Inner City Public Open Space and Parks as inclusive, livable, safe, and accessible spaces: The case of pilot initiatives by Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo

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Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) is responsible for addressing the challenges of open spaces and parks in Johannesburg and it is the focus of this case. Many city officials are committed to rejuvenating the inner city and making it safe for people and families to live and walk without fear. Such a commitment includes upgrading public parks in cooperation with affected communities. Public parks are used by people in the surrounding community, so it is critical to keep a strong relationship with these communities. However, in the past there has been mistrust towards city officials due to a mismatch between user expectations vis-à-vis what government could deliver in certain timeframes.

There are high levels of homelessness, unemployment and drugs (selling and consumption) around many of the parks. They are not safe for families living in the area and kids cannot play because it is dangerous. Without these places for activities, learning and recreation, a vicious cycle is perpetuated, which is evident in the impact of drinking, drugs and other anti-social behaviour on young people.

Another challenge to creating safe public parks is getting city departments to work together. For example, the End Street North park in Doornfontein needs the cooperation of Johannesburg Roads Agency. The park is on the corner of a bigger road where there is a risk that people can get knocked over, which means that people cannot cross the road to use the park.

The various problems described here are symptoms of larger issues for the city. Addressing these challenges requires budget, political leadership and agreed management structures with clear responsibilities. The budget requirements are not significant amounts when compared to large infrastructure developments but they are continuous. Human capacity is another factor as there is a need for continuous engagement with communities and stakeholders.

After an in-depth assessment on the status of Johannesburg's inner city parks showing that many parks remain underutilised because of safety concerns and high rates of vandalism, the entity responsible for parks and zoo JCPZ decided to start a pilot where the City could test alternative ways of developing and managing parks, and where collaborative engagement processes could be employed to explore a range of issues around safety in parks and public open spaces. JCPZ set out to demonstrate that tackling public spaces needed to be a collaborative process where residents and city officials came together in dialogue and negotiation so as to find more meaningful and sustainable ways of developing and managing their local space.

This initiative required an increased cooperation between sectors within the city but also triggered collaboration with international and local agencies such as the GIZ Violence and Crime Prevention Programme and UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme, as well as nonprofit and community organisations. Furthermore, higher education institutions such as Wits University joined the initiative.

The pilot project at End Street North Park aims to build a safer park in a safer community by:

- ■ engaging stakeholders to forge long-term relationships to manage parks
- ■ creating a safer community parks strategy
- ■ completing a physical upgrade of End Street North Park
- ■ offering practical guidelines of an integrated and participatory approach to park design and management
- ■ documenting lessons learnt

Since 2017, the project also started to engage and to work on methods for park management – focusing on how to use sport and other activities as a means to create opportunities for communities to take ownership of their parks and adopt a collective approach for permanent park activation in urban communities addressing safety issues at the same time.

The big issue for parks and open spaces in urban areas is about providing inclusive, liveable, safe, and accessible spaces for the people that live in the city.

Parks in cities are a highly valuable resource. They provide green space, can absorb rain water where there are non-sealed surfaces. Parks with trees are of an immense value providing shadow in summer, but also absorb CO_2. From a social aspect, parks can be of high value and places where people meet and interact socially. The open spaces provide people of all ages from children to older people, those living or working in the area, to enjoy being outdoors. Well maintained physical spaces are popular for doing sports and other activities. These public spaces are also dedicated places where people from different classes, origin etc. meet and mix. Especially with the recent history of having been a divided and segregated society, public parks and open spaces could be used as a foundation for the creation of more inclusive societies and on building social cohesion.

However, parks can only be used in this way if they are livable, accessible and safe. The current status of many parks is that they are often dump sites, they are generally in bad condition, and often dark and unlit at night. This means in many cases, parks and open spaces are places where violence and crime thrive, rather than being places for people to enjoy in their leisure time, with family and friends.

A key aspect of the challenge to provide livable, equitable ands accessible urban open spaces is the issue of safety and security and crime prevention. It is a complex social challenge. While surveillance can help reduce opportunities for crime, it does not solve the underlying causes. It is not a solution to just push out other users (homeless, waste collectors and gambling youth). These social illnesses will not go away and city departments need to deal with it. Crime prevention is the responsibility of different spheres of government and requires leadership to make a commitment ot action.

Question: How can this 'wicked problem' be better understood and better addressed in the context of South African cities of the future ?