

Policy Briefing

Public Spaces, Placemaking and Integration of Migrants in Finland

Placemaking and urban public spaces are important but often neglected factors in the integration and wellbeing of forcibly displaced people and other migrants. Placemaking – a multifaceted approach to the planning, design, and management of public spaces – is highly relevant for many migrants, for whom spaces outside the home are important for building community and promoting wellbeing. Yet migrants tend to have limited access and ability to use public spaces and are under-represented in urban planning processes. Efforts to integrate migrants need to explicitly address spatial aspects, and processes of urban planning and redevelopment need to be more inclusive.

Key messages

- Plans to integrate and support the wellbeing of migrants and other displaced people need to address spatial arrangements and provide equal access to public spaces in cities and towns.
- The ability of migrants to access and use public spaces is often limited in ways that both reflect and reproduce wider social inequalities.
- Although migrants are rarely represented in urban planning and redevelopment processes, they are often disproportionately affected by these processes and decisions.
- Migrants in urban areas need facilities with reasonable rents in easily accessible locations for social and business purposes.
- Urban planners should explicitly address social and cultural diversity to make cities more inclusive for everyone.



The needs of migrants, refugees, and displaced people are rarely sufficiently or explicitly addressed in urban planning policies and processes.

Placemaking in the city

Access to public spaces is crucial to help migrants integrate into local communities and to support their wellbeing. Placemaking is highly relevant for many migrants and especially those who have been forcibly displaced to a new location. Public spaces such as parks, playgrounds, places of worship, and libraries can play a crucial role in helping migrants feel that they are active agents within their new environments. The same is true of many semi-public spaces (which are privately owned but open and accessible to all), such as shopping malls or playgrounds situated in inner yards.

Yet while public spaces are generally perceived as accessible to all, in practice, migrants and displaced people often have limited access or ability to use such spaces. In our research location, in Vantaa, Finland, people with migrant backgrounds often live in older apartment buildings and social housing. The relatively low level of investment in suburbs or residential areas with affordable housing means that there are often fewer good-quality public amenities in the neighbourhoods where most migrants live. Particularly during the long, cold winters, there are few non-commercial places available for informal socialising. Moreover, lack of knowledge, time, and resources means that public spaces can be perceived as unfamiliar, too distant, or as meant for 'someone else'. They can also be experienced as unsafe, and their use limited – particularly by migrant women and people racialised as non-white – by fears and experiences of discrimination, harassment, or ethnic profiling.

Our research suggests that some groups of migrants – particularly women and those who have arrived recently – often face obstacles in engaging with their surroundings and creating a sense of belonging.¹ This is linked to the

¹ Our research involved a very heterogeneous migrant background population and their descendants living in a suburb of Vantaa, with a particular but not exclusive focus on refugees and displaced people. The latter category covers a broad variety of individuals, from vulnerable European Union migrants to temporarily displaced people and asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected.

scarcity of easily accessible and safe spaces where people would feel they could meet and get to know other people across cultural and linguistic divides. Lack of shared spaces can thus reinforce migrants' sense of social and emotional separation, and both reflect and reinforce other social inequalities.

Localising migrant services: the case of Vantaa

Our research highlights how local governance and services can play a positive role in migrant placemaking. Vantaa, in Helsinki's metropolitan area, is the most diverse city in Finland, with 16.6 per cent of its residents speaking a language other than Finnish, Swedish, or Sami as their mother tongue. As the number of people with a migrant background has risen over the past three decades, local government and other organisations have developed new ways to support migrants' wellbeing and their integration into local neighbourhoods.

The incentive for developing new models of cooperation in Vantaa stemmed from the accumulated knowledge of municipal workers interacting with migrants as clients of local services (from social services to kindergartens, schools, housing, and counselling for employment and education, for example). Breaking from a model of centralised bureaucratic hierarchy, local service providers, working closely with migrant-led associations, began providing municipal services to migrants in the neighbourhoods and facilities that were most familiar to them. They paid particular attention to the most vulnerable migrant populations, including asylum seekers, refugees, and other displaced people. The initiative took place in four suburbs, with a social worker and counsellor from the employment office holding a regular weekly support slot. Those using the services could access them more easily, including accessing counselling services for a wide range of issues, in locations that were familiar to them

and felt safe. The programme also included visits to individual homes.

Meeting city officials in facilities run by migrants' organisations was felt to be more welcoming than having to visit a distant municipal office. As one interviewee explained, 'They came to our home and we let them, because we trust these people.' This reflects the importance of personal trust, even when dealing with official matters. Having service providers visit a place where migrants felt more 'at home' created a sense of control and levelled out the hierarchy between (Finnish) 'hosts' and (migrant) 'guests'. Subsequently, the project model was developed further so that migrants with relevant experience took on paid roles as counsellors.

Our interviews highlight the need for further support for local officials who work with migrants across a range of municipal services. One recent initiative, the Vantaa Guiding project, provides this kind of support. It provides help and counselling for anyone in the municipality interacting with migrants in fields such as education, health services, kindergarten, or social work. It is based on the belief that knowledge of issues affecting migrants and of multiculturalism is necessary for anyone working with diverse populations.

Policies and planning as placemaking in urban areas

Urban environments are highly varied in terms of cultural and social diversity. Yet the needs of migrants, refugees, and displaced people are rarely sufficiently or explicitly addressed in urban planning policies and processes. Our research highlights the need for more inclusive planning processes and more effective ways to identify and meet the needs of marginalised populations.

Participating in municipal planning processes requires that people understand how and when to voice an opinion about a particular site or plan. Accessing this process is very challenging for non-Finnish speakers and those who lack relevant social networks. In our example of Vantaa city, the legal obligation

to involve residents in urban planning has, in principle, been met by arranging urban planning seminars, residents' workshops, and online surveys. In practice, however, residents with a migrant background have been under-represented in these forums and have not always been given the opportunity to respond in a language other than Finnish or Swedish.

Planning and redevelopment processes can disproportionately affect the everyday lives of people from a migrant background. In a Vantaa suburb where we did our study, some older commercial and apartment buildings are to be demolished as part of a redevelopment. They include residential apartment blocks with multiple units housing migrants, and an older shopping mall that is currently being used as a site for municipal services for migrants, as well as hosting migrant-owned shops and businesses. The redevelopment and new construction are likely to force many migrants currently living and working in the area to move further away, particularly if the redevelopment leads to rising rents. It is also likely to put at risk many of the businesses, some of which have also served as social gathering places. This would contradict the city's stated aim of encouraging foreign-born residents to set up businesses locally.

This example highlights the potential disruption to migrants' everyday lives caused by urban planning and redevelopment processes that frequently do not involve them. Our findings thus indicate the need for more inclusive urban policies and planning processes. As well as developing better feedback and participation channels and addressing language gaps, there is a need to better understand the everyday lives of migrants and how they use public spaces – or what prevents them from doing so. Specifically, we suggest that knowledge based on migrants' experiences and aiming at a more comprehensive view of how their daily lives and placemaking efforts are related to their local environments (that is, ethnographic knowledge) can offer an invaluable tool in planning for more inclusive urban environments.

Policy recommendations

- **Urban policymakers and planners should address cultural diversity** and the wellbeing of migrants and displaced populations when planning public spaces.
- **Social, employment, and other services should explicitly address spatial aspects of integration**, including migrants' access to public spaces and services.
- **Municipal services can support migrants' local integration and placemaking by working with their representative organisations** and, where possible, offering services in facilities and places where migrants feel welcome and safe.
- **City-level officials should seek to integrate migrants and displaced**

people more effectively into processes of urban development and redevelopment.

- **Officials and other stakeholders are required have a better understanding of the daily lives, placemaking, and spatial practices of migrant populations in order to take into account migrant and displaced communities within urban development and planning.** Doing so also requires an understanding of the structures, norms, and regulations that prevent migrants' spatial integration. Urban planners and city services could seek migrants' voices by developing more inclusive feedback and participation channels, addressing language gaps, and making use of ethnographic knowledge. ■

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Further reading

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