

Designing for socially sustainable urban regeneration

An urban revival agenda is emerging across the Middle East and North Africa. Although many old districts face challenges from rapid growth and expansion, urban regeneration can breathe new life into those communities by tangibly improving the quality of life while preserving the soul of the place — **as has happened successfully in cities as different as Copenhagen and Singapore**. When done successfully, regeneration can reverse such social ills as urban decay, unemployment, poverty, and lack of social cohesion while ensuring that unaffordable housing does not force people out of their communities. To have such an impact, however, urban regeneration needs to integrate a sustainable social agenda from the start.

Despite its promise of a better life, urban regeneration often disrupts the lives of residents and businesses with unintended consequences. Short-term and often unavoidable disruptions can include inconveniences like noise, dust, and traffic disruption, along with temporary uprooting, emotional stress, and dissatisfaction. These can be managed while ensuring a long-term positive impact. However, longer-term implications can include alteration of the sociodemographic fabric and a lower standard of living, particularly when growth is not inclusive. That can damage the sense of belonging and put the project at risk.

Instead, governments, urban planners, and developers should consider a long-term approach that prioritizes communities by integrating a sustainable social agenda into urban regeneration. That would mitigate the negative effects on both the project and the community.

The entity should then develop a deep understanding of the needs of the target communities. Such an engagement should be a concerted effort to increase community ownership and gain trust, not an afterthought to gain buy-in. That means co-designing solutions that integrate the priorities and preferences of the whole community, including residents, businesses, and property owners.



“The starting point for any regeneration project should be a governance structure that integrates efforts and brings together the right players for the project. These players may include various ministries, affiliated agencies, sector representatives, and local stakeholders like preservation groups and cultural advocates. Ideally, they should be jointly coordinated by a central urban regeneration entity.

Building a bond with the community requires frequent project updates and measuring community sentiment through things like advisory boards, town halls, surveys, and focus groups. Importantly, community engagement channels, messages, and communication styles should resonate with the local culture and social norms. Digital tools like co-design applications have been deployed by cities such as Estonia's capital, Tallinn. Helsinki's OmaStadi initiative invited residents to cast votes for their favorite regeneration initiatives.

To address unavoidable social disruption, governments should consider tailored assistance packages such as financial or non-financial relocation assistance. For example, they can offer relocation advisory assistance and access to counseling to help families adjust to disruption, or include resident protection measures and dispute resolution during the temporary relocation phase.

In the long term, urban regeneration should support affordable housing by designating a portion of developed properties for low-to moderate-income original residents. Accompanying protections can be offered to the existing community, including, for example, "right to first purchase" or "right of first refusal" policies. Additionally, regeneration should leverage local economic development with job creation, workforce training, and small business support.

As regeneration requires significant resources, it is essential to secure sustained funding from the start. A funding shortfall that occurs once a project is in progress can gravely affect a community, leading to a sense of disappointment and exclusion. Accordingly, the government should perform a needs assessment before the project starts and make sufficient provision by, for example, factoring community engagement and support into the budget. One way to ensure commercial considerations do not overtake social sustainability is to link additional funding to social indicators.

Governments, urban planners, and developers should also articulate clearly and publicly key long-term outcomes while monitoring and evaluating progress throughout the project. Several indicators can measure the social sustainability of urban regeneration projects, such as income level, job opportunities, cost of living, housing affordability, access to services, displacement rates, and cultural vibrancy. These entities should also regularly monitor community satisfaction and public perception and help resolve or mitigate issues where possible.

When done correctly, urban regeneration can revitalize districts, boost economic growth, and give back to the cities their legacy hidden gems. By structuring urban regeneration as a community project from the beginning, ambitious goals are achievable.

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