



Global Network of
Civil Society Organisations
for Disaster Reduction

Urban Living Laboratories

An approach towards
improved multi-stakeholder
decision-making



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Introduction

Definition

An “Urban Living Laboratory” (ULL) is a real-world setting within an urban environment where multi-stakeholders, including those living in the area, collaborate to design or develop, test, implement and evaluate innovative solutions and interventions. ULL is an approach, not a one-off event, that serves as a platform to develop ideas, strategies and items to contribute to improving the overall quality of life in urban communities.

Purpose of resource

11 GNDR members, through the *Making Displacement Safer* (MDS) programme¹, have conducted ULL approaches to facilitate inclusive decision-making whilst developing locally-led solutions to disaster risk challenges faced by displaced populations living in urban areas. This resource aims to capture learning from using ULL in the context of displaced persons living in informal urban settings so that others can use it in their own urban-based disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts.



Introduction

Background

Displaced people around the world have sought refuge in urban areas. GNDR members have supported those living in informal settlements or in housing developments built in response to a crisis but not maintained. They have found that the displaced have been underserved as their new homes are on the edge of cities or urban areas and away from service provision or livelihood options, still in high-risk areas (such as hillsides or watersheds) and excluded from DRR and other information sharing processes or decision-making. They faced a range of challenges, often unresolved for years, and continued to be affected by disasters.²

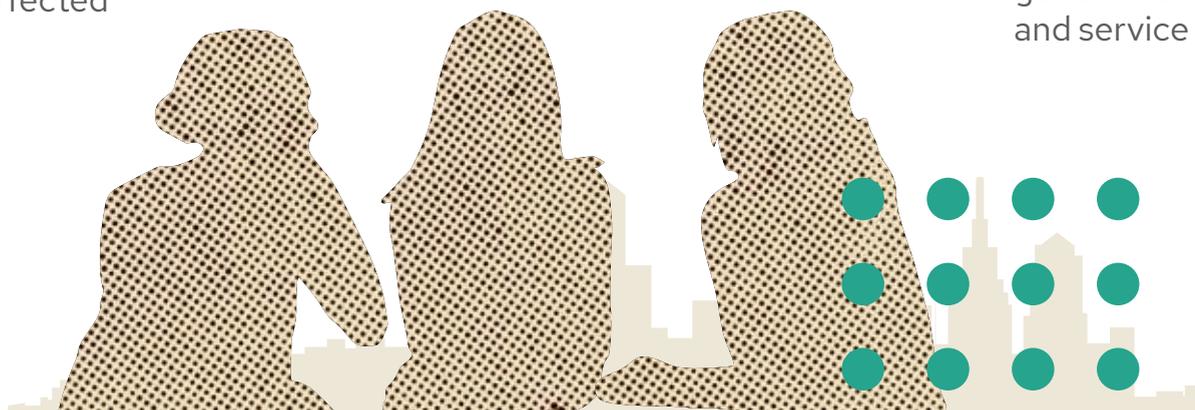
In order to facilitate a process whereby displaced persons were central participants in decision-making on issues that affected them, the ULL approach was used. This is documented, alongside positive outcomes and lessons learned.

Making displacement safer through the urban living laboratory approach

GNDR members sought to contribute to the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and assets, for displaced populations in urban areas. They aimed to do this by developing locally-led DRR solutions to address the challenges faced by communities living in displacement. ULLs were used as the central approach to do this.

Across the 11 urban areas, GNDR members brought together at-risk populations – displaced persons as well as host community members, with representatives from local government, civil society, academia and service providers.

Taskforce groups guided initial research with the displaced populations, which included participatory mapping of risks, hazards and access to services; stakeholder mapping; capacity gap analysis; and *Views from the Frontline* to understand the perspectives of individual persons who have been forcibly displaced. Questions about priority threats, consequences of those threats, actions needed, and the barriers faced to risk drivers including climate change, poverty, instability, conflict and natural hazards are included.³



Introduction

Jean de Dieu Musengamana of Manadisaster organisation in Rwanda, highlights the importance of inclusion in this process: "Trusting the ULL process has helped the project to be carried out in a way that the community has their own voices. Stakeholder engagement was key to this. Views were heard and people were part of the process."

Once this research was complete, the larger group was brought together to identify which priority threats to address and in what way. The group were aware of the budget available and utilised the approach to develop solutions.

Crucially, displaced community members took part in key decision-making. Reflecting on the approach in South Sudan, Philip Amura of Root of Generations organisation said, "One factor throughout the process was that all the officials and CSOs and community, when we were planning implementation, were all at the same place of understanding for decision-making. All were at the same level of thinking for making agreements together."

As well as the increased ownership and potential of sustainability within the solution agreed upon, there was a sense of empowerment and increased self-confidence. "Since we joined this group we have learned a lot. Since we joined the group they have surveyed us and asked us what is the problem for us. Since learning the problem from us, they found out the solution for these problems in company with us. The ULL had an impact on my heart and community."⁴

The solutions developed included purchasing greenhouses to grow strawberries⁵, developing community cooperatives and savings groups, setting up their own early warning systems, working on repairing roads and storm drains that were particularly susceptible to flooding and supporting creative education initiatives.⁶

Further, this ability to involve displaced community members in decision-making was a significant success factor for wider advocacy work as well as implementing the solution itself.

Many community members participating felt empowered to speak directly to government decision-makers about their concerns, planning activities that met their needs, and in some cases felt inspired to pursue more advocacy work in the future. It was an important element of building trust with communities that have long felt exploited or forgotten by typical approaches to assistance. The involvement of government officials also raised awareness of the needs amongst decision-makers, and created additional communication channels and engagement through which to pursue future advocacy.



Understanding the approach

What are ULLs?

Urban Living Laboratories (ULLs) emerge from and are based in urban communities. ULLs are an approach to collectively and inclusively innovate, by designing, developing and testing a solution, service, policy change⁷ or product in a certain community to address a certain challenge of that urban community.

Users of ULLs should expect to achieve:

- Developing a deeper understanding of a particular challenge to then identify a joint vision or goal addressing the challenge
- The development of unique solution/s that will contribute towards the wellbeing of an urban community, meeting the identified goal

- Selecting, piloting and, ultimately, adopting, a unique solution/s
- Ongoing knowledge and experience sharing, learning and evaluation to strengthen the solution and its sustainability

The approach aims to build a community, a place for public participation and build social capital. Collaboration is key - the engagement of participants and ownership of the solutions should be promoted for success.

ULLs facilitate collective wisdom from multi-stakeholders to find sustainable solutions while addressing the problems that are relevant and therefore empower citizens in the process.⁸

The process or steps taken should include multiple stakeholders, including residents of the area, researchers, businesses, local government entities and civil society organisations or groups. They all have an agreed role or responsibility within the ULL so that they play an active role in designing, developing and trialling solutions to utilise the knowledge, experience and capacity of those who live in the urban community as well as those with other knowledge, experience or capacity to contribute from outside of the community.



Understanding the approach

Overall, this facilitates the quick development and adoption of more sustainable solutions or new approaches to address problems faced. Solutions emerge because they target solving a specific problem in a practical and time bound way. The solution should be a new process for the community – it does not need to be a brand new solution (i.e. a completely unique invention) but something that addresses a specific challenge identified. It should be identified and selected by community members themselves. They lead to sustainability because they allow space for ownership, inclusion, permanence, and adaptiveness.⁹ GNDR has found that this space should also intentionally become a safe space for all people to be part of, distinguishing the ULL from other participatory approaches.

Why should Urban Living Labs be used?

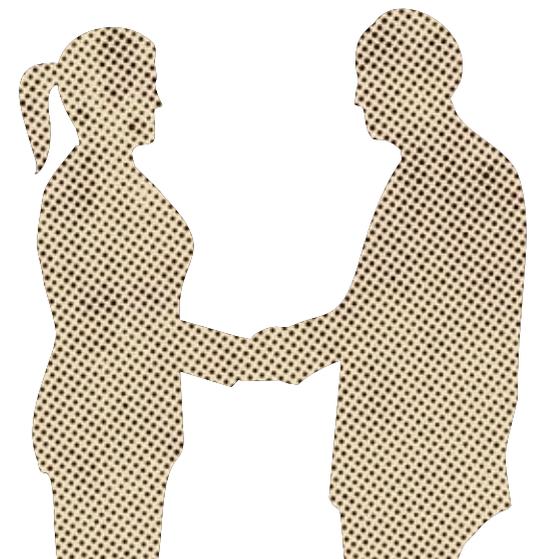
ULL is a participatory approach which engages a diverse multi-stakeholder group within a community, facilitating an inclusive process to find their own unique solution. Crucially, it brings those normally not involved in decision making much closer to it. The benefits users may gain include:

- An active role as a co-creators and decision-makers
- Mutually beneficial relationships, which improve collaboration
- Learning by doing and doing to learn in its experimental process
- Gained insight to new solutions or their thinking challenged by new perspectives
- Sustainable solutions

GNDR utilised the approach and found that the ULL methodology enabled meaningful engagement with urban displaced groups to understand risks, needs and priorities from their perspective. It raised the profile and built understanding of urban displacement challenges among stakeholders, and brought attention to the issues facing these marginalised communities.

Displaced community members reported feeling heard, included and engaged through the ULL and follow-on processes, which helped to ensure the relevance of subsequent interventions.

The assessments of displaced community needs and priorities as seen by the community itself provided through Views from the Frontline Lite, in many cases, shed light on previously more “invisible” communities. Feeding this information into the ULL approach and uniting displaced community members, academia, civil society, and local (and even national) government facilitated shared stakeholder buy-in and resource sharing, while still being led by community needs.



Understanding the approach

GNDR members found the approach particularly beneficial in working with displaced communities. Alvin Koumbhat of CDHD organisation in the Republic of the Congo states, “The ULL approach helped to get the communities together. This participatory approach is good in that it entails getting the views of the community and has helped CDHD gain experiences in addressing the issues affecting the displaced. Past approaches have been to speak in their place and on their behalf, but this is not suitable. ULL supports being with communities and listening to them.”



These worked because ULL brought them together from the start and local leaders worked out the solution.

Philip Amura, Root of Generations, South Sudan

Philip Amura, of Root of Generations organisation in South Sudan highlights the sustainability these locally-led solutions bring. “These worked because ULL brought them together from the start and local leaders worked out the solution.”

Lastly, ULLs complement international efforts, aligned with the Sendai Framework and other efforts connected to human mobility, to raise awareness and provide additional pressure on a local level in how national policy incorporates best practices on DRR. In the way they were used for *Making Displacement Safer* (MDS), they directly contributed to the understanding of disaster risk at the local level.

Participating communities and implementing members, empowered with detailed information on community needs and greater knowledge on international guidance on DRR, can use relationships built with government actors through the ULL to advocate for greater resources and detailed policy to address issues.



Understanding the approach

Key elements

The following steps are written based on a scenario that a civil society organisation seeks to support displaced persons living in an urban area because they are facing multifaceted challenges, or perhaps those living in displacement have sought help.

The selected aim and process of each ULL delivered will change, but keep these key elements in mind.

Urban community

Ensure the ULL is based on a defined area/site, to which residents have a sense of belonging (even if newly arrived or recently settled). The urban community should have a set geographical boundary. This will be the focus of the ULL - exploring the common challenges faced in these specific settings. The approach is intentionally designed for urban spaces because of the changing nature of urban areas, and the variety of people (stakeholder groups) and livelihoods or activities that take place within urban communities.

The ULL intentionally brings people together amidst these vibrant, changing and expanding urban communities. It is arguably harder to bring together urban community members than rural communities because of this, which is why the ULL approach is not specifically documented for use in rural communities.

In the context of the MDS project, the community was identified as having faced past disasters and hosting displaced persons who crucially had not found a 'durable solution' to their displacement. In the context of disaster risk reduction, these communities, whether IDPs or hosts, often face the same exposure to risks and have limited access to resources.

Inclusion

However the ULL starts, inclusion must be a foundational step, and repeatedly considered, to ensure diverse representation. Having the right people will be critical for the success of the ULL. Those facilitating the overall process must engage representatives of all key stakeholders, including those who are displaced community members and host community members previously living in the community before displaced persons settled. Special effort should be made to include women, those of different ages or ethnicities, people living with disabilities and any marginalised groups. Involve groups that have a legitimate interest to change something alongside those who actually have the influence to deliver the change.



Understanding the approach

Stakeholder mapping is a useful initial step to consider who should be selected to participate in the ULL, remembering that together stakeholders should have diverse interests, knowledge and capacity. The inclusion of new, multi-disciplinary stakeholders in the development process is believed to provide new insights and offer new, more integrated solutions to the investigated problems, thereby advancing the generation of unique solutions.¹⁰

Context specific

ULLs need to vary to suit the context they are set within. Adapt your ULL to the culture, community, existing socio-economic processes and current challenges that you face.

Participants of ULLs are encouraged to document their solutions so that learning can be shared and they can be considered by others who might be able to replicate them in other contexts, using ULL approaches to refine them as they need for their own purpose.

Purpose

Those involved should have a clear connection to the identified and agreed challenges and solutions, thus having a sense of purpose in their participation.

Co-creation

The evolving process of identifying, developing and implementing solutions ought to be a unique one, and the active role of 'users' (displaced and host communities, multi-stakeholders) working together in the production of solutions.

Continuous evaluation

The ongoing monitoring and reflection of what is taking place and why, with an emphasis on review so that current actions can be adapted.

Safe space

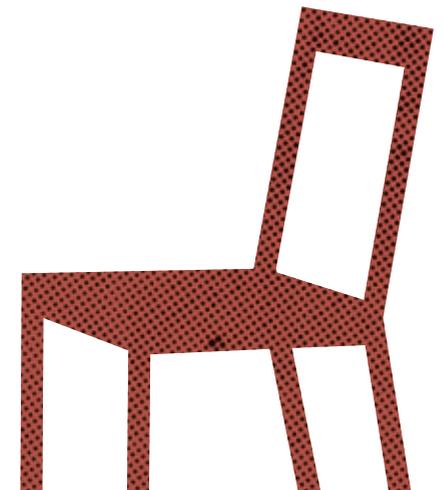
A venue or set space: It is essential that there is a "space for users to actively take part in or co-create innovation and development".¹¹ It should be an inclusive place, accessible to all within the community and intentionally a safe space so that all feel aligned to the decisions made.

"Sense of place"

By meeting together regularly and collaborating in such a way, the ULL will eventually become a place. This sense of place is important because it will bring with it meaning for those involved.

New social bonds will be created in the place. The place will be an opportunity to share participant's knowledge and learn more. The place will be a space for positive change. The ULL will be a place of social learning and investment – a change in understanding that goes beyond an individual and their situation, to become situated within wider social units and action. This is particularly important for displaced communities, who will often be seeking such connection having lost it when they left their homes.

GNDR members involved have considered that this sense of place may take up to a year to foster.



Guiding steps

1. Assemble a (small) steering group/taskforce of people who will facilitate the process.

They should be from diverse backgrounds/organisations, and include members of the community (in the context of displaced communities living in urban areas, have both host and displaced persons) who represent their wider population.

2. Undertake research to further understand the challenges faced. This could include, but is not limited to:

- GNDR *Views from the Frontline* survey¹²
- Interviews and focus groups discussions, collections of case studies or existing research
- Community mapping, capacity gap assessments and/or other participatory tools

3. Invite representatives from the wider urban community to meet with the taskforce. These representatives should come from different backgrounds including local leaders, faith-based groups, service providers (health, education), those who work in the community as well as those who live there. Invitations should respect local traditions, but invite men, women and other marginalised or minority groups to gather together.

4. Select a physical community space where meetings will be held and where unique solutions will be generated. It should be a local space or landmark, with meaning for the community of displaced people – and identified by them. This could be a school, community centre or other communal space. Try to avoid spaces that are not neutral, such as religious or government buildings. If the space selected is not local, there might be reluctance to join or barriers to attendance (time, distance, cost) and sustainability if it needs to be hired (i.e. a hotel conference room).



Guiding steps

Example terms of reference for an urban living lab:

- Joint vision, the ultimate aim
- Objectives, the specific changes that you want to see
- Members of the group
- Purpose and roles of the taskforce and wider participants, including working groups on specific aspects if needed
- Name of facilitator and their role
- Shared values and ways of working
- Leadership and coordination, how decisions will be made
- Overall time frame and budget
- Signed by all members

5. Start the first meeting with consideration of shared values and agree on the terms of reference, and a consensus on the key challenge to be addressed.

6. Conduct meetings to generate ideas and develop unique solutions, on a regular and frequent basis. The facilitator should create an environment for knowledge exchange by using participatory approaches and tools – utilising data/research previously conducted. They should aim for open and respectful interaction between the participants so that a safe space of trust and empowerment is created. They should promote discussion and inclusion of all, but not make decisions. Note takers should document key information and decisions, sharing this with participants.

7. Co-create. After considering lived experiences, utilising existing data and sharing ideas, participants select a solution to trial. Design and plan the solution, share the solution with the wider community for validation or further input if needed. Select a solution that meets the resources available; be honest with the ULL participants as to how much budget (or other resource) is available. Work together to release more resources if needed.¹³

8. Trial the solution/s.

9. Conduct ongoing learning and evaluation. Take time to reflect and document what has been learnt – both in terms of the solution and the ULL itself. Use this learning to reframe the challenge and solution/s to allow further innovation and new solutions to emerge.

Discuss the sustainability of the solution by engaging the community in the adoption of the solution adopted, identifying community leaders (champions) who can lead the solution when the ULL is complete to coordinate ongoing action if needed.

10. When needed, formally close the ULL – celebrating its success, shared learning and if there is buy-in to repeat the process to address another challenge.

Lessons learnt from Making Displacement Safer

The GNDR members who implemented ULL to address disaster risk challenges that displaced populations in urban areas were facing are documented here. From their experiences of implementing ULL, the following lessons were learnt:

Positive practices

- “The intentional efforts made to conduct ULL processes and connect with stakeholders they would not normally have, and/or in different ways – such as handing over more decision-making – has been encouraging. **Frequent engagement and updates** with stakeholders and displaced communities is pivotal regarding the initiative’s implementation.” Danang Azhari, Resilience Development Initiative, Indonesia.

- “The approach of ULL is very useful as it gives a platform to **involve different stakeholders** to engage and contribute to resolve the burning issues of the displaced community in the urban area. In addition, this approach has vital advantages such as establishing relationships, future partnerships, collaborations and coordination among different stakeholders, utilising this platform for sharing of knowledge, resources etc. facilitates quick decision-making processes.” Chandrika Kularathne, Janathakshan GTE Ltd, Sri Lanka.
- ULL can add to **coherence** amongst groups addressing challenges. “The challenges faced by communities we have worked with are diverse; there are those displaced due to climate shocks or disasters as well as economic migrants. They have moved from their homes and live together in the same area.

Linked to wider activities, there are committees whom represent different issues – representatives from these groups can be brought together within the ULL to increase opportunities to solve challenges together and bring collective results.” Jean de dieu Musengamana, Manadisaster, Rwanda.

- On a local and national level, there were significant gains in **increasing understanding of disaster risk challenges** for displaced communities in urban areas, among policymakers, civil society, and in some cases, within displaced communities themselves. In Nepal, the main focus had been on improving road access in the area, but the ULL process eventually led to recognition of fire and flooding risks, and mitigation and preparedness activities to address them.

- **Media representatives** can be critical social actors and help build awareness or input their ideas into a solution. If part of decision-making, make sure they have a legitimate social connection to the community i.e. those who have demonstrated previous support of the community in their work. Alternatively, media groups can promote the unique solutions.



Lessons learnt from *Making Displacement Safer*

Aspects to be aware of

Fostering trust and relationships

Ensure displaced communities and other stakeholders have time to get to know each other and build trust. This is why regular meetings are needed, not just one-off events.

If there is social conflict in the community (or ULL), the role of the facilitator is to be aware of these tensions and carefully facilitate conversation so that everyone is involved, understands different perspectives and agreement can be found.

It is helpful if they think through challenges that could be addressed because they affect everyone instead of the issue causing the conflict.

This may have the added advantage of bringing people together. Don't let decisions made in the ULL be driven by conflict. If there is outright violence, the ULL is not recommended as a suitable approach for the community.

Navigating group dynamics

The facilitator needs to sensitively navigate dynamics between different groups so that final decisions made are mutually agreed. The ULL in some locations was dominated by individuals not from the displaced community, highlighting the potential difficulty in balancing perspectives of those living in a specific community and those who attend the ULL with a different stakeholder role. In one ULL, some members not living in the community were quite insistent on their idea. The facilitator agreed to put the final decision to a vote but the representatives of the displaced community were outvoted because they were fewer in the room than the other stakeholder group. Others faced similar situations and, as such, it was felt that some of the resulting solutions were not as locally-led as they could have been.

Scalable solutions

Not every member of a community can participate in a ULL, yet as many as possible should be part of the results. Decisions should be made with this consideration in mind, not only with those in mind that have been directly involved in research or the ULL meetings.



Acknowledgements

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Janathakshan GTE Ltd, Sri Lanka

Manadisaster Organisation, Rwanda

National Society for Earthquake Technology, Nepal

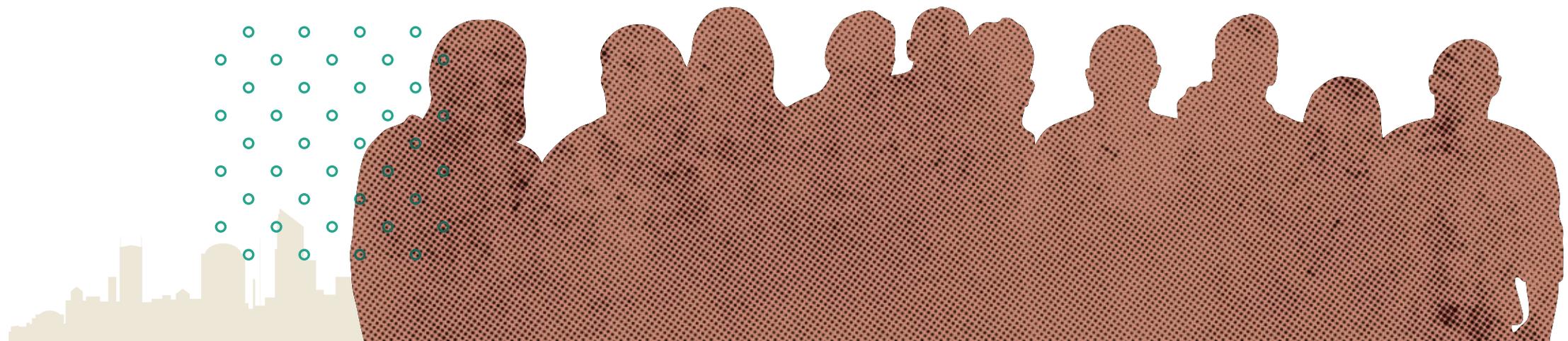
Resilience Development Initiative, Indonesia

Root of Generations, South Sudan

Voice of South Bangladesh, Bangladesh

Asia Disaster Risk Reduction Network

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References and additional resources

“Coherence Cookbook: Building Resilience in an Integrated Way”, GNDR
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24342Coherence_cookbook_EN_web.pdf

“Cookbook on Institutionalising Sustainable Community Based Disaster Risk Management”, GNDR
<https://cbdrm.org/cookbook/>

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<https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/urban-governance/key-policy-challenges/informal-settlements>

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https://livelearn.org/assets/media/docs/resources/WaterGov_LearningCircles_eng.pdf

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu67-erX8as&app=desktop>

“Living Labs in South Africa: An Analysis Based on Five Case Studies” by Handri Coetzee, Ina-Mari du Toit and Marlien Herselman in *The Electronic Journal for Virtual Organisations and Networks* (Volume 14) August 2012

Making Displacement Safer Cookbook, GNDR, February 2024
<https://www.gndr.org/making-displacement-safer-cookbook>

Participatory Asset Mapping, Community Science
<https://www.communityscience.com/knowledge4equity/AssetMappingToolkit.pdf>

Project Management Toolkit, The Salvation Army International Headquarters 2017

Urban Living Labs – Learning for Urban Transitions? Timo von Wirth, hosted on YouTube
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqhLODs>



End notes

- 1 For more information about the programme, see here: www.gndr.org/project/making-displacement-safer
- 2 Read more about their work here: www.gndr.org/making-displacement-safer-cookbook
- 3 *Views from the Frontline* survey used in the context of displacement, www.gndr.org/impact/making-displacement-safer/explore-forced-displacement-data GNDR, May 2022
- 4 Anonymous feedback, quoted in the Making Displacement Safer Mid-term Review, Pepper & Carlson, October 2022
- 5 www.gndr.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/GNDR-Annual-Report_2021-22_Final.pdf
- 6 www.gndr.org/making-displacement-safer-cookbook/
- 7 If a policy change is required, focus on a key ask or request - something that will have the most benefit to change part of the overall problem. See GNDR's advocacy toolkit for further advice: www.gndr.org/resource/advocacy/national-advocacy-toolkit
- 8 "The Defining Characteristics of Urban Living Labs", Kris Steen and Ellen van Bueren for Technology Innovation Management Review (Volume 7, Issue 7) July 2017
- 9 Cookbook on Institutionalising Sustainable Community Based Disaster Risk Management, GNDR, cbdrm.org/cookbook
- 10 "The Defining Characteristics of Urban Living Labs"
- 11 "Living Labs in South Africa: An Analysis Based on Five Case Studies" by Handri Coetzee, Ina-Mari du Toit and Marlien Herselman in *The Electronic Journal for Virtual Organisations and Networks* (Volume 14) August 2012
- 12 See an example of Views from the Frontline survey used in the context of displacement <https://www.gndr.org/impact/making-displacement-safer/explore-forced-displacement-data>
- 13 If local fundraising is required, please see GNDR's Local Leadership Academy for further insight on how to do this: www.gndr.org/resource/local-leadership-academy/fundraising





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