

**LEARNING BRIEF 11** 

Fostering safety in public (green) spaces

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### An initiative of the South African - German Development Cooperation:











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## ABOUT THIS LEARNING BRIEF

Area-based violence prevention interventions (ABVPI)<sup>1</sup> are targeted approaches to bring about improved safety within a specific geographic area. They are designed to reduce crime and violence and address the root causes by using a combination of spatial, social and institutional interventions. ABVPI are a key preventative mechanism in reducing the incidence and impact of violence and crime. The predominant response to crime and violence is to pursue security initiatives, but there is growing evidence of a shift to include more preventative safety measures which focus on underlying risk and protective factors. Risk factors are those factors that increase risk or susceptibility while protective factors are those that encourage healthy and safe outcomes. These factors interplay with one another and can influence violence and crime at the individual. relationship, community or societal level - as seen in the socio-ecological model.<sup>2</sup>



Public space plays a key role in the quality of neighbourhoods. This learning brief is the result of the Community of Practice (CoP) learning event "Building Safer Neighbourhoods Together: Parks and public space" hosted by Isandla Institute on 10 November 2022 as part of the Safer Places: Resilient Institutions and Neighbourhoods Together (SPRINT) Project CoP. The CoP is comprised of civil society organisations and representatives from the different spheres of government. The learning brief draws on the presentation by Ayanda Roji of Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) and the reflections and experiences shared by the participants, without directly attributing contributions to participants.



Activated public space that is created through inclusive and participatory methodologies helps foster safer, more inclusive and sustainable neighbourhoods.

#### INTRODUCTION

Public space in South Africa plays an essential role in creating thriving and prosperous cities. However, it still holds and reflects exclusion of the historically marginalised, both in the provision and quality of these spaces, particularly in lower income areas.

Post-Apartheid spatial planning seeks to eradicate this exclusion through designing better provision, access, inclusivity and safety of the spaces.

Public space interventions and upgrades are examples of an area-based approach that can have a key role in successfully contributing to crime reduction in cities. When such interventions are carried out using inclusive and participatory methodologies that successfully activate space, these areas are less likely to become sites where crime thrives. Similarly, such interventions can contribute to place making and building socially cohesive communities which have been proven as successful in creating safer, inclusive and sustainable neighbourhoods. As such, public space interventions are important opportunities for area-based violence prevention interventions (ABVPI) in South Africa.

Public spaces should be owned and managed by public entities to serve the public.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SPACE, PARTICULARLY GREEN SPACE, IN CREATING SAFER NEIGHBOURHOODS

Public spaces are valuable and important parts of any city. These are spaces that should be open, inclusive and accessible to all people at no charge, regardless of socioeconomic background, age, gender and physical abilities, where a variety of activities can take place.<sup>3 4</sup> These spaces should be owned and managed by public entities to serve the public.<sup>5</sup>

There are different types of public spaces ranging from open spaces such as streets, parks, sports fields and plazas to urban facilities such as community halls, libraries, sports facilities, and spiritual/religious sites that each have their own role and function. These can be important spaces of relaxation and recreation, but also for learning and income generation. Community halls and libraries are often used as sites by organisations to host training sessions or upskilling courses, while streets and plazas are important sites for informal livelihoods where street and market traders earn a living. However, it is important to acknowledge that public spaces are experienced differently by different people based on how they are owned, managed and designed. When accessible and well maintained, these spaces can be a powerful

tool in creating vibrant, liveable neighbourhoods and cities through social inclusion. In contrast, public spaces can be exclusionary, either by design or by default – for example, when an underutilized and poorly maintained park becomes a haven for criminality. Public spaces can also be contested, due to their political and/or cultural meaning, and perpetuate issues of exclusion and displacement, depending on factors such as their accessibility, availability and inclusivity.

This learning brief has a particular focus on green open spaces such as parks and outdoor sports grounds. Green spaces, and public space in general, play an important role in all contexts throughout cities, but are particularly important in marginalized, low-income communities. Due to Apartheid spatial planning, houses in marginalized, peripheral areas of the city are small, with limited private space such as a small/no backyard, garden or lounge area. As a result, the public space outside of the home such as streets and parks becomes an extension of that private space, and an important common ground, where children can play and neighbours/community members can meet and engage.

If well maintained, accessible and safe, green spaces can play a critical role in creating connected and socially cohesive communities, thus playing an important role in reducing crime.8 Green/public spaces that are activated and utilised throughout the day are less likely to become sites where crime thrives. Similarly, when these public/ green spaces are activated, with programmes or activities that respond to youth and community members' needs and interests, such as sports games or arts and culture programmes, it can play a big role in deterring them from engaging in antisocial activities. These types of activities and programmes also contribute to building connected neighbourhoods where people interact and get to know each other. When communities are tight knit and connected that filters out to the public and deters crime. This was evident in Hillbrow, Johannesburg where urban regeneration through the eKhaya neighbourhood programme contributed towards a more socially cohesive community, keeping community members engaged and connected, resulting in an overall crime reduction in the area 9

Issues arise when public/green spaces are not utilized or activated. Then criminality may take hold and these spaces can become unsafe. Unused open spaces can become crime ridden or taken over for processes that make others feel unsafe, for example, drug dealing/use, drinking, presence of gangs and/or people experiencing homelessness<sup>10</sup>, and in some extreme cases where assaults take place and dead bodies get dumped. Spatial and social factors such as how these spaces are planned, designed, owned and managed contribute to this. For instance, where these spaces are positioned (within neighbourhoods or on the outskirts), the presence of active or passive surveillance, maintenance of the space as well as activation of the spaces through activities and programmes, among many other factors, contribute to the feeling and use of the space and, thereby, both perceptions and experiences of safety.



Green spaces are important, particularly in marginalised, low income communities where that green public space becomes an extension of the home and an important common space.

The spatial legacy of Apartheid is still evident today, including in the provision of public space which is often limited, unsafe and unmaintained in marginalised communities.

## EXCLUSION AND DISPLACEMENT

While public and green spaces play an increasingly important role in marginalized communities (as outlined previously), the availability of these spaces is a highly political and contested issue, resulting in the unequal provision of these spaces throughout the country.

During the Apartheid era in South Africa, areas that were assigned to people of colour received limited resource allocation and service delivery, including the provision of (quality) public space. It was seen as a luxury reserved for white residents. As the Apartheid regime was based on the separation of people on the grounds of race, excluding people of colour from accessing the quality public space was used as a tool to enact social segregation. Today, the spatial legacy of Apartheid is still very evident, including in the provision of public and green spaces which is limited in lower income, peripheral areas. The few public/green spaces that do exist in these areas tend to be of poor quality and are not maintained, are often crime havens and thereby remain unsafe. This shows how the provision (or lack thereof) of public/green spaces is a highly political issue that can further perpetuate historical exclusion, inequality and neglect.

While city practitioners must work towards eradicating this through increased provision and better maintenance and management of these spaces, this may lead to other forms of exclusion that may include the following:

- 1. Upgrading or creating new spaces often leads to displacement of existing activities that may have contributed to the decreasing quality of the space. For instance, unused open spaces may be used by people experiencing homelessness or drug users/dealers. Interventions may displace these individuals, but that doesn't mean that the underlying social concern (e.g. homelessness) is addressed. Although they are unintended users, it is important to offer alternatives such as shelters for people experiencing homelessness or rehabilitation centres for drug users.
- 2. Exclusion can also manifest through the engagement processes. When creating or upgrading a site, it is critical to hold inclusive public participation in which a wide array of different stakeholders are included to inform and, importantly, drive the planning/design process. However, in many instances these participation processes can be tokenistic and seen as tick box exercises where officials merely present their plans to communities with no real opportunity for engagement. 15 In other instances, participation and/or co-creation may only be carried out with well-known civil society or community-based organisations within the area, excluding the voices of those who may not be part of these formal associations. 16 In addition, speaking only to men or those physically abled may result in the exclusion of the voices of women or those with physical difficulties, respectively. If engagement processes are to be truly inclusive, concerted effort needs to be taken to include all interested and affected individuals, including people experiencing homelessness and drug addicts who may have appropriated the space before.
- 3. Once the project or intervention has been completed, it is possible that exclusion may manifest in the resulting activities. For instance, if the newly provided sports grounds are only being used by boys and men for men-dominated sports such as soccer and rugby, it restricts the use by girls and women. Although it may have been unintended in the design, this then results in the exclusion of women and girls from the space.

It is evident from the above that exclusion can manifest in a number of ways and occur at different moments in time. Practitioners need to be alert to this and be willing to go back and (re)engage or re(plan) if needed. Sustained inclusive engagement and building inclusive spaces requires time, energy, patience and resources.



CASE STUDY:

## UPGRADING END STREET NORTH PARK IN THE CITY OF JOHANNESBURG

The case study below outlines how an unused park, which contributed to crime, was turned around through upgrading and activation in the City of Johannesburg. The case study draws on the input provided by Ayanda Roji of Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ), presented at the SPRINT online learning event in November 2022.

In 2015, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ), responsible for the development, conservation and management of green spaces, decided to host a number of dialogues around the topic of safety in public spaces. This was after noticing that safety remained a common concern for users of green spaces as reflected on Customer Satisfaction surveys reports, complaints records and Integrated Development Planning Forums discussions.

The deliberations of the dialogues revealed that the work of JCPZ around greening parks and other open spaces would not be sustainable nor yield the positive outcome it intends unless issues of safety and access are addressed. The issues were

- The different City departments were operating in silos, not involving the others in their planning or budgeting process.
- 2. There was no co-designing and cocreation with the users of the space.
- 3. End Street North Park in the inner city of Johannesburg needed to be upgraded with a specific focus on safety and access

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The recommendations put forward included the need to do things differently. The Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) partnered with other departments including Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), Department of Public Safety, the Johannesburg Roads Agency (JRA), the Special Projects Unit within the Office of the City Manager, UN Habitat Global Public Space Programme, I.H Harris Primary School, Sticky Situations and GIZ Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention Programme (GIZ-VCP), using the End Street North Park as a learning site.

The intention was to upgrade the park that had been plagued by activities bringing down the quality and safety of the space, such as alcohol and drug abuse, vandalism, illegal dumping and the presence of people experiencing homelessness. In addition, harsh crime such as robbery, rape and the dumping of dead bodies occurred within this space, leaving women and children particularly reluctant to use it, resulting in closure of the park.

The City wanted to ensure this process was a collaborative project that involved the local community, particularly the hard-to-reach groups. However, they were not sure how. To combat this, they partnered with a local NGO Sticky Situations, who assisted with undertaking stakeholder mapping exercises to find out who the community actually is, and who the (potential) users of the park are.

The organisation also helped the City employ participatory approaches to effectively get inclusive and context-specific input, including the community's desperate need for a speed bump in the adjacent street, notoriously known for accidents.

With the additional help of UN Habitat and GIZ-VCP, the City was able to inclusively engage a wide array of stakeholders, even those who do not form part of (formal) associations, such as children and people experiencing homelessness. They also used customised methods and techniques to engage the community, as different social groups respond better to different forms of communication.17 In this case, they partnered with I.H. Harris Primary School where they engaged children using art workshops and a video game called Minecraft to engage with and encourage them, including young people, to get involved in public space design and planning. GIZ-VCP and the Department of Public Safety of the City of Johannesburg were particularly helpful in assisting with undertaking community safety audits, as well as having an explicit focus on vulnerable groups such as women and their experience of safety within the space.

Local stakeholders were not only asked for their input; they were also involved in the co-creation of the park through co-planning and co-implementation. The City employed people to paint, activate and maintain which was important in building ownership over the space, which has a key role in deterring crime

One of the considerations of the project was the fact that this park is situated within the inner city and is thus meant to draw in people from all over the city. To do this, the project used public space activation, a key concept to create vibrant spaces. When it comes to activation, context is key. The City needed to understand what was important and needed within that specific park.

Through the collaboration process they found that at the heart of this community was to showcase local talents and artists. They worked with local artists on a variety of temporary activations; in the end their work was permanently displayed on the walls and in the bathrooms. Not only did space, but it also provided employment and recognition of local artists in the area. They also found that community members were interested in boxing. A partnership with the Hillbrow Boxing Club resulted in monthly boxing tournaments in the park, which also opened up important opportunities for the club who was able to acquire funding to upgrade their equipment. These interventions were subject to the needs and interests of the users of the space and kept the space busy and used throughout the day, playing an important role in crime

The City also established a Park Activators Programme in which the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) workers together with community members and the people experiencing homelessness residing in the park were involved in helping with the activation and maintenance of the park. Partnerships with the City of eThekwini was also important here, sharing learnings about how to better utilise the EPWP workers beyond menial tasks, such as sweeping and basic maintenance. The Park Activators also acted as important touch points for the community to provide information about the parks and assist with finding other government and social services. Thus, activation was essential in the success of the park upgrade.

Through the physical upgrade and the activation process, the City was able to transform an underutilised site, contributing to crime and grime in the city, into a thriving community space that played a big role in creating connected communities, and ultimately crime reduction.

Sustained inclusive engagement and building inclusive spaces requires time, energy, patience and resources. Good quality public space and activation are a tool to sustainably and inclusively reduce crime.

## SUCCESSFUL FACTORS IN CREATING THRIVING PUBLIC GREEN SPACE

Due to the historical lack of provision of public/green spaces, there is a need to not only upgrade existing spaces, but also to create new ones. This is key in promoting social, spatial and economic integration. In turn, this will also have a significant role in promoting urban safety. 19

The case study of the City of Johannesburg provides us with important lessons that informs the success of such processes. These include:

• Willingness to reflect and adapt. JCPZ recognised that while they were fulfilling their mandate to upgrade and green public space, their interventions were falling short and were not sustainable. An important step in this process was the realisation that the department did not only want to do what was within their mandate – that is, to provide as many green spaces as possible. Instead, they were concerned with creating vibrant spaces that would survive long term and play a positive role in the community.

 Partnership, collaboration and co-creation played a critical role. Bringing together various departments to collectively strategise, plan and assist each other where skills were lacking, was important to the success. JCPZ noted that this was very different to what the City had done previously, with public participation often seen as a tick box exercise, where participation is not meaningful or substantive. This is a common approach where community members are gathered and officials present their preconceived plans with no real opportunity for engagement.20However, working with organisations outside of the City of Johannesburg was helpful to undertake inclusive collaborative planning and co-design/co-creation interventions where local stakeholders were part of driving certain processes, ensuring the City was able to provide a thriving place that was relevant to the needs of the community it intended to serve. These partnerships assisted the City in carrying out conversations with stakeholders which often require good facilitation skills (in which government often lack) as there are often unseen power dynamics and polarizing views and agendas in communities. This is where partnerships really came into play. Where the City departments lacked in skill, their partners were able to assist in filling that need. It was also through these partnerships that they began to see safety as a transversal issue, beyond security, where all departments have a role to play.



• **Activation** was essential. The City needed to bring different groups of people together in the park as part of promoting social inclusion and used activation to this. Not only did activation ensure the space was being used throughout the day, but it also brought together a variety of people from different backgrounds where they could interact within the space. This contributed to social cohesion and connectedness of people and the community at large, having an important role in crime reduction. Activation was an important change agent in the process. For instance, involving people experiencing homelessness to help with activation, through painting, as well as with cleaning and maintenance had an important mind shift change from community members. People experiencing homelessness were no longer seen as dangerous and bringing down the quality of the space, but part of the community and the solution. This approach was also key to not perpetuate exclusion from public space by just removing people experiencing homelessness. Interventions were put in place to ensure they also had a say in the process.

Overall, the project was a success and contributed to creating better inclusive public green spaces in the City of Johannesburg. One of the critical points to highlight here is the use of creating good quality public space and activation as a tool to sustainably and inclusively reduce crime. This is different to the usual approach where high walls, gates and other security measures are put in place in an attempt to make the space feel safer. However, this method can be very ostracising, where those who are seen as 'outsiders' are not allowed to enter. This takes away from the very essence that makes a space 'public' and reinforces the exclusion that historically existed in many of these spaces.



## ADVANCING AND REPLICATING GOOD PRACTICE

The JCPZ good practice example reveals many lessons and insights that can be taken forward in other contexts and by other stakeholders seeking to bring about change, more particularly to improve urban safety. While the project cannot simply be duplicated elsewhere as needs and social ecology vary with context, based on the JCPZ example and other experiences from participants at the learning event, some elements of success can be identified.

# Champions/trailblazers play a vital role in identifying and pursuing possibilities for change

In many instances, success in projects like this rely on a 'champion' within the organisation, municipality or government department to advocate for the issue and drive the process. These are people who are passionate about change and are skilled in navigating their organisation to bring about the desired change. This could be through building important connections, leveraging other stakeholders or partners to come on board, or getting their department to go the extra mile. Champions often have an ability to see beyond the immediate issue and supposed solution to identify strategic and systemic opportunities for change. In the case of violence and crime prevention, this means recognising that crime and violence prevention requires more than security initiatives and appreciating that a transversal, multistakeholder response is needed. Champions are not necessarily subject experts or more knowledgeable than others about problems or solutions; rather, they have an ability to harness people, resources and networks towards a common objective and are creating space for other voices and expertise to come through. In doing this and through their passion, champions

are often a source of inspiration for others. But champions also suffer frustration, stress and burnout, especially when they feel unsupported. This is why it is so important for champions to have support networks and build a broader coalition of interest to pursue the desired change.

# Crime and violence prevention, like other systems change, needs an institutional response

While champions often play a critical role in driving change, to sustain the effort it is critical that the response is institutionalised. If the success of an initiative is solely dependent on project champions, it is unlikely to be sustained and if the project champion leaves there is no institutional memory or capacity to take the work forward.

One of the ways to do this is to set up a dedicated unit and/ or a municipal safety forum. A number of cities, like the City of Johannesburg, Cape Town and eThekwini have established a Safer Cities Unit, which is dedicated particularly to focusing on issues of safety in the municipality. However, this is not something that is mainstreamed across all municipalities and where it exists, it is usually understaffed. While a dedicated unit or structure can play a key role in driving an urban safety agenda, it may suggest that other parts of the municipality do not have to consider themselves with violence prevention and safety concerns. Ensuring that neighbourhoods and cities become safer and more inclusive requires a multi-sectoral and transversal approach. It has direct relevance to the strategic interests of many sector departments, such as planning, health, social development, economic development and human settlements. Therefore, a transversal safety forum should be considered to institutionalise the urban safety agenda across various departments and units. Another important way to institutionalise the responsibility for improved safety is by embedding the contribution to safety outcomes in the performance management system, through Key Performance Areas/Indicators.

The political sphere, and in particular ward Councillors, also needs to be brought on board to appreciate why promoting urban safety is important, what a holistic safety approach entails, how to do safety planning and budgeting, and what partnerships can be leveraged so that urban safety outcomes are truly institutionalised.

# Partners bring valuable expertise and resources, but investing in institutional capabilities is also important

Partnerships are key to the success of any project, particularly those that bring together stakeholders with similar interests, mandates and complementary skill sets, resources and/or networks. Partnerships are dynamic and can evolve over time, especially as needs and capacities may change during the course of the project. Key to partnerships is integrative planning, of skills, budgets and capacity and making sure to outline each institution's role and responsibilities.

However, partnerships can be demanding and require coordination, which in turn means that municipalities need to have the capacity to assemble and manage strategic partnerships. In partnering with other stakeholders, particularly the private sector, the municipality needs to remain vigilant that the public interest stays front and centre of the initiative. For example, in the case of improvement districts there is a risk that public space may become privatised, resulting in spaces that are no longer accessible to the majority, compromising the very essence that make these spaces 'public'.

There are clear benefits to government drawing on the skills and capacity of partner stakeholders by depending on them to carry out particular functions, such as social facilitation or undertaking participatory research. But a key limitation and possible risk is that outsourcing such work to others does not allow government and community stakeholders to build important relationships that are key in developing public trust and for the success of (later) interventions. Ensuring that skills are transferred from the partner to the municipality to replicate and sustain the action is therefore key. This means investing in internal capabilities – for partnership coordination, social facilitation and implementation.

Here universities also have an important role to play (and can be leveraged as key partners), by ensuring that their educational offerings equip urban practitioners to engage in multidisciplinary planning (including safety planning), social facilitation, partnership coordination and other relevant knowledge and competencies.

## 4

## Co-creation is a worthwhile investment, leading to better results

Co-creation is an important method in the planning and design of public spaces. It goes beyond just collaborating and getting input from communities and other stakeholders by recognising that communities have valuable knowledge, skills and agency. Key to the success of this method is getting different stakeholders to co-design, co-plan and co-implement such initiatives. Not only does this ensure the space is designed in the interest of those who live there; it also helps to build a sense of ownership of the space. This approach needs to be employed as a standard practice.

To do this, government institutions should not see the participation process as a tick box exercise and come with

preconceived notions about what needs to be done or how things will go. Instead, government should recognise how critical this process is to ensure the interventions are context specific, therefore contributing to place-making and the longevity of the intervention. This means putting concerted effort into understanding the local context, including who the community and affected stakeholders are, which methods are best to engage them creatively and efficiently, and what current activities are taking place in the space.

It is vital to have someone with good facilitation skills to ensure that different power dynamics and agendas within the community are handled accordingly. In engagement and cocreation processes it is also important to be mindful that other stakeholders may need to be brought on board to ensure the success of the initiative. An example from the City of Tshwane is instructive here. Despite the City engaging extensively with the community, taxis in the area would drive over the sidewalk they were trying to construct. The City then had to engage taxi associations before moving forward. Where key interest groups, and in particular marginalised sections of the community, are excluded, efforts should be made to draw them in to ensure that the initiative doesn't perpetuate or reintroduce exclusion.

Key to co-creation is the aspect of co-management. Redistributing power to the local community to co-manage public spaces is important in facilitating ownership and a sense of pride over the space.

## 5 Don't just plan: Act!

It is important to spend time with other stakeholders, including local residents and community groups, to understand the context, local needs and opportunities and to co-create interventions. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of crime and violence prevention, public space interventions can be quite complex

and take a while to materialise. It is therefore important to start small and include measurable actions.

Small catalytic interventions can go a long way in changing local realities and showing people the possibilities of change. Government (and political leaders in particular) tends to focus on mega projects that will leave a legacy behind. However, small starts, such as temporary activations and interventions that are relatively cheap and don't require many resources, can open doors for other opportunities and more permanent solutions that can be scaled up and replicated elsewhere. It also allows other stakeholders, who may not see how their work fits in with the mega plan, to connect their work and contribution to the initiative. In this way small actions can act as catalysts for other interventions and more stakeholders to get involved.

## 6

## Make time to monitor, reflect, document and learn

It is important to keep track of the process and reflect on what is/isn't working. The forums and structures set up to guide the work, such as the proposed municipal safety forum or transversal project working groups, should be seen as a learning hub, where different practitioners can learn from each other and collectively reflect on their collaboration and the result of their work. Not only is this important for redirecting an initiative or augmenting its engagement activities, for example; keeping a record of approaches and tools that worked helps to show others what can be achieved, which is useful in advocating for support or replication and for inspiring similar practices elsewhere.

#### **IN SUMMARY**

1: Public space has a key role in creating thriving, safe and inclusive cities. However, these spaces can be spaces of contention, exclusion and of poor quality, particularly in the lower income communities depending on factors such as planning, design, ownership and management.

- **2:** The provision of good quality, accessible and safe public/ green spaces needs to be pursued and is a key thrust of eradicating spatial Apartheid in South Africa and bringing about inclusive and liveable neighbourhoods.
- **3:** While upgrading/creating more and better-quality public space is important, activation is the key ingredient to creating thriving, inclusive and, importantly, safer spaces.
- **4:** Practitioners always need to be cognisant of exclusion, whether advanced deliberately or inadvertently, and be willing to go back and (re)engage or (re)plan if needed.
- **5:** Champions/trailblazers are important in bringing about change. However, for this change to be sustained, support networks and a broader coalition for change need to be established.
- **6:** Partnerships, co-creation and transversal working is essential to the success and sustainability of such interventions. However, these processes need to be institutionalised and adequately recognised and resourced.
- **7:** Institutions need to be willing to invest in and upskill practitioners as a long-term solution.
- **8:** When undertaking development interventions, it's important to monitor and reflect on what is/isn't working and be willing to (re) learn for improved practice and sustained success.







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#### **NOTES**

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The primary objective of the SPRINT Project is to institutionalise area-based violence prevention intervention (ABVPI) approaches in public policy, programmes and practices in order to upscale them and have a sustainable impact.



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