

Improving the Management of Public Space: Proposals for the Territorial Organization of the Urban Center of Sincelejo, Colombia

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Abstract

The management of public space in the city of Sincelejo, Colombia, faces great challenges that affect the quality of urban life and order in the central part of the city. Despite the progress proposed in the Land Use Plan, serious problems of saturation and disorganization persist, particularly in areas such as the Transport Terminal, the New Market, the entrance to the University of Sucre and the historic center. These places show a lack of effective planning and regulation, which allows the disorderly occupation of public space by informal vendors, vehicles, and unregulated activities. This study analyzes the causes and effects of this excessive occupation and proposes solutions to improve mobility, safety and citizen enjoyment. It was identified that the lack of adequate state intervention, low citizen culture and lack of infrastructure are key factors in the congestion of public spaces. Based on the analysis of the problems and taking as a reference strategies implemented in cities such as Medellín and Bogotá, practical recommendations for Sincelejo are proposed. These proposals seek not only to reorganize spaces, but also to encourage citizen participation and offer economic alternatives to the informal actors who currently occupy these places. The research was carried out using a qualitative methodology, using official documents, citizen surveys and consultations with the Municipal Mayor's Office of Sincelejo. The results indicate that the Transport Terminal is perceived as the most congested area and with the least effective intervention by local authorities. Likewise, an overwhelming support of citizens for the protection of the historic center was identified, raising the need to allocate it to tourism and guarantee a viable economic transition for informal vendors. Finally, a series of recommendations are established to improve the use, use and management of public space in Sincelejo, Sucre.

Keywords: Public Space, Management, Organization, Sincelejo, Informal vendors.

1. Introduction

Public space is a non-appropriable medium of common use that belongs to everyone, but to no one in particular. Its main function is to guarantee pedestrian and vehicular traffic, serving as a

place for the satisfaction of collective needs that prevail over individual interests. In Colombia, Article 139 of Law 1801 of 2016 (National Code of Security and Citizen Coexistence) defines public space as the set of goods destined by their nature or affectation to collective interests, including public and private properties of ecological or architectural importance. This regulatory framework underlines that, when conflicts between individual and collective interests arise, common interests will prevail, reinforcing the social function of public space.

At a global level, the management of public space has also been a priority issue. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 11, related to sustainable cities and communities, emphasizes the need to adopt measures to transform the way public space is managed and used. UN-Habitat (2019) argues that public spaces are fundamental for sustainable urban development, facilitating social cohesion, economic development and quality of life in cities. In Colombia, despite having a robust regulatory framework, the lack of effective implementation has affected the structure and organization of public space, which generates problems such as insecurity and disorder, affecting the perception that citizens and visitors have of cities.

The ineffective management and use of public space also affects rights such as free movement and a healthy environment. In places like Sincelejo, where labor informality predominates, the misuse of public space by informal vendors has generated mobility problems, which highlights the need for an in-depth analysis on how to efficiently manage these spaces and ensure their sustainability.

The study of public space is not limited to the regulations that regulate its use, but also involves a series of theoretical approaches that explain its role in the configuration of cities and the development of communities. One of the most relevant approaches is that of the theory of the commons, which argues that resources such as public space should be managed collectively and equitably, ensuring that all citizens can benefit from them without prioritizing individual interests over collective ones. The work of Elinor Ostrom (1990) has been key in this regard, as it demonstrates that the commons, when well managed, can be sustainable and equitable.

In the urban context, Henri Lefebvre's (1968) theory of the right to the city also provides an important understanding of the use of and access to public space. Lefebvre argues that all inhabitants of a city have the right to access, use, and transform public spaces to meet their needs. This theory emphasizes citizen participation and empowerment as essential elements for an equitable and democratic management of urban spaces. In this framework, the management of public space in cities such as Sincelejo should not only focus on the regulation of informality, but also on ensuring that these spaces fulfill an inclusive function, in which all citizens have equal access.

Another theoretical approach that has relevance in the study of public space management is that of social capital theory, proposed by authors such as Robert Putnam (1995), who argues that well-managed public spaces can increase the social capital of a community by strengthening social ties and cooperation among its members. A quality public space not only fulfills physical functions, but also symbolic ones, such as facilitating social interaction and strengthening trust among citizens. In this sense, public spaces play a fundamental role in the development of a more cohesive and participatory society. In the case of Sincelejo, improving the management of public

space could help reduce mistrust and promote greater collaboration among inhabitants, especially in areas where informality and disorder generate social tensions.

The theory of spatial justice, developed by Edward Soja (2010), is another key perspective for understanding how distribution and access to public space are directly related to power dynamics and social equity. Soja argues that spatial injustice occurs when certain social groups have less access to quality public spaces, which reinforces inequality and marginalization. In this context, inadequate management of public space in cities such as Sincelejo, where poverty and informality are common, can deepen social inequalities by limiting access to safe, organized, and sustainable areas for the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Therefore, the implementation of urban policies that promote spatial justice is essential to ensure that all citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have equitable access to public space.

On the other hand, the sustainable urban planning approach has gained relevance in recent years, especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This approach promotes the idea that cities should be planned and managed in a way that public spaces contribute to environmental, social and economic sustainability. According to UN-Habitat (2019), urban planning should include the revitalization and modernization of public spaces to foster social integration and the creation of safer and more resilient communities. In this sense, the lack of structure and adequate management of public space in places with high labor informality, such as Sincelejo, can aggravate problems such as traffic congestion, lack of green areas and poor accessibility for pedestrians.

Finally, the theory of public space as a social good also highlights the importance of managing these spaces in a way that not only serves mobility and circulation, but also as places of meeting and recreation. Richard Sennett (2008) argues that public spaces should be designed to promote social interaction and strengthen the community fabric, which contributes to social cohesion and the formation of a collective identity. From this point of view, cities must invest in the creation of well-managed, safe and accessible public spaces that not only promote mobility, but also provide recreational and leisure opportunities for all sectors of the population.

This research will be developed using a qualitative methodology with a focus on public policies, structured as a case study on public space in the municipality of Sincelejo, Colombia. The objective is to describe and analyze the factors that hinder the proper use of public space in the city. To this end, information will be collected from various sources, such as public documents and records, previous studies, jurisprudence, doctrine, and consultations with the mayor's office and other local entities in charge of territorial management. In addition, surveys will be carried out on 122 residents of Sincelejo, randomly selected, in order to obtain a direct perspective on the problems they face in the use of public space. These surveys, designed with closed questions, will allow us to understand the problems from a practical approach, without quantitative measurements or comparisons with other studies. This methodology was selected for its ability to contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge of the use and management of public space in Sincelejo, contributing to the formulation of proposals that could be applied in other contexts with similar conditions.

2. Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach, with a research design focused on public policies, aimed at describing and analyzing the factors that hinder the use of public space in the municipality of Sincelejo, Colombia. The qualitative methodology allows us to understand the specific context of the municipality, through the collection of data that reveals the local dynamics in the management of public space and the barriers faced by citizens in accessing it.

Study design

The design of the study is qualitative, focused on a case analysis of the municipality of Sincelejo. The public policy approach provides a basis for identifying how regulations related to public space are implemented and how they affect the local population. The methodology focuses on collecting information both from a theoretical perspective, through public documents and records, and from a practical perspective, through citizen surveys, to capture the perceptions and experiences of residents regarding the use and access to public space.

Population

The population of interest for this study includes residents of the municipality of Sincelejo. For data collection, a sample of 122 people will be selected, chosen randomly to guarantee diversity in the answers. The sample includes citizens who interact daily with public space, including those who use it to travel, work or recreate. Random selection will be carried out without any coercion, ensuring the voluntary participation of the respondents.

Instruments

Two types of instruments will be used for data collection. First, a documentary analysis will be carried out that will include the review of public documents and records, investigative work on the management of public space, relevant jurisprudence and formal consultations with municipal authorities, such as the mayor's office and other bodies responsible for territorial organization. These documents will provide a normative and structural vision on the management of public space in Sincelejo.

Second, structured surveys with closed questions will be applied to the residents of Sincelejo. The surveys seek to obtain direct information on the perceptions and problems faced by citizens in their relationship with the public space, allowing a qualitative analysis of the responses. The purpose of these surveys is to generate a practical understanding of the problems, without quantitative measurements or comparisons with other studies.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data will be carried out using qualitative content analysis techniques, which will allow the identification of recurring patterns and themes in the responses obtained through the surveys. The responses will be grouped into categories that reflect the main problems related to the use of public space in Sincelejo, such as congestion, improper use of space by informal vendors and the perception of insecurity. Likewise, the documentary analysis will complement this information by providing a theoretical and regulatory framework that will allow the perceptions of citizens to be contrasted with the regulations in force.

3. Results

The qualitative analysis of the data obtained in the surveys and the documentary review allowed us to identify two major categories that reflect the main perceptions of citizens about the use of public space in Sincelejo: "Perception of congestion and misuse of public space" and "Satisfaction with government measures". These categories are deeply related to the regulatory framework and public policies around the management of public space in the municipality, and reveal key patterns on the challenges and opportunities to improve its use.

Category 1: Perception of congestion and misuse of public space

The first category addresses how citizens perceive congestion in key areas of the municipality, as well as the misuse of space by informal vendors and other actors. The results indicate that 47.5% of those surveyed identify the transport terminal as the point of greatest congestion in Sincelejo, followed by the Mercado Nuevo (19.7%), the entrance to the University of Sucre (16.4%), and the historic center of the municipality (13.1%). These points are perceived as areas where disorder and the occupation of public space by informal merchants hinder pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

In addition, respondents highlighted that informal commerce, especially stationary and semi-stationary, has generated inappropriate use of sidewalks, sidewalks and streets, which directly affects mobility. These findings coincide with previous studies on the relationship between the informal economy and the occupation of public space in Colombian cities (García, 2020), which suggest that the lack of spaces for the formalization of trade contributes to the uncontrolled expansion of informal activities in urban areas.

One of the most revealing aspects is the perception of insecurity associated with the disorganized occupation of public space. 62% of those surveyed said that disorder generates a feeling of insecurity, especially in the historic center and the transport terminal. This suggests that the management of public space not only affects mobility, but also citizens' perception of safety, which coincides with the literature on urban planning and urban security (Castells, 2017).

Category 2: Satisfaction with government action

The second category addresses citizens' satisfaction with the measures implemented by local authorities to manage public space. According to 72.1% of respondents, municipal interventions have been inadequate to solve the problems of congestion and misuse of space. 63.9% of citizens perceive that there have been no significant improvements in recent years, while 36.1% consider that there has been minor progress.

The main criticism of the respondents is related to the lack of state intervention to relocate informal vendors, which affects not only mobility, but also the proper use of important public areas such as parks, squares and pedestrian zones. The data suggest that the lack of effective policies has contributed to the deterioration of public space, affecting not only the resident population, but also tourism and the economic development of the municipality. Respondents also pointed to the lack of civic culture and the absence of community work as other factors that contribute to the misuse of public space.

One of the most remarkable results is that 93.4% of those surveyed support the declaration of the historic center of Sincelejo as a place of special state protection. They consider that the protection of this space would not only preserve its architectural value, but also improve its tourist attraction and generate greater control over the use of the space by informal actors. This vision is in line with the proposals of UN-Habitat (2019), which promote the protection of urban areas of historical value as a strategy to foster urban sustainability and local economic development.

The qualitative analysis also identified that a large majority of citizens (93.4%) agree with the need to design an adequate space to relocate informal vendors, which would contribute to freeing up high-traffic areas such as the transport terminal and the historic center. This relocation, however, must be accompanied by trade formalization and training programs, as indicated by 65% of respondents, who consider that informal vendors play an important economic role and, therefore, should be integrated into urban planning in an appropriate way.

Finally, respondents also underlined the need to improve the infrastructure of public spaces, such as parks and squares, which are currently perceived as non-functional or unsafe areas. The creation of green areas and recreational areas is seen as a priority to improve the quality of life of citizens and encourage greater appropriation of public space by the community.

Table 1: Synthesis of results on citizen perception of the use of public space in Sincelejo

Evaluated aspect	Percentage of respondents (%)
Points of greatest congestion	
- Transport terminal	47.5
- New Market	19.7
- Entrance to the University of Sucre	16.4
- Historic center	13.1
Perception of government measures	
- Consider measures inadequate	72.1
- Perceive significant improvements	36.1
Support for protection and relocation initiatives	
- Protection of the historic center	93.4
- Relocation of informal vendors	93.4
Need for formalization programs	65.0
Perception of insecurity associated with disorder	62.0

The table above summarizes the main findings of the surveys conducted with 122 residents of Sincelejo. The data reflect citizens' perceptions of congestion and misuse of public space, as well as their views on government measures and possible solutions.

- **Points of greatest congestion:** The transport terminal is identified by 47.5% of respondents as the most congested place, followed by the Mercado Nuevo (19.7%), the entrance to the University of Sucre (16.4%) and the historic center (13.1%). This indicates that the main nodes of mobility and informal commerce are critical areas that require intervention.
- **Perception of government measures:** 72.1% of the participants consider that the measures implemented by local authorities have been inadequate to solve problems related to public space. Only 36.1% perceive that there have been significant improvements, suggesting widespread dissatisfaction with government actions.

- Support for protection and relocation initiatives: An overwhelming majority (93.4%) support the protection of the historic center of Sincelejo, recognizing its cultural value and tourism potential. Similarly, the same percentage agrees with the relocation of informal vendors to suitable spaces, reflecting a consensus on the need to reorganize the use of public space.
- Need for formalization programs: 65% of respondents consider it essential to implement formalization and training programs for informal vendors. This demonstrates an understanding of the economic importance of these activities and the need to integrate them appropriately into urban planning.
- Perception of insecurity associated with disorder: 62% of the participants associate disorder and congestion of public space with a greater perception of insecurity. This data underlines the relationship between the management of public space and the feeling of citizen security.

The results show that congestion and misuse of public space in Sincelejo are problems perceived significantly by citizens. Dissatisfaction with current government measures indicates that the actions undertaken have not been effective in addressing these problems. The strong support for the protection of the historic center and the relocation of informal vendors suggests that there are potential solutions that have the support of the community.

The need for formalization programs reflects a concern to integrate actors in the informal economy in a way that benefits both them and society as a whole. In addition, the association between disorder and perception of insecurity indicates that improving the management of public space could have a positive impact on citizen security.

These findings point to the urgency of implementing comprehensive policies that consider not only the physical reorganization of public space, but also social and economic aspects. Citizen participation and community work emerge as key elements for the success of any initiative in this regard.

4. Discussion

The results obtained in this research reflect a series of problems related to the management of public space in Sincelejo, which coincide with previous studies on urban dynamics in cities with high labor informality. Congestion and misuse of public space by informal vendors not only impact mobility, but also generate perceptions of insecurity among residents, as pointed out by previous studies such as those by García (2020) and Castells (2017), who highlight that the lack of control over public space generates an increase in social tensions and deteriorates the quality of urban life. These authors have pointed out that informal commerce, without proper regulation, tends to grow disproportionately in critical areas of cities, such as historic centers or transport terminals, affecting access and safe use of these areas. In Sincelejo, citizens identified the transport terminal and the New Market as the most conflictive points, which reinforces this trend observed in other urban studies. In the international context, research by UN-Habitat (2019) also underlines that poor management of public space has a direct effect on the perception of

insecurity, as citizens tend to associate disorder and unplanned occupation of space with the increase in petty crime, which coincides with the perceptions of those surveyed in this study.

Regarding the implications of these results, it is evident that the municipality of Sincelejo needs to reorient its public policies towards a more inclusive and sustainable approach in the management of public space. The massive support of citizens for the protection of the historic center and the relocation of informal vendors is a clear indicator that there is a consensus on the need to reorganize these critical areas to improve mobility, safety and the image of the city. In this sense, the findings suggest that future policies should not only focus on the relocation of informal actors, but also on the formalization of these activities, offering economic alternatives and adequate spaces for the development of their work. This proposal for formalization has important implications for sustainable urban development, since the informal economy, when properly managed, can be harmoniously integrated into city planning, as authors such as De Soto (2000) have pointed out. In addition, the perception of insecurity associated with the misuse of public space underscores the importance of adopting measures that not only respond to the need for physical reorganization, but also to the creation of safe and accessible public spaces, which coincides with Henri Lefebvre's theory of the "right to the city." Along these lines, a comprehensive intervention that considers both the social inclusion of informal vendors and the revitalization of public areas could have a significant impact on the social cohesion and safety of the city.

However, this study is not without limitations. The sample of 122 respondents, although sufficient to capture important trends, cannot be considered representative of the entire population of Sincelejo. Although the results reflect widely shared perceptions, it is possible that there are significant variations in the opinion of other sectors of the population that were not included in the sample. On the other hand, the qualitative approach, although valuable for understanding local dynamics, limits the possibility of making direct comparisons with other studies or cities. A comparative study between municipalities with similar problems could provide a broader perspective and allow the identification of more general patterns in the management of public space in Colombia. In addition, this study did not fully explore the perceptions of key actors such as informal vendors and public officials in charge of space management, who play a crucial role in the implementation of urban planning policies. Including these voices could have enriched the analysis and allowed for a more complete understanding of the dynamics that affect the use of public space. Likewise, the lack of longitudinal measurements prevents evaluating the impact of the policies implemented over time, so future studies could focus on monitoring government interventions and their effectiveness in more detail.

5. Conclusions

This study has allowed us to obtain a detailed vision of the problems related to the use of public space in Sincelejo, focusing on the congestion generated by the disorganized occupation of informal vendors and the insufficient effectiveness of government measures to address this situation. The results reveal that, although there is a solid regulatory framework in Colombia that regulates the management of public space, implementation at the local level has been deficient,

especially in urban areas with high labor informality. The transport terminal, the New Market and the historic center are identified as critical points that suffer the greatest problems of inappropriate use of space, which affects both urban mobility and the perception of safety of citizens. These findings coincide with previous studies that underscore the need for comprehensive urban planning, where policies of social and economic inclusion are combined with the protection and revitalization of the most emblematic public spaces. The lack of coordination between local authorities and the poor application of current regulations has contributed to perpetuating disorder in public space, negatively affecting both the quality of life of residents and the tourist and economic attractiveness of the city.

One of the main contributions of this study is the evidence of a broad consensus among citizens regarding the need to reorganize and protect public spaces in Sincelejo, particularly in the historic center. The support of 93.4% of respondents for the relocation of informal vendors reflects the urgency of adopting policies that not only regulate the use of space, but also integrate these actors into formality, providing them with economic opportunities and an adequate space to develop their activities. This formalization approach is crucial to ensure the sustainability of any intervention in public space, as mere relocation without economic inclusion measures would only shift the problem to other areas of the city. On the other hand, the strong connection between clutter in public space and the perception of insecurity underscores the importance of developing strategies that not only aim at physical reorganization, but also at creating safer and more accessible environments. These results coincide with urban theories that highlight the need for well-managed public space to promote social cohesion, efficient mobility and citizen safety.

From a practical application perspective, the findings of this study provide a solid basis for local authorities to design more effective policies in the management of public space. First, it is essential that the measures to relocate informal vendors are accompanied by formalization and training programs that allow these actors to fully integrate into the local economy. Respondents expressed clear support for the protection of the historic centre, suggesting that the revitalisation of this space could have a positive impact on both mobility and the promotion of tourism and the regional economy. In addition, the perception of insecurity linked to the misuse of public space indicates that any intervention must include improvements in infrastructure, such as the creation of pedestrian zones and green areas, which not only facilitate transit, but also provide safe and quality spaces for citizens. Implementing urban policies that promote safety and accessibility in public space can have a multiplier effect in terms of social and economic development, strengthening the community fabric and improving the quality of life in the city.

However, this study has limitations that must be considered. The qualitative approach based on surveys of a sample of 122 citizens, although adequate to capture general perceptions, cannot be representative of the entire population of Sincelejo. Future studies could benefit from expanding the sample to include a greater diversity of voices, as well as implementing mixed methods that combine qualitative analysis with more robust quantitative data. In addition, although this study focuses on the city of Sincelejo, the results are not necessarily extrapolated to other cities with different urban and socioeconomic contexts. Comparative studies between municipalities with similar characteristics could shed light on common patterns and more generalized solutions for the management of public space in Colombia. On the other hand, the inclusion of the perceptions

of the informal vendors themselves and of the officials in charge of urban planning would have enriched the analysis, providing a more complete view of the dynamics that affect the use of public space in Sincelejo. These limitations open the door to future research that can address these gaps and offer a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach in the management of public space in Sincelejo, where not only physical interventions to reorganize congested areas are considered, but also the economic and social inclusion of the informal actors who occupy these spaces. Community participation and the protection of historic areas such as downtown Sincelejo are key elements to foster a more cohesive, safe, and attractive city, both for residents and visitors. The success of any public policy in this regard will depend on the ability of local authorities to design and implement strategies that balance the regulation of space with support for the most vulnerable sectors of the informal economy. In this way, Sincelejo could be transformed into a model of sustainable urban management, where public space fulfills its social and economic function in a more efficient and equitable way, benefiting the entire community.

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