



Policy Briefing 1

2019

Working for Grassroots Walking & Cycling Projects in London: Why and How

Introduction

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 projects 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.

Why Support Citizen-Led Projects?

Our research found that many of the citizen-led walking and cycling projects 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 organisations 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 organisations' 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*.

"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."

"Susan" in London

What are Grassroots or Citizen-led Projects?

In general, these are projects that are initiated and run by citizens or citizen groups. They are often legally recognised as charitable organisations, though some may be social enterprises or cooperatives. Their activities are not performed as employees of the government, the military, or standard firms.



Examples

Citizen-Led Walking and Cycling projects are very diverse although they tend to share a focus on hard-to-reach groups, such as children from disadvantaged backgrounds or refugees or people with a disability. Examples from London include:

- Organised neighbourhood walks for older women in areas perceived as dangerous
- Organised bike tours for youth from disadvantaged areas with active gangs
- Bicycle provision and maintenance workshops for refugees and asylum seekers
- Special bike 'libraries' for people with mental or physical disabilities.

2. Experimentation to Inform Public Policy

Pathways to a sustainable and just transport system are diverse, and it is difficult for anyone—policy makers or activists—to know what the best options are. 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 support walking and cycling among those in need may be valuable guides for larger public institutions.



3. Complement Public Policy under Austerity

For decades all levels of government have been challenged by shrinking budgets and devolution of responsibility. This has left the authorities responsible for providing sustainable transport options 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. Citizen-led activities can and do complement those projects with initiatives focused on walking and cycling that cater effectively to the needs and the capabilities of hard-to-reach groups in the city.

4. Generation of Social Cohesion & Community Ownership

Both leaders and end-users of the grassroots activities in the research spoke of the way the projects went beyond supporting walking and cycling to build social connections among beneficiaries, many of whom experience some level of social isolation, and cultivate a sense of community ownership by all involved. In urban environments often characterised as socially fragmented, detached and even alienating, these larger social benefits that citizen-led activities provide are not to be ignored.

"[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

Summary

Citizen-led infrastructures provide multiple benefits to their communities and make valuable partners for decision makers. Put simply, this grassroots work helps your work.

Citizen-Led Projects can be Vulnerable: How to Support Them?

The grassroots leaders who were interviewed for the study described sources of resilience and vulnerability that their organisations and projects faced. A key source of resilience was people, such as persistent co-leaders, dedicated staff, and extended networks connecting them to similar organisations and supportive intermediaries. Two key sources of vulnerability were also identified.

A. Locations

Many of the grassroots leaders ran the administrative end of their organisations and conducted their 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 organisations' attempts to remain available to their end users. Not all users 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 projects, they are often detrimentally destabilising. Policies and initiatives to make more durable physical spaces available for grassroots projects are essential if authorities are to support their valuable work. Strategic options include:

- the provision of co-working spaces in community hubs
- the creation of new spaces through the purchase of used shipping containers for use in empty public spaces
- subsidies for shop rents and leasing empty high street premises at (very) low rates

B. Financial Resources

For most organisations erratic funding was the primary source of vulnerability. Some leaders tried to secure more stable funding through commercial and/or additional activities but many were reluctant because of:

- the time these add-ons took away from core activities
- concerns about the potential for commercial activities to undermine their altruistic identity and orientation
- fears that commercial and profit-oriented activity might undermine their original pro-social visions and missions.

Partly because of these concerns, grants from charities and local governments are a particularly important source of income for the organisations that run citizen-led projects. There are, however, two main set of challenges associated with those grants: 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. Grassroots leaders explained that the main reason for these fluctuations was that the grant schemes increasingly focused on short-term projects and that there was very little money available to cover ongoing operational costs. The key concern with this type of funding was that organisations had to abandon their targeted communities of end users when the money runs out. At the same time, leaders also appreciated short-term project grants insofar that they provided the funding to invest in capital (e.g. bicycle repair tools) that could be used for as long as operational costs were covered.

"We had to take lots of data and churn it [when applying for a big grant]. And if we get any more funding in the future, it will be worse, I don't think it will be any better. Tendering processes and all that are huge for a tiny organisation 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



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 reflect bias towards quantitative evidence of efficacy and size, ‘fads’, and the appropriation of grassroots activities.

Quantitative Evidence Bias

Some grassroots organisations embraced the use of quantitative indicators about their activities, but others felt that their impact was better captured through qualitative evidence. The 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 organisation we spoke with claimed they did recognise qualitative impact—then funding agencies may be favouring size over qualities such as diversity or flexible adaptability.

Appropriation

Several organisations in both London and São Paulo recounted stories about how larger, highly professionalised and often commercial organisations had, to put it bluntly, stolen their ideas and practices. The tendency to favour size in funding decisions thus meant that these larger organisations 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 and capacity to experiment (see above).

Funding Fads

Many interviewees spoke of the eligibility requirements as a constantly moving target. They felt that these requirements tended to take on 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.

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. This may mean the periodic provision of smaller amounts of money as opposed to one large deposit. A better balance between different types of grants is welcome.
- b. Funding eligibility criteria should be written broadly in order to transcend media and political fads. For instance, the beneficiaries of grassroots projects that support walking and cycling may be defined in broad terms such as “those unable to meet their basic needs” in eligibility criteria.
- c. Policies and strategies should avoid prioritising quantitative evidence of impact and volume over more nuanced qualitative forms of evidence. Visits to projects by funding decision makers to obtain first-hand experiential evidence of efficacy would be one excellent way to do this.
- d. When the efficacy of a project or organisation is evaluated, past achievements and the adoption of an applicant’s activity or method by other organisations should be taken into account.
- e. Small is also beautiful. Rather than valorising administrative efficiency and volume by supporting large projects and organisations, funders should consider the important role played by smaller initiatives. There is value in the diversity and innovativeness of their activities and in their strong sensitivity to the needs of specific groups or in particular neighbourhoods. Smaller projects and organisations can be supported by funders distributing more money to them and by requiring larger grant holders to earmark a portion of their funding for subcontracting to smaller organisations.

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About the DePICT Project

DEsigning and Policy Implementation for Encouraging Cycling and Walking Trips (DePICT) is an international research collaboration between investigators at the University of Oxford, Utrecht University, and the University of São Paulo that ran from 2015 to 2019. The Oxford team conducted 38 interviews in London and 32 in São Paulo for their work on community-led walking and cycling projects. For further information see <https://www.tsu.ox.ac.uk/> or contact tsudirector@tsu.ox.ac.uk.

