Working with Grassroots Walking & Cycling Infrastructures in London: Why and How

This document summarises findings from the ESRC sponsored research project DePICT (Designing and Policy Implementation for encouraging Cycling and walking Trips), conducted at the Transport Studies Unit of the University of Oxford. The research seeks to understand how grassroots infrastructures help to encourage walking and cycling in London and São Paulo. This briefing has been written for policymakers in London and elsewhere in the UK.

**Definitions**
A Broader Definition of Infrastructure

In recent years social scientists have begun asking whether ‘infrastructures’ are in fact much more than just highways, bridges and airports. They argue that infrastructures may be ‘hard’, like railways or separated cycle tracks, or ‘soft’, like realtime transit schedule apps or cycling skill training.

**Examples**
Citizen-Led Walking and Cycling Infrastructures are very diverse. For example, they may include:

- Organized neighbourhood walks for older women in areas perceived as dangerous.
- Bicycle provision and maintenance workshops for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Do-It-Yourself/Do-It-Together painted zebra crossings.
- Special bike ‘libraries’ for people with mental or physical disabilities.
- Staircase repair and aesthetic improvements.
**Why Support Citizen-Led Infrastructures?**

Our research found that many of the citizen-led walking and cycling infrastructural activities taking place in London and São Paulo offered a number of valuable benefits to their respective cities. Four of these benefits should be of particular interest to government staff and decision makers.

---

### 1. Sensitivity to Community Needs

The organizations we studied most often catered to communities who otherwise found walking or cycling challenging owing to insufficient supportive infrastructure. These communities were defined by geography (for example neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation), social identity (for instance gender variant people), or some combination of these (see Examples). It was clear that working closely with these communities had broadened and deepened the organizations’ collective understanding of what exactly their beneficiaries needed to start walking and cycling more and to lead more fulfilling lives generally. This understanding of needs may be of great value in broader efforts to achieve a transport system that is not only environmentally sustainable, but also just.

### 2. Experimentation to Inform Public Policy on Infrastructures

Pathways to a sustainable and just transport system are diverse, and it is difficult for anyone—policy makers or activists—to know the best option. Our research confirms claims in the academic literature that citizen-led activities to support sustainable practices provide sites of experimentation, where best practices, often under tight resource constraints, can be identified. The lessons that citizens learn through their trial and error efforts to provide walking and cycling infrastructures to those in need may be valuable guides for larger public institutions.

### 3. Substitution of Infrastructural Gaps Left by Austerity Budgets

Since the 1980s all levels of government have been challenged by shrinking budgets and devolution of responsibility. This has left the authorities responsible for providing sustainable transport infrastructure to the public in a difficult position, where they may not always have the resources to fulfil their mandate in the socially just fashion they desire, but are instead left to roll out more ‘generic’ projects that cater to ‘average’ citizens. As described in numbers 1 and 2 above, citizen-led activities may, through their community sensitivity and experimentation, fill some of the gaps left by these austere conditions.

---

**Definitions**

**What are Grassroots or Citizen-led Infrastructures?**

These are infrastructures that are provided by citizens or citizen-groups. They are often legally recognized as charitable organizations, though some may be social enterprises or cooperatives. Their infrastructural activities are not performed as employees of the government, the military, or standard firms.
4. Generation of Social Cohesion & Community Ownership

Both the leaders and end-users of the grassroots activities we examined spoke of the way their initiatives went beyond the provision of walking and cycling infrastructures to also build social connections among their beneficiaries and cultivate a sense of community ownership by all involved. In urban environments often characterized as socially fragmented, detached, or even alienating, these larger social benefits that citizen-led activities provide are not to be ignored.

Summary

Citizen-led infrastructures provide a number of benefits to their communities and may make valuable partners for decision makers. Put simply, this grassroots work may help your work.

“Someone who used to work here went around to some other refugee service centres and spoke to the women who are refugees and asylum seekers there and asked them, you know, “can you ride a bike, and would you ride a bike, and why can't you ride a bike?” … Cycling as a woman hadn’t been, either it hadn’t been a priority or it hadn’t been okay … so we got specific funding to run sessions where we teach female refugees to ride”

“[The initiative] is a creative, accessible, and enjoyable movement in which to participate… our neighbourhood, and surrounding neighbourhoods, have many stories to tell and places to explore … The friends we make each walk benefits the community with these connections.”

“Madalena” beneficiary in São Paulo

“Susan” in London
How to Support Citizen-Led Infrastructures?

The grassroots leaders who were interviewed for the study described sources of resilience and vulnerability that their organizations and activities continuously faced. One of the key sources of resilience was people, such as persistent co-leaders, dedicated staff, and extended networks connecting them to similar organizations and supportive intermediaries. Two key sources of vulnerability have been identified during the research. We discuss each of these here.

A. Locations

Many of the grassroots leaders ran the administrative end of their organizations and conducted their infrastructural activities in physical spaces that were either temporary or of uncertain length of tenancy. Regular and unexpected relocations were not only stressful and time-consuming for leaders and staff, but most importantly undermined the organizations’ attempts to remain available to their end users. Not all use are social media savvy, and many face mobility constraints, so returning to a location where they had taken part in past activities only to find the site abandoned or occupied by new tenants usually meant the end of their participation in organised activities, sometimes reducing their walking and cycling levels significantly.

Recommendations Regarding Locations

Whereas pop-up and meantime spaces may be ‘better than nothing’ for citizen-led walking and cycling organizations, they tend to be detrimentally destabilizing. Policies and plans that find more consistent space for grassroots organizations are essential if authorities are to support their valuable work. Strategic options may include council tax breaks for charities, letting agent tax breaks earmarked for charity-occupants, or new spaces created through the purchase of used shipping containers which are often of value in utilizing empty public spaces.

“We had to take lots of data and churn it. If we get any more funding in the future, it will be worse, it won’t be any better (laughs) ... Tendering processes and all that, which is huge for a tiny organization like us ... otherwise we apply to smaller funds. But those are always for projects only, not where you’re wanting to cover the overheads. Lots of reporting to be done on each of those tiny little parts ... How you can do all that without overhead is just ridiculous.”

Elizabeth in London
B. Financial Resources

Erratic funding was cited by a majority of the organizations as the primary source of fragility. Although some leaders attempted to find more stable funding through commercial and/or additional activities, many found this option problematic owing to (a) the time these add-ons took away from their core activities, (b) concerns about the potential for commercial activities to undermine their altruistic identity and orientation, and (c) fears that commercial and profit-oriented activity might undermine their original pro-social visions and missions. With respect to funding grants, the citizen-led organizations struggled with two dimensions: consistency and selection processes.

Consistency

Unpredictable fluctuations in funding from granting sources led to undesirable floods and ebbs in the magnitude and changes in the nature of their operations, or outright collapse in the worst cases. This in turn created destabilizing shifts in the numbers and skill level of paid staff, demanded more time for re-hiring, and led to losses of organisational memory and tacit knowledge. Research participants claimed that the main reason for these fluctuations was that the grants were increasingly committed to short-term projects and that there was very little money available to cover ongoing operational costs. According to the grassroots leaders, some of the consequences of this type of funding included the inability to build up extensive and enduring relationships with the target communities. The risk is always that these communities had to be abandoned when the money runs out. However, it must be noted that sometimes short-term project grants were also appreciated, as they provided the funding to invest in capital (e.g. bicycle repair tools), that could be used continuously so long as operational costs were covered.
Selection Processes
The eligibility requirements and selection processes associated with grant distribution were also seen as a source of funding inconsistency. These were believed to be owed to funding ‘fads’, bias towards quantitative evidence of efficacy, and the appropriation of grassroots activities.

Funding Fads
Many interviewees spoke of the eligibility requirements as a constantly moving target. They felt that these requirements tended to take on the whatever theme was popular that month or year in the media and among politicians. For example, this might mean that transport projects were preferred one year and urban agriculture the next, or that target groups would be BAME this month, but people with disabilities the next.

Quantitative Evidence Bias
Whereas some research participants readily embraced the collection of numerical statistics on their activities, others felt that their impact was better captured through qualitative evidence. This latter group believed that this put them at a disadvantage when seeking funding, as competitors who can offer big numbers were more likely to win the grants. If this perception is true—and one funding organization we spoke with claimed to recognize qualitative impact—then funding agencies may favour size rather than qualities like diversity or flexible adaptability.

Appropriation
Several organizations in both London and São Paulo told stories about how larger, highly professionalised and often commercial organizations had, to put it bluntly, stolen their ideas and practices. The tendency to favour size in funding decisions thus meant that these larger organizations received larger slices, or the only slice, of the funding pie. Although upscaling may offer a number of benefits, it may also come with costs, particularly with respect to sensitivity to community needs (#1 above) and capacity to experiment (#2 above).
Recommendations Regarding Funding

A. Most importantly, policy around granting must more seriously consider the trade-offs between short-term project grants and longer-term operational funding. Under austerity conditions this may mean the periodic provision of smaller amounts of money as opposed to one large dumping. A balance between these types of grants offered may be wise.

B. Funding eligibility requirements should be written broadly so as to transcend media and political fads. For instance, ideal recipients of charitable goods and services may be defined more broadly (e.g. those unable to meet their basic needs).

C. Policies and strategies should be put in place to ‘catch’ and minimize the prioritization of quantitative evidence of impact, particularly big numbers, over more nuanced qualitative forms of evidence.

D. Small is also beautiful. Rather than succumbing to the administrative convenience of ‘big players’ funders should consider the important role played by smaller organizations. There may be value in the diversity of their activities and the smaller scale in which they operate.

About the Authors

Denver Nixon is a Research Associate in the Transport Studies Unit (TSU) at the University of Oxford. He brings his broad training in sociology, geography, and environmental studies to substantive sustainability concerns around transport.

Tim Schwanen is the Director of the TSU. He is a geographer interested in urban transport, wellbeing, inequalities and just transitions towards low-carbon societies.

About the Project

DEsigning and Policy Implementation for Encouraging Cycling and Walking Trips, or ‘DePICT’ is a multi-site international research collaboration between investigators at the University of Oxford, Utrecht University, and the University of São Paulo from 2015 to 2018. The Oxford team conducted 38 interviews in London and 32 in São Paulo for their work on community-led infrastructures.

For further information visit depictmoblis.org or www.tsu.ox.ac.uk contact or contact tsudirector@tsu.ox.ac.uk