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## Rethinking Urban Resilience: A Bottom-Up Approach to Public Space Management in Bogotá, Colombia

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### ABSTRACT

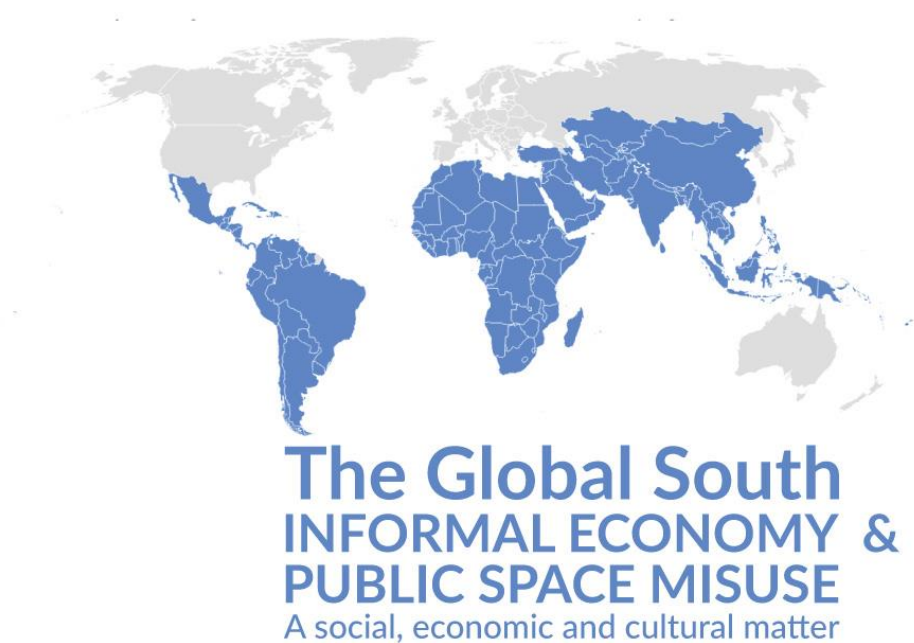
The escalating climate crisis demands innovative solutions for urban adaptation. This paper argues for a bottom-up approach, centered on the active participation of architects, communities, and end users in redesigning and managing public spaces. This shift is imperative to achieve the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16.7 on inclusive and participatory decision-making. The document examines the case study of Locality 11 Suba-La Gaitana, in Bogotá, Colombia, where facing growing informality and public space misuse the local government through an effective governance (economy) implemented tactical urbanism practices (urban design). Efforts with and for the community contributed to normalization of public spaces dedicated to their economic activities. The normalization led to formal agreements between the vendors and the local administration, which established regulations and segmented spaces for product display. Moreover, vendors received identification, training in financial education and business management, and access to support programs through the Network Services program. Through a polycentric approach, informal vendors were formally integrated into the local economy, contributing to increased tax revenue and improved public order. The model also fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members towards their public spaces. The "Portal de Suba", another replicated initiative involving the local government, street vendor organizations, and the Institute for the Social Economy, further highlights the scalability and replicability of this model. The paper describes how the Suba-La Gaitana case and its broader implications can be applied to not only other Colombian and Latin American cities, but also to other third world cities with an informal economy and public space misuse. It contributes to the discourse on sustainable urban development and proposes a participatory approach as a strategy for building resilient and inclusive cities in the face of climate change.

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## Introduction

Informal economy in public spaces is a phenomenon specific to cities of the global south (cities below the equator) with relatively low level of economic and industrial development, and low institutional capacity to regulate effectively and appropriately the economic use of public space. Although informal economy—informal sector or gray economy—makes up a significant portion of economies in developing countries, it must be recognized that eliminating them is a social, economic, and cultural impossibility. Public policy must recognize the role of the informal economy as part of the local economic development and, in turn, the power of governance of public space by city government agencies to preserve it as a collective right [1]. Figure 1 - The Global South.



**Fig. 1.** The Global South.

Undue occupation of the urban commons (spaces of public interest) has been one of the main challenges for the administrations of the city of Bogotá, Colombia. It's confirmed by the fact that today the issue attracts the media's attention and that several actors continue to denounce the situation. Although public space recovery plans and policies have been in place for more than two decades and many areas have been declared as recovered space, the city has not been able to maintain the conditions for such "recovery". In general, the city's approach to the phenomenon of informal economy has been based on the recovery of public space, leaving as subsidiary interventions the rationality of social economy.

Thus, the present document aims to argue that if the problem of irregular occupation of public space is addressed with interventions that promote productive inclusion—labor or commercial—and from a rationality that combines economy and urban design, the apparent tension between the right to work and the right to enjoy public space, can be effectively managed. Shifting from a top-down to a bottom-up approach, the paper focuses on the experience carried out in the locality 11 Suba-La Gaitana in Bogota City, and it describes applied principles of an alternative and resilient vision of governance and tactical urbanism for public space management—understanding the economic dimensions and activities that take place in a territory. The paper contributes to the discourse on sustainable urban development and proposes a participatory approach as a strategy for building resilient and inclusive cities in the face of climate change. Figure 2 – Bottom-up approach for urban adaptation.



street food, pushing fruit carts or mobile supermarkets; and iii) informal vendors, who, freely move on public spaces occupying their own personal space [4].

Having understood the above views, the approach and methodology used in the locality 11 Suba-La Gaitana has been to fully understand the complexity of the problem and to fully comprehend the market, the community's needs, and activities. To accomplish this, the local administration has considered two important components to study: the available public space and the generation of resources (informal commerce activities). Likewise, working with the community for the community has been imperative to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels—SDG 16.7. As a result, practices of tactical urbanism led to segmentation areas on public space for product display. Figure 3 – Model methodology and process.

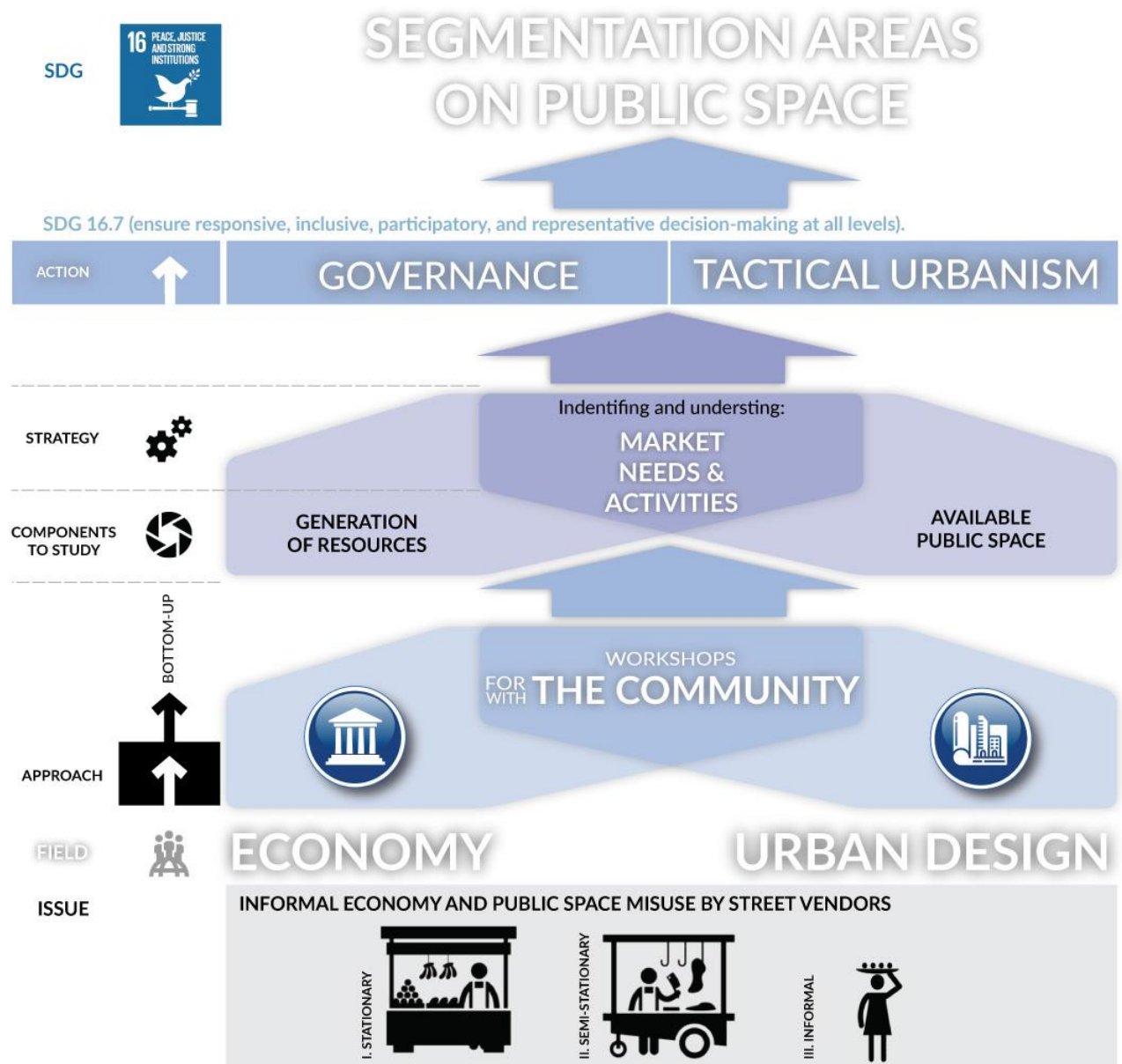


Fig. 3. Model methodology and process.



The intervention has led to the normalization of public space with an economic productive use to close inequality gaps. This model's concept goes beyond the way that public space is usually managed in the global north—nations above the equator which are characterized by a high level of economic and industrial development—where public spaces are planned and intervened for people's enjoyment and recreation. At Suba-La Gaitana, urban commons (spaces of public interest) are being intervened in terms of democratization, for a more sustainable planet with opportunities to satisfy basic needs—like hunger. Once urban commons are understood as a resource shared by the community, they are effectively managed through schemes (set of norms and strategies) that are formed, applied, and interpreted withing this area of political interactions [5]. These governance schemes particularly the governance of public space are then configured as a non-static process, in which multiple entities can participate, such as local government staff, and/or representatives of civil society or local communities. In this way, different governance systems can make local authorities and governments adapt, and subsequently adjust aspects such as: the available information, the system's levels of competence, the use of available resources and incentives generating conditions for a polycentric system. Figure 4 – Polycentric approach.

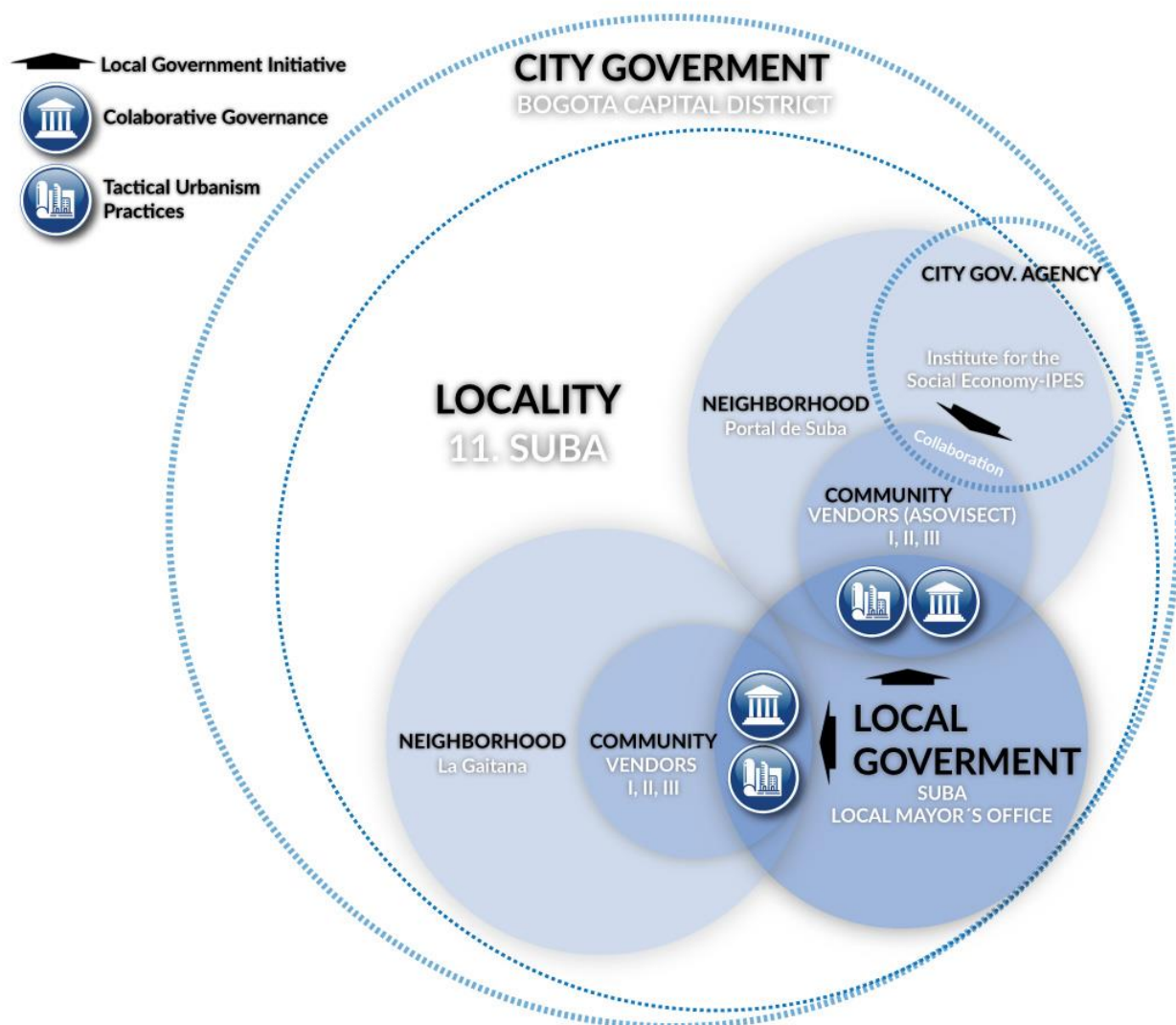


Fig. 4. Polycentric approach.

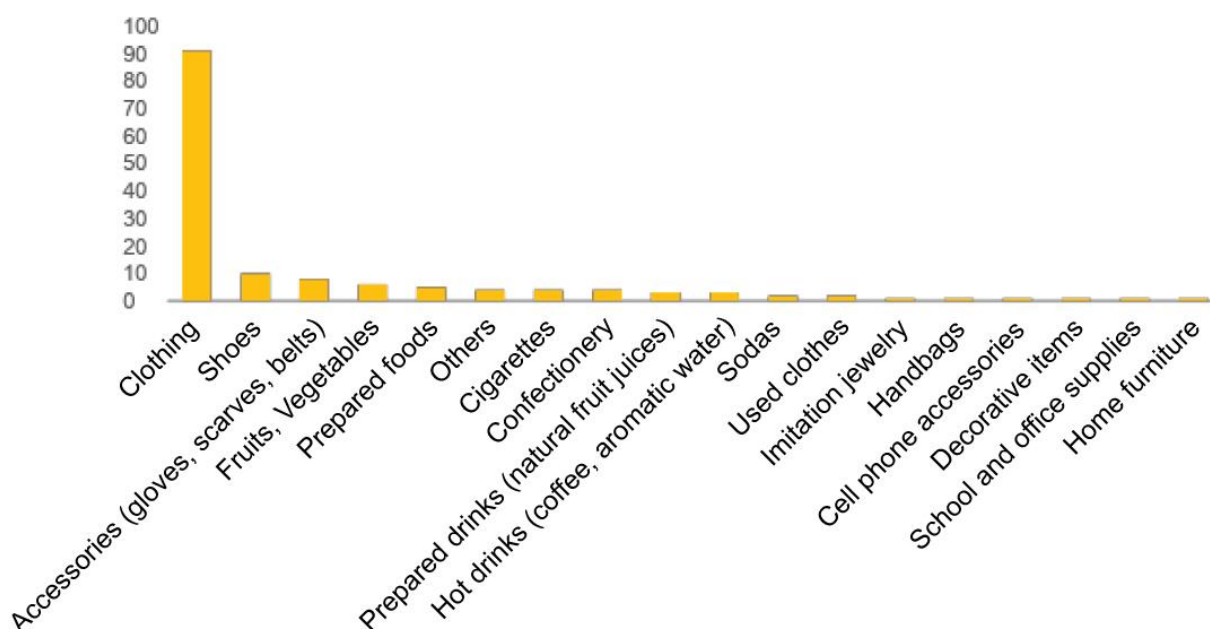
The polycentric approach used in the model is one in which [6] “citizens can organize not only one, but multiple government authorities at different scales. Each unit has considerable independence to develop and enforce rules in an established domain of authority and for a specific geographic area”. In short, the polycentric system is one that does not have a single and unique final authority that designs, applies, and interprets the rules of a community; but it does have a general and abstract set of shared rules that can be agreed upon and applied by the decision-making centers themselves. The approach and initiatives by the local government have made it possible that urbanism be in function of the community, closing gaps of inequality, and not in function of hegemonies.

During the process, the initial survey of the informal retailer’s population at Suba-La Gaitana had a characterization with results shown in Table 1 and Figure 5:

**Table 1**  
122 Informal Retailers at Suba-La Gaitana

Population Type	Qty
Women	65
Men	57
NARP *	2
Natives	1

\*Afro-Colombian population



**Fig. 5.** Informal retailers by commercialized products.

For a fast, economically efficient and action-oriented approach to making meaningful civic changes to the locality, the community has been the most important component not only in the design process, but also in the economic use of public space. No one knows better what a community needs than the people who live in it. Yet most alterations to the urban fabric are either a matter of routine maintenance or the results of top-down decisions made by governments and developers in distant board rooms. “Computer models and conceptual design studies by Architects can provide critical insight, but sometimes we won’t know if an idea will work until we try it out in real life. Tactical urbanism provides a temporary laboratory for cities to test the effects, financial costs, benefits, and pitfalls of projects before fully committing to them. By experiencing changes to the urban environment firsthand, citizens can also better decide if they want them to remain permanent” [7]. The two intervened zones at Suba-

La Gaitana for the tactical urbanism practices were called by the local city government: *La Gaitana*—alluding to a Colombian heroine and indigenous leader of the 16th century—Zone 1: *A cry for freedom* (Figure 6 Plan view, Figure 7 Elevation view); and Zone 2: *A community path* (Figure 8 Plan view recognizing existing urban areas, Figure 9 Proposed urban elements).



Fig. 6. Zone 1 *A cry for freedom* - Plan view



Fig. 7. Zone 1 *A cry for freedom* - Elevation view



Fig. 8. Zone 2 *A community path* - Plan view recognizing existing urban areas.





**Fig. 9.** Zone 2 A community path - Proposed urban elements.

As a result of the workshops with community led by architects of the local government of Suba—ensuring inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making SDG 16.7—the tactical urbanism design plans were followed by organization principles planned for the two zones [8]:

- The fundamental principle is associated with the fact that public space belongs to all people, hence commitment and responsibility are required for its correct use and enjoyment.
- Authorized products must be displayed on stands (1.5 x 2.0 meters), merchandise cannot be displayed on the ground.
- Overcrowding of vendors are not allowed in public spaces. Neither is the use of fixed chairs nor mannequins.
- Bicycle paths and spaces not intended for sales must be kept clear without displaying any merchandise.
- Street corners must be free for pedestrian circulation.
- Facemasks and biosafety kits are mandatory.
- Sale Identification Cards with QR code must be visible and in accordance with the assigned section.
- Illegal products may not be sold in public spaces.
- Sales will be allowed between 9:00 am to 7:00 pm except for scheduled and authorized events that may have extended hours.
- The space must be kept clean and neat.

As today, the vendors are required to comply with the above principles. Otherwise after a formal warning, vendors will be asked to abandon the space [8]. In consequence, the local administration and the informal vendors signed pacts to follow the principles and establish an adequate economic use of the locality's public space—having a dedicated area to conduct business. The pacts describe demarcated colorful modules, well organized to carry out sales activities and make proper use of public space [9].

Once the vendors sign the agreement, they are issued identification cards and receive vests and caps, which identify them as active participants of their established relationship with the local government. The identification cards are in the local government's data base and can serve as a form of identification. Also, they allow individuals to prove who they are and verify their identity and assigned space with the rest of the community, local law enforcement or any city government agency [9]. Figure 10.





**Fig. 10.** Informal retailer receiving an identification card

Following the mutual pacts for economic development, agreements between the community and local governments have transcended into training benefits for users interested in making democratic use of public space. The plan of the local administration provides a wide range of services and training to informal vendors in the locality to professionalize their work. Likewise, the Local Mayor's Office has organized fairs to support local marketing, which aims to support the commercial activities of community enterprises that require it. The initiatives are within the framework of the Local Development Plan, which consists of strategies of differential strengthening and popular undertakings for the locality, according to their productive sector.

As part of the training program in financial education and participation, the Network Services program provides financial education to informal vendors requiring more skills in a variety of aspects, such as life projects, personal finances, and small businesses. The Network Service program aims to summon public and private entities to present a wide range of services to informal retailers, in addition to providing them with advice on how to make the best use of it [9]. Figure 11 – Output, agreements and benefits from the model.

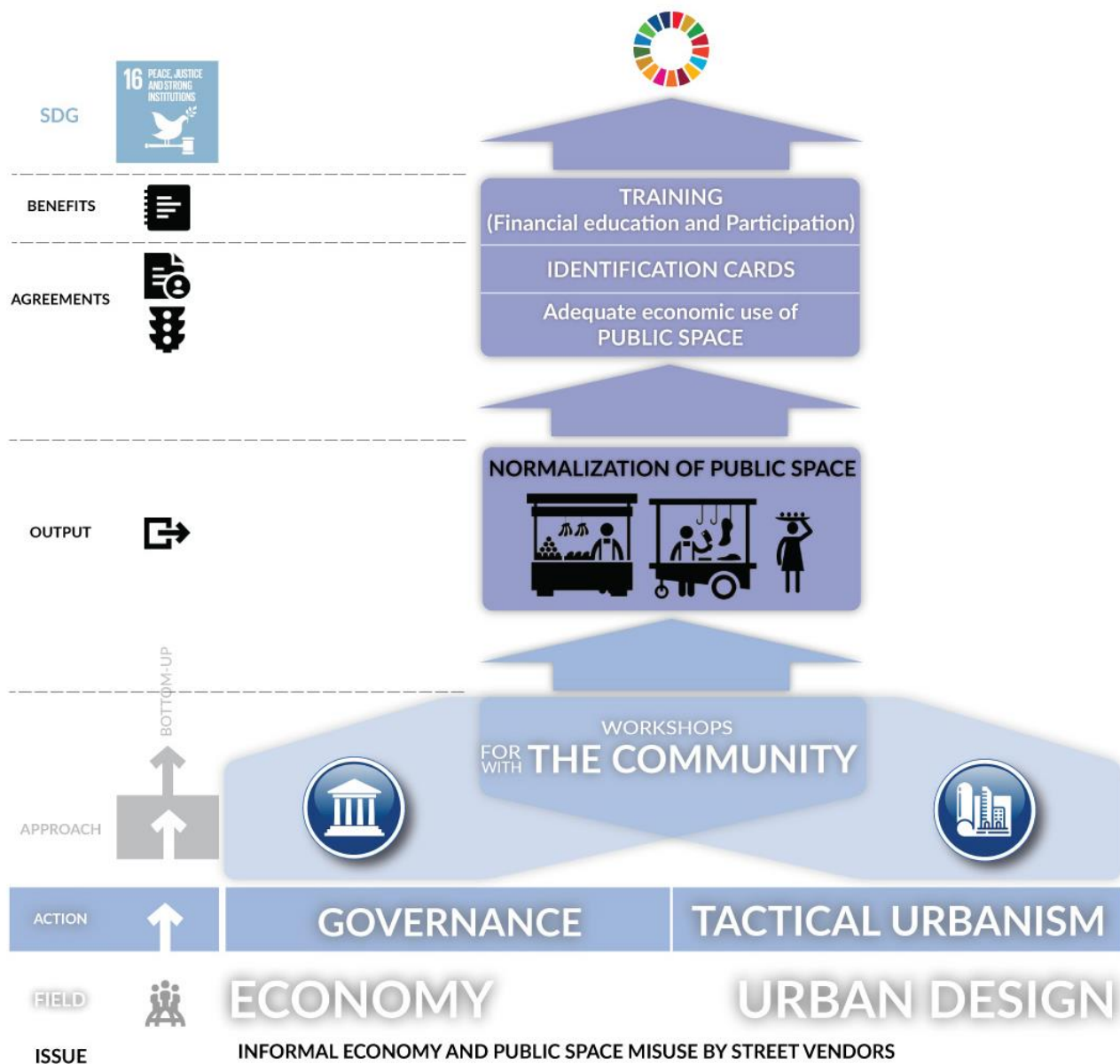


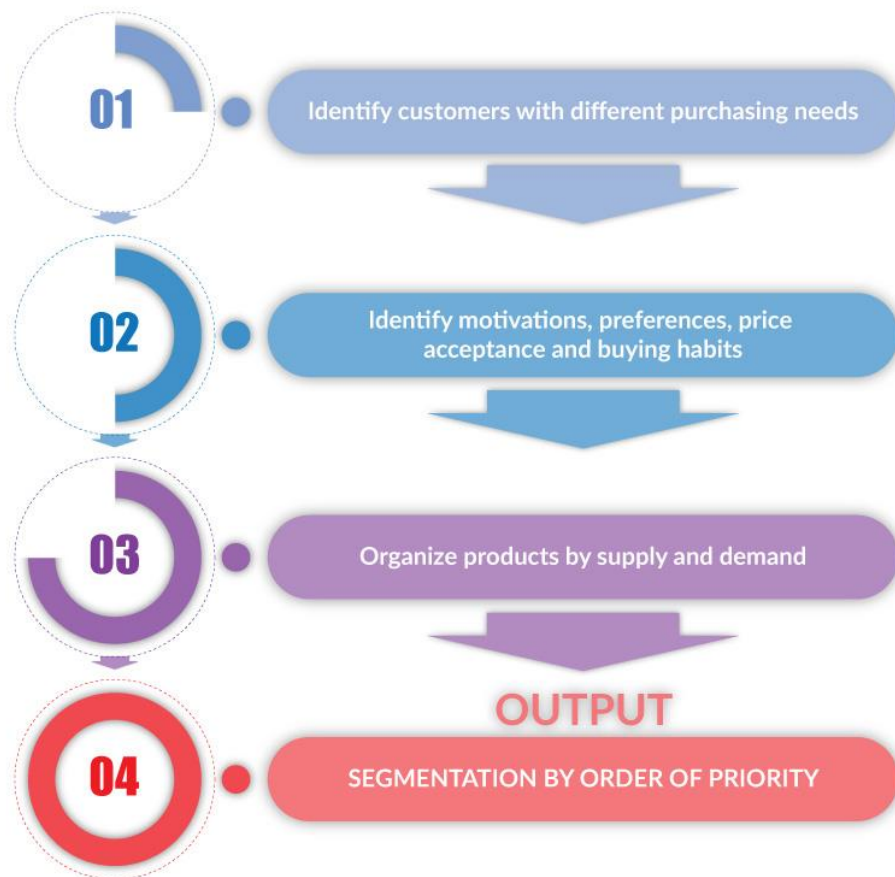
Fig. 11. Output, agreements and benefits from the model.

## Results

Any public space intervention and informal sales management in third world countries should be based on an in-depth interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon. It will vary according to the reality of the agglomeration area being addressed. However, as a general premise, in product markets it is necessary to distinguish between consumers and producers, i.e., for a market to exist, people must have needs and desires to acquire products or services that satisfy them. After the Suba case, it has been identified that market for goods in public space is too broad and is made up of customers with diverse purchasing needs. Therefore, not all consumers in streets have the same motivations, preferences, price acceptance and buying habits, due to social particularities. There is a differentiated product offer adapted to the needs, characteristics, and behaviors of different groups of shoppers.

Consequently, if the objective is to organize, control and regulate the economic use of public space for informal sales, products should be clearly organized by supply and demand. A segmentate approach for organizing vendors based on supply and demand of their goods, leads to establishing an order of

priority which contributes to a better allocation of resources [1]. Figure 12 – Segmentation approach process.



**Fig. 12.** Segmentation approach process.

At Suba-La Gaitana, the process aimed to identify and characterize the supply of goods in public space—differentiated for each group of consumers—made it possible to address some myths about informal retail sales. Considering these "myths" contributed to improving the quality of public policy interventions, to make them more sustainable and resilient.

The following were the "myths" that public policy makers had to avoid to better understand a comprehensive intervention of this complex phenomenon:

- All informal retailers are independent workers, of their own free will, owners of their merchandise.
- Street sales are an illegal activity.
- The goods offered have the same degree of impact on the use and occupation of public space.
- In lucrative street commerce, there is not distinction between the legal and the illegal.
- The uncontrolled increase of street commerce makes it impossible to rationalize its operation.

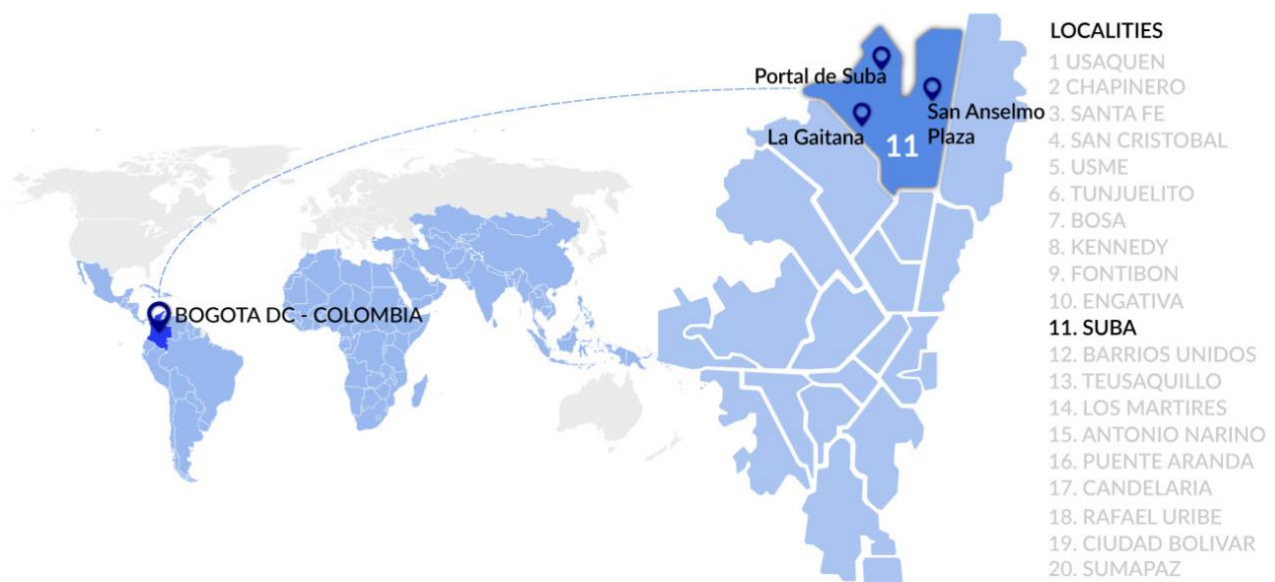
The successful model of "Suba-La Gaitana" even today serves as a model to be scalable and replicable in other neighborhoods of the locality. At the Portal de Suba—a Bus Rapid Transit station—the Local Mayor's Office, the Institute for the Social Economy, IPES (Spanish acronym) and the organization of informal vendors, ASOVISET (Spanish acronym), which brought together 104 merchants, also signed pacts to agree on the proper use of public space and initiate processes of formalization for those dedicated to these economic activities [9]. This has proven that the case of Suba-La Gaitana can be replicated and can be also taken to a larger scale. Figure 13.





**Fig. 13.** Portal of Suba

In consequence, the materialized agreements in the locality of Suba, today are examples in Bogotá that recognize that 6 out of 10 families make a living from the popular economy [10]. “The community can now share public space recognizing rights and allowing vendors to perform their duties. From now on, 104 street vendors will contribute to coexistence, safety, respect for public space and the improvement of the environment of Portal de Suba”, assured the local mayor of Suba, Julián Andrés Moreno Barón [9]. “The Suba-La Gaitana model can also be taken and applied to any part of Bogota City”, also assured the local mayor of Suba, J. Moreno Barón. The model was also later implemented in the San Anselmo Plaza, another neighborhood of the Suba locality. Figure 14 – Suba location and intervened neighborhoods.



**Fig. 14.** Suba location and intervened neighbourhoods.

The public space interventions have also fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members towards their public spaces. Public spaces, like parks and community centres



play a significant role to make a community a safe place to live. So, urban commons are not just places for recreation, they're vital for fostering social connections and a sense of belonging. These areas must be accessible, well-maintained, and designed with safety in mind. At Suba-La Gaitana the intervened spaces made the community to develop a sense of belonging with the space. The community knows the vendors and care not only about the space but also the pedestrians passing by, coming from other neighbourhoods to do shopping. "A city that can find billions of dollars to police and incarcerate residents can invest a fraction of that money in making its neighbourhoods safer in the first place. An obvious place to start is the physical environment", reimagine safety [12].

Convincingly, the Suba-La Gaitana case study invites to better understand the nature of public space. It can be also used as a source of information for smart use of public space with informal economies in third world cities. It suggests that, in cities with high rates of poverty, economic and/or political instability, and social inequalities, local governments should use a socio-economic approach to intervene in commercial activities and public space. Thus, urban design (tactical urbanism) and different public policy interventions (governance) would then adjust to achieve more realistic and efficient results. Policy makers and local governments should then include these approaches to improve the control, administration, and use of public space with a collaborative governance model that helps to make these interventions replicable, scalable, and above all, sustainable over time.

## Conclusions

Climate change demands imperative solutions of innovative proposals for adaptation, not only by environmentalists, but also by city government agencies and the community. The misconception that urban commons do not require the use and management of people, and that interventions end there needs to be rethought. Hence, the policy limitation of the Suba-La Gaitana model is that cities in the global south today continue to design with the logic of the global north—without the community's intervention—where Nordic and traditional urbanism does not fit. In Suba-La Gaitana, the dilemma between the right to work and the right to enjoy public space had to be rethought although the problem is still present in other Colombian and Latin-American cities. By applying the model, rethinking urban resilience implies that local city governance today moves from a traditional to a collaborative and multilevel governance (bottom up instead of top down) to make it more effective and more sustainable. It must be seen not with monochromatic lenses, but rather intervened with the community for the community to solve complex problems of informal economy and public space misuse.

Urban design and economy professionals are called upon to be included in changing some of the rules when it comes to designing and intervening cities. The polycentric model used at Suba-La Gaitana contributes to the discourse on sustainable urban development and recommends a participatory approach as a strategy for building resilient and inclusive cities in the face of climate change.

Hence, applying the Suba-La Gaitana model in other hemispheres implies that local and city governments see the benefits for the future—tactical urbanism for segmented and productive areas on public space. It shall be understood that the generation of resources and proper intervened public space has economic and space implications for the local community. In other words, identifying and understanding the market, needs and activities will affect the economy by increased tax revenue and improved public order. Therefore, it's recommended to identify and characterize the informal economy carried out in public space to managing it and using it more effectively. To achieve this, it's crucial to classify informal vendors by types of products to generate differentiated intervention alternatives, adapted to each target group in terms of organization, location, and regulation [11].

For public policies in cities of the global south to be more efficient in the control, organization, and regulation of economic uses of public space, innovative approaches are required to understand the context, culture, and economic reality. In short, a comprehensive and sustainable approach—initiated by the local government involving the community—implies understanding that the governance of public space must be collaborative; that is, built with all stakeholders. In that way, public entities can

ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels—SDG 16.7

Lastly, this complex process doesn't have a simple or one-shot solution. Sustainable development today requires that commons be intervened with a polycentric governance including architects, economists, and the community in the decision-making processes. Community participation is essential to create transversal and dynamic solutions for the built environment. A community that feels included is naturally more engaged, thereby creating a sense of belonging, pride, and responsibility.

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