

Tactical urbanism in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs)

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Question

How has tactical urbanism been defined and to what end? How is it being promoted or delivered in response to COVID-19 in LMICs? What is the evidence of success and failure? What models or approaches might be replicable?

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Summary

Tactical urbanism, a term developed from High-Income Countries (HICs), describes grassroots activities in urban settings for neighbourhood building which are short-term, low-cost, iterative, make efficient use of resources, and are reactive/activist. When the term is used to describe activities in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), experience tends to share some but not all of these features. Initiatives described as tactical urbanism that occur in LMICs have less of a activism element and are more likely to involve local government or NGOs.

In HICs, examples include citizens adding street signs, pop-up projects in disused buildings, painting bike-lines, and car free days where parking spaces are repurposed as parks.

Examples and case studies labelled as tactical urbanism from LMICs, are predominantly related to road safety (Brazil, India, Tanzania, and Chile) and are described in informal resources such as blog posts. Material from blog posts is more likely to be positive and may be biased. Unsuccessful examples are unlikely to be reported. Examples identified from Egypt and China are more themed around repurposing or upgrading space for improving retail business.

It was necessary in this rapid literature review to focus on information that was *described as* tactical urbanism though it should be noted there are likely to be examples of tactical urbanism *type* approaches that are not labelled as such and therefore were beyond the scope of this rapid review.

There was little evidence of tactical urbanism being promoted or delivered in response to COVID-19.

2. Definition

Mike Lydon is said to have come up with the phrase ‘tactical urbanism’¹ and it is described in his book *Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action for Long-term Change* (Lydon & Garcia, 2015):

“Tactical Urbanism is an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies. It makes use of an iterative development process, the efficient use of resources, and the creative potential unleashed by social interaction.... In many ways, Tactical Urbanism is a learned response to the slow and siloed conventional city building process” (p2)

Actions are also referred to as guerrilla urbanism, pop-up urbanism, city repair, or D.I.Y. urbanism (Lydon et al., 2012).

Examples in the United States include adding signs to encourage walking in urban areas, intersection repair, pop-up projects in disused buildings, and painting bike lanes (Pfeifer, 2013). In San Francisco, a small group took over a single parking space and turned it into a miniature

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/tactical-urbanists-are-improving-cities-one-rogue-fix-at-a-time-180955049/>

park which grew into Park(ing) Day, a car-free day to highlight the lack of green space. People install grass, plants, and a bench and get creative with parking spaces. Now celebrated globally.²

The term emerged from HICs and has been used in a small number of identified cases to describe activities in LMICs. An Institute for Transport and Development Policy (ITDP) presentation on tactical urbanism in India describes such interventions as “quick, temporary, and low-cost projects characterised by a community focus to build support for long term change” (ITDP, 2020). The other resources with LMIC examples describing tactical urbanism are mostly blog posts, so quite informal and do not specifically define tactical urbanism.

The World Bank, in their publication *The Hidden Wealth of Cities: Creating, Financing, and Managing Public Spaces*, discusses tactical urbanism as opposed to comprehensive city planning, though it also notes the two are not mutually exclusive (Kaw et al., 2020). The authors describe tactical urbanism as simple, low cost physical alterations to improve space with fast results. Examples include temporary social programmes such as exhibitions, street furniture restoration, changing the use of space, and changing the use of buildings. They suggest that projects may have some planning and then use elements of tactical urbanism or tactical urbanism approaches. They describe the need for well-planned programming for sustainability past temporary status.

The Project for Public Spaces³, based in the United States, describes a similar concept, placemaking, which would be interesting to explore further. “As both an overarching idea and a hands-on approach for improving a neighbourhood, city, or region, placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces at the heart of every community”.⁴

Javier Vergara Petrescu is the Co-founder and Executive Director at “Ciudad Emergente”⁵ in Chile. He describes tactical urbanism as “short-term actions to leverage long term change” offering “an innovative and inclusive method to integrate local communities into the transformation of streetscapes and the revitalisation of public spaces.”⁶

LMIC examples described as, or tagged tactical urbanism seem often to have government involvement although the original idea in HICs was communities responding to lack of government action. There may be examples of this type in LMICs which are not labelled as ‘tactical urbanism’ which would require further scope to research.

² <https://cohere.city/tactical-urbanism-how-parking-day-leads-to-permanent-change/>

³ <https://www.pps.org/>

⁴ <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>

⁵ Described as a Lab of Tactics and Tools for Human Centered Cities

⁶ <https://www.urbanet.info/equitable-public-spaces-in-latin-america-a-how-to/>

3. Case studies

Brazil

The international Institute for Transport and Development Policy (ITDP)⁷ held a webinar in March 2020, titled: *The Transformative Power of Tactical Urbanism in the Global South*.⁸ ITDP published regional webinar presentations including one from a transport manager in Brazil (Hoppe, 2020).

The presentation notes the following actions and lessons learnt from Brazil:

- High rates of traffic accidents prompting a focus away from cars and towards people.
- Initiatives use traffic cones and paint roads to mark out pedestrian areas.
- Capacity building workshops support citizens in making change.
- Implementation processes sometimes involved public servants.
- The initiatives are efficient in raising awareness even if permanent implementation takes a long time.
- Data, surveys and political will are important.
- Champions are useful to help maintain engagement of community and public servants after pop-up.

Chile

Calle Portugal in Santiago Centro experimented with a temporary bike lane which has resulted in a 560% increase of cyclists in the street according to an urban.net blog post (Petrescu, 2020). It was part of a larger effort led by *Ciudad Emergente* described as a tactical intervention called Shared Street for a Low Carbon District. It was a local community process sponsored by the Municipality of Santiago.

China

From the World Bank publication *The Hidden Wealth of Cities: Creating, Financing, and Managing Public Spaces* a case study of China is described (Kaw et al., 2020). Tactical urbanism is not referenced but is based on similar ideas.⁹ The Beijing Municipal Government wanted to use incremental, inclusive approaches to regeneration in Dashilar. Co-creation involved various stakeholders to address community needs and provide ownership among residents. The aim was to improve the use of narrow streets and create green and cultural space that preserves authentic culture. Cultural businesses such as art galleries, design studios and boutique shops were put alongside already established businesses and strengthened cultural

⁷ <https://www.itdp.org/about/>

⁸ <https://www.itdp.org/event/power-of-tactical-urbanism/>

⁹ The case studies in the publication tend to have more from government or private sector than the original idea of tactical urbanism.

identity and attracted interest. Private sector engagement prompted economic opportunities for surrounding businesses which were previously struggling.

Egypt

One source describes activities in Cairo, Egypt, using the term tactical urbanism (Abd Elrahman, 2016). The paper defines tactical urbanism as “a low cost - temporary change approach to the urban environment that can act as a pop-up solution for Cairo's built environment” and highlights “the unplanned or traditional practices that have been carried out by inhabitants, entities or initiatives, which carries out the principles of "Tactical Urbanism"” (p224).

Examples in Cairo described in the paper include:

- A local non-profit organisation undertook a project to develop Luxor Street in Mansheit Nasser which supported a marketplace for skilled craftsmen to sell their goods. Inhabitants helped to shape the space with a colour scheme. This initiated incremental investment.
- The Al-Sa'ada project was founded by an architecture student. The project used upbeat colours and abstract calligraphy in urban spaces to support people psychologically. The community transformed spaces and had a sense of pride between each other.
- A holy festival is described as a tactical urbanism practice where the community builds temporary tents for lighting instalments and loudspeakers.
- Vendors and stalls being placed along alleys and in between houses and shacks for weekly pop-up markets. People organise the markets into different sections with a route to follow.

India

The ITDP webinar presentation on India discussed case studies from Chennai, Pune and Ranchi (ITDP, 2020). The presentations used photos from urban actions such as:

- Citizen support for street transformation with pavements rebuilt including bollards and litter bins.
- Building support from traffic police.
- Creating safe neighbourhood streets.
- Building momentum for long-term change with temporary road markings becoming permanent.
- Car-free Sundays with people playing badminton in the street and families cycling.

ITDP India worked with the Ranchi Municipal Corporation (RMC) and the Ranchi Traffic Police (RTP) to install low-cost temporary measures such as paint and traffic barricades to create a colourful walking paths for pedestrians in the state of Jharkand. An ITDP blog describes this as a tactical urbanism intervention (ITDP, 2019). The Ranchi Municipal Commissioner and Deputy Mayor came together to address problems of traffic congestion and lack of pedestrian space. The project moved very rapidly with a study conducted and designs created. A team of painters worked with the authorities to transform one road in a few hours. Success was reported in user feedback surveys.

An article from Bloomberg CityLab describes tactical urbanism activity in Mumbai (Flint, 2014). Slumdweller are adding a floor onto of their house for a workspace using lightweight construction materials. This example does not clearly fit with the definitions of tactical urbanism used elsewhere but is described as tactical urbanism in the article.

Indonesia

The ITDP presentation on Indonesia describes a street safety intervention in South Jakarta (Lazuardini, 2020). A small alley and local street are used as a short-cut to reach the station and schools, avoiding the unsafe wider roads. However, motorised vehicles sharing this local street make it hazardous for children to walk safely through the alley to school. Discussion with the community, particularly women helped further understanding of accessibility issues. Local government were consulted. And some work was organised through the 'Road Construction and Management' and Transport sub-agencies. Local residents had an implementation day who helped paint the street. There is a pedestrian path, a large traffic calming sign in front of the school, and a convex mirror in an L-shaped alley. A zebra crossing and speed humps were added near the school. The project was co-designed by local inhabitants, coordinated by the government and implemented by both locals and the government. Collaboration noted as important.

Tanzania

A Bloomberg CityLab article describes SARSAI, a project described as tactical urbanism which won the World Resources Institute Ross Prize for Cities (Jarvorski, 2019). SARSAI stands for School Area Safety Assessments and Improvements. It identifies high-risk areas for children walking to school and uses different inexpensive measures to separate children from traffic including speed bumps, bollards and sidewalks. It started with two schools in Dar es Salaam and is now in 50 areas in 9 African countries.

4. Commentary on tactical urbanism in Africa

A blog post on africanurbanism.net describes the perception that tactical urbanism is not ensuing in Africa as it is in other parts of the world (African Urbanism, 2017). The blog notes that bottom-up urban space adaption in response to insufficient government planning for community needs are occurring. "Everyday "informal" interventions – many of which are already innovative, low-scale, citizen-centered initiatives – are uniquely tied to the historic past of these evolving human settlements, or strategically carried out as opportunistic elements in the city's present."

The author considers the activities to be marginal or threats to a city's modern future. The blog notes the exclusionary nature of town planning historically with strict city government designations as being an issue. And that there are thought to be many small-scale initiatives that are not being recorded or studied. The author describes tactical urbanism as "another external framework" which may not be well-suited to dealing with the issues of informality, a problem because of the imposition of formality.

5. Tactical urbanism in the COVID-19 response

Links made to tactical urbanism in the COVID-19 response are somewhat tenuous. There is a notion that post-COVID is an opportunity for rebuilding urban public spaces and that tactical urbanism approaches may be useful but nothing concrete was found within the scope of this report.

An International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED) blog¹⁰ talks about community mobilisation which could be seen as an element of tactical urbanism. It describes community-focussed COVID-19 responses such as grass-roots initiatives improving handwashing facilities, and delivering food parcels and masks in different countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

A blog offering discourse more relevant to HICs notes that the pandemic restrictions have reminded us of the importance of public spaces (Daly et al., 2020). And that fresh air and open space needed for physical and mental health. This is somewhat different from LMIC discourse on emergency response.

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