way between Beirut and Damascus, just 15km from the Syrian border. Estimates vary, but the town has a population of between 60,000 and 70,000 Lebanese residents and hosts between 31,000 and 45,000 Syrian refugees, as well as 7,000 Palestinian refugees (UNDP, 2018 p.6). Regardless of exact figures, Bar Elias’ demography, fabric and landscape were profoundly changed by the arrival of so many refugees, and the town is marked by strong spatial segregation (Rigon & al, p.209).

Unlike Beirut, the significant housing ‘geometry’ for Syrian refugees includes numerous ‘informal’ tented settlements, set up in agricultural fields and empty lots around the town. There are more than 100 such settlements (UNHCR, 2016, quoted in Rigon & al, 2021), and while living conditions are generally substandard, some, like the ‘Awde’ settlement, stand out by their high levels of organisation and good external support (Sanyal, 2017). In the context of Lebanon’s “no camp policy”, these settlements developed in diverse ways, and living conditions and amenities can vary significantly, depending on the collusion of private interests, state acquiescence and humanitarian aid (Ibid).

While Bar Elias has often been described as more welcoming towards Syrians than many other Lebanese towns, it has not been spared from tensions between different groups, not least over jobs and the use of public space, such as parks and street-side markets (Mintchev et al, p.123). While a UNDP qualitative WhatsApp survey amongst Syrian refugees and Lebanese residents (Ullrich, 2018) substantiated that there was generally peaceful coexistence between Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese nationals, it revealed more complex and nuanced interactions and perceptions between different identity groups but included hostility and racism. The latter are also symptoms of underlying tensions or concerns over debilitated infrastructure and stretched resources. The street was a specific site of fear (Ullrich, 2018. P.5).

The above dynamics led Catalytic Action and UCL to focus their spatial intervention in areas that would benefit *all* residents (versus focusing on areas that would only benefit refugees and would not help address intercommunal misunderstandings or tensions). This ensured the process could engage and mobilise various residents around a common and mutually beneficial objective.

### **Did these processes help to improve children’s wellbeing?**

When considering the impact of refugee children’s involvement in spatial design and interventions, the *Ibtasem* playground provided evidence that this helped children to develop a sense of ownership over the play area, as well as realising that their own role was very important (Dabaj & Conti, 2020 p.223). “I am here to build the playground with you, so that when I go back to Syria, I can build one myself” (Ibid.) Shahd, a 5-year-old Syrian refugee’s words also illustrate how this can also provide both a sense of purpose and accomplishment, as well as a hopeful vision for the future. The playground continues to be used by local children today, and five years after its completion, one mother told Catalytic Action that her son, who took part in designing it, ‘still remembers it with joy’ (Conti, 2020, p.149).

While it did not focus on co-designing with children in the same way, the 2018-2019 spatial participatory intervention intensively engaged diverse residents (including parents or other family members) and used the *Ibtasem* example as a key illustration to think through co-created design solutions. Different methods were used, including observation, participatory mapping, semi-structured interviews, a public design consultation, with the main needs identified as safety, accessibility, leisure and safe play areas for children (Dabaj & Conti, 2020 p.241-2). Addressing these through the co-design process served to improve the safety and comfort of communal areas, including building shaded waiting areas and installing seats. The role of main streets as “social hubs” for diverse residents and, potentially, for newer arrivals or more transient visitors (Dabaj & Conti, 2020 p.239) was positively enhanced. (This is interesting when considering the role of streets in denser urban areas too, which are often used as prime play areas for children due to a lack of other infrastructure and spaces, with related safety issues).

The literature and multimedia available on the Bar Elias intervention illustrates very positive feedback from those who participated. This came from those playing a leading role, such as the citizen scientists, as well as from street users, children, and even a neighbouring town’s mayor (Catalytic Action, 2020). The spatial intervention, which included a collective clean-up of a run-down public park (Rigon & al, 2021, p.206), strengthened the social functionality of public spaces in the centre (Ibid, p.209) and enabled diverse residents to meet and interact more easily, and children to play safely.

According to socio-ecological models and our relational description of wellbeing, enhancing parents and family members’ wellbeing can contribute positively to children’s wellbeing and strengthen key protective factors in their home. Acknowledging how refugee parents, as outlined previously, may constrain their children’s mobility and time outdoors because of concerns for their safety (including concerns of bullying and discriminatory treatment by other residents), such processes reportedly helped to break down barriers and reduce tensions. Combined with public spaces’ improved accessibility, safety and attractiveness, this may have helped to allay many parents’ fears and provided more children with regular opportunities to interact and play with other children. This is also suggested in the literature available.

Designs were also implemented with children’s needs and choices in mind, such as through making sites and facilities more colourful and playful (Dabaj et al, 2020). Children’s involvement in different activities during the implementation phase (e.g. painting park benches or the walls), the interactive public inauguration, and child-friendly designs will all have contributed to their sense of ownership and pride for their refashioned environment.

In Naba’a, there is less information available on children and families’ impressions and feedback on the process, so the following draws from overall descriptions instead, acknowledging this cannot replace direct feedback. While the Committee was constituted by more powerful and influential adult residents, including activists and local leaders, children were well-represented: they were involved in two of the five initial focus groups (which involved 120 people), which were organised by age and/or gender. These groups were tasked with nominating the 24 participants for the Minecraft training and design stage, and the selected 24 included 15 children (i.e. representing 63% of participants), aged from seven-years-old to adolescence. While there was a gender balance amongst the 24 participants (UNHABITAT, 2017, slide 32), 71% were Lebanese and only 29% were Syrian refugees (Ibid, slide 33). Whether this reflected the proportional breakdown of residents in the local vicinity is not clear from the literature (given that population figures estimated Syrians comprised 60%-80% of residents in the wider Naba’a neighbourhood). Yet this reportedly did not impact on the collaboration between groups (Mady, p.168).

The use of an interactive 3D tool meant participants could visualise the neighbourhood and propose designs, helping to make discussions practical and purposeful. Computer literacy may have been an initial challenge, yet training was provided to overcome this, helping ensure that engagement with children focused on ‘the lived experience, not abstract concepts of urban design’ (Bornat and Shaw, quoted in Gill, 2021, p.123). Participants translated their ideas and proposals into Minecraft models, which included “green areas, shaded areas, plantations, benches, fences, toilets, food kiosks, a pedestrian sidewalk and a waiting area” (Nazzal and Chinder, 2018 p.138). The Minecraft facilitator and UN-Habitat architect took the proposals and consolidated them into a final proposal, which they presented back to the community, allowing a chance for further feedback and iteration.

While Syrian children were reportedly more “active and creative” in their proposals than Lebanese children (Mady, p.168), the outcome reflects the popularity of the site amongst all young children. From a 200-square metre plot in a central residential area used by a local drug dealer for his trade (Nazzal & Chinder, p.136), to the construction of a child-friendly, public garden, serving all residents in the area, the Naba’a project successfully transformed a central urban space. After it opened, the Naba’a garden became well-known, popular and actively used by children (Mady p.171). On the one hand, it addressed specific spatial injustices (the lack of a safe play area and social hub for residents, lack of security), while also improving the overall practical infrastructure and aesthetics of the local area (e.g. through the planting of trees and the installation of solar lighting fixtures, which the whole neighbourhood is benefiting from) (Mady, p. 171).

Both the participatory process and garden served marginalised and low-income children and their families’ needs and provided an area where users could feel comfortable and safe, and which could contribute to their wellbeing. The space became a “central place allowing for the everyday to become a celebration, providing a meeting place for women and children” (Mady, 2019 quoting Dines et al. 2006), and provided residents with an immaterial benefit and contribution to wellbeing (Mady, p.174).

In Lebanon, kindergartens are currently the main integrated educational space for Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian children, and sometimes the rare “normal” chance they have to interact (this is due to the double-shift school system that separates Lebanese and Syrian children, while Palestinian children are mostly taught in UNRWA schools) (Abu El-Haj & al, 2018 p.21). Children do not otherwise have regular and recognised spaces of encounter. At different scales, both the Naba’a and Bar Elias spatial interventions increased opportunities for school-aged children to be brought together meaningfully. In Naba’a, children worked together and with adults towards a common, creative objective, and in both Naba’a and Bar Elias, the spatial interventions resulted in a more mixed, enjoyable and accessible social space for many children.

### **Addressing spatial injustices in a participatory manner – the glue that binds?**

In Naba’a, a rapid UN-habitat assessment of the neighbourhood in 2015 found that Lebanese residents felt strong resentments towards Syrians, who they blamed for their neighbourhood’s deterioration and densification (Nazzal & Chinder, 2018 p.135). Through the project, Lebanese and Syrian children were brought into meaningful and purposeful contact, where Allport’s optimal conditions seemed to be present (i.e. equal status, cooperation, common goals, and institutional support, at least from UN-Habitat, and to a more limited degree, by the local municipality).

While orientation sessions divided participants into more ‘classic’ groups (by age and gender), subsequent stages mixed participants and reduced group sizes (e.g. up to four people), even allowing participants to work alone. This may have been a means of overcoming certain power dynamics and ensuring all participants had a voice. There was a strong focus on relationships between different participants and their potential interactions with one other within the public space, underlying its value and design as a social space.

Crucially, the project’s focus groups enabled tensions to be aired by adults and created a forum to try and address these (even if these were not the topics introduced). Such opportunities do not seem to have existed before and gave Syrian refugees a platform to share their perspective (Mady, 2019 p.166-7), illustrating another benefit of such a process.

Subsequently, women from different backgrounds started to use the garden as a meeting space and set up local social and community groups ‘to address common concerns and even reverse generalisations about each other’ (Mady, p.174). This illustrated how the project fostered a greater sense of the ‘urban commons’ amongst diverse residents (i.e. ownership over a shared social space), and how they wanted to continue building a sense of community. NGOs also started to organise events in the garden, illustrating its value as a space for both planned and spontaneous encounters.

Mady concluded that ‘the bleak image of a degraded and socially fragmented neighbourhood was transformed’ through UN-Habitat’s spatial intervention (Mady, 2019 p.174). While keeping a critical eye on certain drawbacks, she emphasised the extensive benefits the process brought about by bringing diverse residents into purposeful and meaningful contact with each other. It enabled new relationships between groups that previously kept themselves separate, helped to address and diminish prejudices through increased intercommunal contacts, and provided a physical space for ongoing interactions and purposeful encounters. The inauguration of the garden also brought diverse community members together in a celebratory event.

One clear flipside was the exclusion of adolescents from the space, despite their earlier involvement, and the dearth of social spaces available for them otherwise. While UN-Habitat had intended the space to be open access and benefiting everyone in the community, participants raised early concerns regarding who the space users would be, and ultimately, teenagers were later excluded. Syrian youth also continue to be particularly discriminated against in the area (Mady, p. 174), illustrating the constraints of such spatial interventions, but also the importance of considering ways of overcoming these or developing appropriate alternatives.

In Bar Elias, the programme seems to have maximised opportunities for meaningful encounters throughout the consultations and the implementation phase and built on prior networks and local knowledge. It brought citizen scientists into contact and conversation with many different residents, whom they may not otherwise have met or discussed with (Catalytic Action, 2020). Beyond the physical solutions it implemented, one key success identified was its transformative impact on social relations, through building “a human infrastructure able to negotiate and activate important processes of change, while reducing social tensions” (Ibid). The intervention helped transform social relations both through the impact of the physical intervention and the social process of co-design itself (Rigon, Dabaj & Baumann, 2021, p.207), addressing and breaking down barriers across nationality, gender and age (Ibid, p.209).

One participant said the workshop changed their relations with other town residents, whereas previously they had been “enclosed” and only knew Syrians and their neighbourhood: “I met a lot of people: Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians, and when I pass through the street, we say hi to each other. So, it brought us together.” (Rigon, Dabaj & Baumann, p.210). From the feedback received, Rigon & al found that some Syrians felt more part of the town because they were helping to ‘shape it’ and ‘to some extent exercising agency and urban citizenship’, but also giving something back for the hospitality they had received (Rigon, Dabaj & Baumann, 2021 p.208.)

### **Engaging the Municipality and the challenge of ensuring a lasting process**

Both the Naba’a and Bar Elias initiatives engaged municipal actors early on, something which development and humanitarian actors have been criticised for failing to do sufficiently or systematically in the past (Sanyal, 2021). Despite the reported prevalence of weak and under-resourced local governance in Lebanon (Atallah, 2016), the sustainability of such projects relies on ensuring the buy-in of political and administrative stakeholders and networks. Another strategic aspect of engaging local municipal players was to demonstrate the effectiveness of engaging local children and residents when designing urban design solutions. This could illustrate the power of local ideas and knowledge in addressing problems despite limited resources, as well as ensuring a sense of local ownership and responsibility.

In Bar Elias, there is evidence that the process helped create alliances between Lebanese and refugee residents when, given residents’ active support, municipal players overcame their initial scepticism and were convinced of its added value. They also highly appreciated the intervention’s concrete results (Rigon, Dabaj & Baumann, p.209.) This meant they became more willing to replicate similar approaches in the future, even if this was conditional on external support (Ibid).

In Naba’a, the Municipality’s initial reneging on some of its commitments to maintain the space and ensure daytime opening hours created doubts about its sustainability (Mady, p.171). It also implemented ‘quick-fix’ solutions when trying to solve problems, such as when it removed the monkey bars after children rowed over who could use them. (Such short-sighted solutions were also observed in Al Mina, Tripoli after the authorities removed a play facility a day after its inauguration, as children from neighbouring areas were fighting over the space, Mohareb, 2019 p.116). As both refugees and many Lebanese residents living in Naba’a cannot vote (for Lebanese, this is because they are registered to vote elsewhere), there is a democratic deficit (UN-Habitat, 2017a, p.27) and a sense that local authorities’ accountability towards residents may already be weak.

To address the above, UN-Habitat reengaged with residents to propose alternative solutions and negotiated with the Municipality regarding opening hours and space management. The ongoing process and dialogue are likely to have created bridges between municipal employees and diverse residents. Yet whether it altered mindsets, notably regarding the value of engaging children and residents (regardless of their nationality or status) when designing urban solutions (and thus the importance of doing this systematically in the future) is another matter. While the project’s impact (notably on social cohesion) appears to have been successful, it is worth noting the scale of outstanding needs and spatial injustices in Naba’a, which such a programme can only start to address.

In Bar Elias, the intervention unexpectedly inspired complementary initiatives by other stakeholders, including the municipality, which helped to amplify its impact (Rigon & al, 2021 p.209) and is also a desired outcome for any such process. The key challenge for such initiatives is indeed to help ensure that architecture can be sustained as a continuous process, notably through the ‘living on’ of participation (Conti, Dabaj & Pascucci, 2020 p.219), and that it triggers lasting change. In order to be successful and change towns and cities at scale – and notably demonstrate the importance, value and potential impact of involving children and families in an inclusive manner in co-designing urban solutions – these processes need to become owned, shaped and perpetuated by a variety of local stakeholders, not least local authorities.

# **Conclusion**

Co-designing urban environments is increasingly recognised as having transformative potential, not least when children and traditionally overlooked or marginalised groups are actively and meaningfully involved. Cities are ‘anchored in the multiple forms of inhabitance, the practices, imaginations, and interactions, individual and collective’ (Fawaz, 2020) of their residents, not least of children, with their intimate knowledge of their environments and creative ways of reimagining them.

This dissertation set out to consider how, and under what conditions, co-designed child-friendly urban neighbourhoods in areas impacted by mass displacement in Lebanon could address spatial injustices and, drawing from psychosocial and relational conceptions of wellbeing, improve Syrian refugee children’s wellbeing. Inspired by Gordon Allport’s contact theory, it also explored how participatory processes could improve prospects for social cohesion by enabling meaningful and purposeful contacts between diverse residents.

Set against wider socio-political dynamics that constrain Syrian refugees’ rights in Lebanon, the spatial injustices that Syrian children and their families typically face in urban areas are to a large degree shared with low income Lebanese and other residents. Limited opportunities or patterns of urban (and school) segregation often reduce refugee children’s contact with their Lebanese peers, while their mobility and opportunities for safe free-flow play may be limited.

While using different methodologies and at different scales, the Bar Elias and Naba’a cases provided strong evidence that *genuine* participatory processes can lead to collective, child-friendly urban visions that can successfully address certain spatial injustices. Drawing from socio-ecological models, environmental psychology and Hart’s (meaningful) rungs of participation, the process and outcomes should be able to positively contribute to children’s wellbeing. Beyond creating architecture and spaces that enable ongoing interactions, there is also evidence that the process helped break down barriers between nationalities and created ‘specific forms of affective engagement not just between participants, but also between participants and the urban environment’ (Minchev et al, p.115).

Over a year, the processes also productively engaged local municipalities and helped to address other salient needs. Crucially, they helped to trigger unexpected, ongoing initiatives in both localities. As the Naba’a example illustrated, it however remains crucial to consider who and when groups are later being excluded or overlooked, including adolescents, youth and other migrants.

While the evidence considered in many ways substantiated what the dissertation set out to test – at specific scales – further exploration would be needed to determine the longevity and scalability of such processes, including through focused, independent evaluations with different stakeholders, not least with children. Ensuring that strategic, powerful stakeholders are convinced of these participatory processes’ value, and that a cross-section of residents of all nationalities continue to seek to redress spatial injustices collaboratively, would be key success indicators.

Finally, it remains important to consider who is leading such processes. While this exploration focused on specific methodologies, it does not exclude that more oppositional or conflictual processes may in certain circumstances be needed to remedy deep spatial injustices (Tisdall, 2013, p.188). Yet given the acute and arguably unprecedented socio-political and economic crises facing Lebanon today, building solidarities across differences and fostering ‘spaces where people can meet and connect’ to nurture these solidarities (Aouad & Kaloustian, 2021, p. 13), especially when they can enhance children’s wellbeing, seems more important and urgent than ever.

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1. The risk of arrest or deportation has been cited as a factor encouraging child labour, given that children under 15 are not legally required to have these (Kim et al, 2020, p.2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Since this study in 2017, the 2020 Beirut Blast will have impacted heavily on this relative sense of safety – particularly in the neighbourhoods near the port, where many Syrians and other migrant communities had settled. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This concept of can also be related to what Rigon & al described as the development of ‘human infrastructure’ in Bar Elias, drawing from AbdouMalik Simone’s 2004 concept (Rigon, Dabaj and Baumann, 2021, p.200). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This definition moves beyond Elinor Ostrom’s focus on traditional ‘common pool resources’ (CPR), such as pastures, forests and lakes, to a much wider definition including multiple scales and kinds of spaces (Neidig 2019 p.8). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This is adapted from a description of the relational wellbeing approach by Sarah C. White (Bristol University Press, 2018), where she talks about focusing on the dance, *not* on the dancers. The proposal here is to keep both lenses. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Over time, psychological and psychosocial concepts have become more complementary, acknowledging one another’s respective strengths and different target groups, including through the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (2007) (White & Eyber, 2017, p.9-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)