

[Working Paper Series: 2019 MDRN Survey 3]

Parks in Yangon: Accessible Public Parks for All

Another Development

Introduction

Public parks play a key role in the quality of urban communities, with benefits affecting climate impact regulation, branding, economic development, tourism, and the character and culture of a city. Not only do parks improve a city, they also are associated with an individual's wellbeing—physically, socially, emotionally, and mentally. The prevalence of public parks has been growing in cities all around the world.

In Yangon City, public parks were included in city planning during the colonial era; however, as the city's population and industry grew, public parks were disregarded. Yangon's public parks have become targets for a number of economic activities, with land converted for infrastructure and commercial purposes. The area allocated for parks in Yangon City has been reduced, and the parks have become more difficult to access due to economic challenges.

In this paper, the term “parks” is used to refer to public parks in Yangon City under the administration of the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC). The paper aims to analyze the accessibility of public parks based on the data available. Through a literature review, we found that a number of papers used network or spatial analysis to examine park accessibility. However, this paper uses a subjective approach on time and GIS technology limitation. The term “accessibility” refers to the distribution of public parks and how they are accessible to urban residents.

Context

Global Context

In the global context, the number of public parks has increased due to their many social, environmental, and economic benefits. Research shows that parks improve general public health and enhance the psychological wellbeing of urban residents¹; provide social interaction and social cohesion, aesthetics and recreation; improve air

¹ WHO. (2016). *Urban Green Spaces and Health* (Rep.). Copenhagen: WHO regional office for Europe. Retrieved January 22, 2019, from www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/321971/Urban-green-spaces-

quality and climate regulation, groundwater recharging, air pollution filtering, etc.²; and provide fiscal benefits to municipal governments,³ creating a positive effect on residential property values.⁴

Politically, parks are also important to the promotion of a democratic society. They become a place for urban communities to conduct public meetings in the policy making process. They become a tool in enhancing social inclusiveness and cultural diversity to promote human and civil rights. Economically, urban green spaces are used in city branding. Cities with well-maintained public parks are able to attract more investment, both national and international. They also increase the surrounding property values.

On the other hand, city development requires tearing down trees and upheaving nature to build infrastructure and roads for the resident population. Additionally, rapid urbanization increases demand for commercial property and public housing, resulting in the decreased development of new public parks in city planning. In some cases, public parks have been created in the outskirts of the cities; however, they are difficult to travel to with little means of transportation.

What are parks?

Researchers define parks as open spaces that provide urban citizens with opportunities for recreation and interactions with nature. They improve the physical and mental health of individuals, strengthen urban communities, and make cities more attractive to live and work in.⁵

In Myanmar, the concept of public parks is generally viewed from an aesthetic perspective. By name, a park is a combination of different types of plants or trees in a designated area. Therefore, public parks are defined as a place or area designated for the purpose of public rest, recreation, or assembly.

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² Rakhshandehroo, Mehdi & Mohd Yusof, Mohd Johari & Mohd Tahir, Osman & Mohd YUNOS, Mohd Yazid. (2015). The Social Benefits of Urban Open Green Spaces: A Literature Review. Management Research and Practice. 7. 60-71.

³ *Environmental Fact Sheet: The Environmental Benefits of Green Spaces* [Brochure]. (n.d.). Retrieved January 22, 2019, from <https://projectevergreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/EnvironmentalBenefitsofGreenSpace.pdf>

⁴ L., Shoup, & R., Ewing. (2010). *The Economic Benefits of Open Space, Recreation Facilities and Walkable Community Design* (Rep.). New Jersey: Princeton. Retrieved January 22, 2019, from https://activelivingresearch.org/sites/activelivingresearch.org/files/Synthesis_Shoup-Ewing_March2010_0.pdf

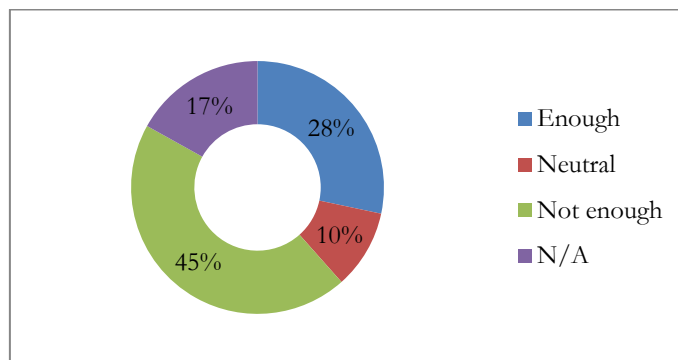
⁵ DSouza, L. V. (2012). *Public perceptions of urban community park benefits: A study in Arlington, Texas* (Unpublished master's thesis).

PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONDITIONS AND MANAGEMENT OF PARKS

Perceptions of the current conditions of parks

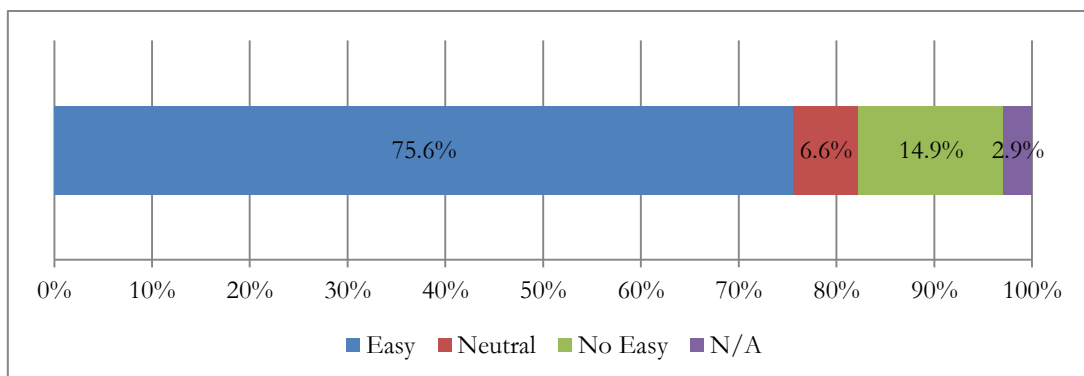
According to the MDRN survey, 45% of respondents stated there were not enough parks in Yangon City, while 28% said there were enough. When asked how easy it was to visit parks, 75% responded that it was easy to visit them, but 15% reported that it was not easy to do so. When asked about the current conditions of parks in Yangon City, 74% of respondents commented that the conditions of parks were good, while 6.4% stated that they were poor. When asked about park safety, 58% of respondents expressed that they feel safe when visiting parks, while 20% of visitors did not feel safe.

Figure 1: Perceptions of the number of public parks in Yangon City



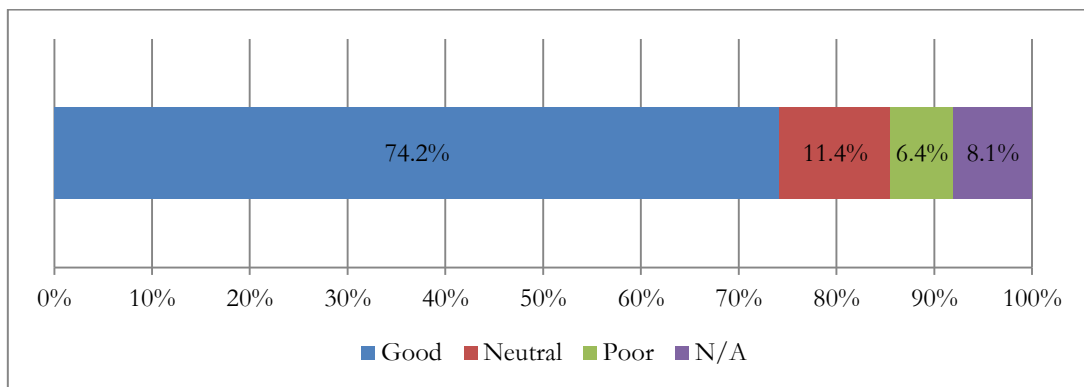
Source: MDRN Survey data, 2019

Figure 2: Perceptions of ease of visiting parks



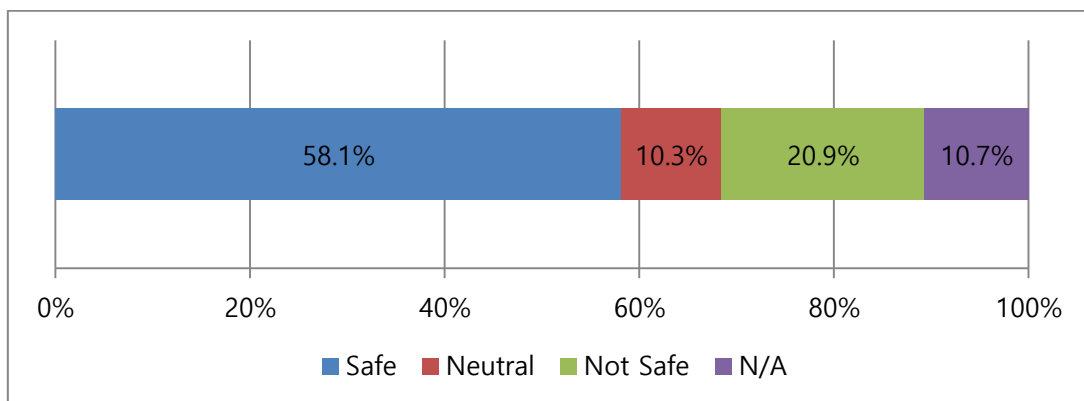
Source: MDRN Survey data, 2019

Figure 3: Perceptions of the general condition of parks



Source: MDRN Survey data, 2019

Figure 4: Perceptions of the safety of parks



Source: MDRN Survey data, 2019

Evaluations of park management by YCDC

The MDRN survey respondents were asked if they knew the organization responsible for the management of parks in Yangon. Nearly 58% of respondents stated that YCDC was responsible, while 9.2% answered the government, 8.4% reported the community and 0.6% said a private company.

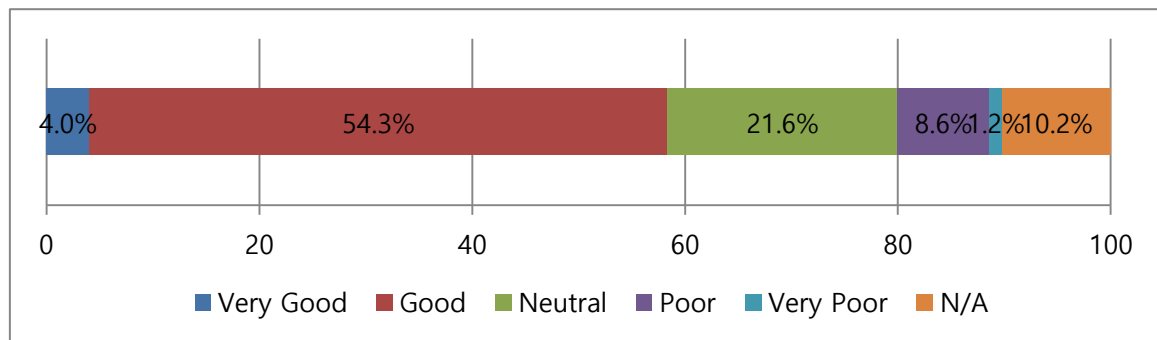
Table 1: Who is responsible for the management of parks?

Organization	Percent
YCDC	57.5%
Government	9.2%
Community	8.4%
Private Company	0.6%
Others	10.4%
N/A	13.8%
Total	100%

Source: MDRN Survey data, 2019

The survey results showed that the overall satisfaction of respondents with YCDC's park management was considerably high. Around 55% of respondents stated that YCDC's management was good and 4% reported it as very good, while 8.6% and 1.2% responded that it was poor and very poor respectively.

Figure 5: Perceptions of the current management of the parks by YCDC



Source: MDRN Survey data, 2019

RESIDENT USE OF PARKS

Reasons for and challenges of visiting parks

Over half of respondents (59%) reported they visited parks for recreation, 11% just for travel, and 17% for exercise as well as to use the playground and sporting facilities. Specifically, young people went to parks for recreation and to meet with friends, while older people came for recreation and exercise.

Table 2: Purposes of visiting parks

Purposes	Percent
Recreation	58.8%
Travel	11.4%
Exercise	10.6%
Meet friends	7.8%
Playground/Sport facilities	6.1%
Commercial	3.7%
Celebrations	1.6%
Total	100%

Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

When asked what challenges they faced in visiting parks, 59% said they did not have enough time to go. Further research might be necessary to unpack what the time limitations are on survey participants. Fifteen percent of respondents that health or old age posed a challenge to visiting parks, 8% of visitors stated they did not want to go to parks, and 7% said parks were too far to visit.

Table 3: Challenges of visiting parks

Challenges	Percent
No time	58.9%
Old Age/Health	15.3%
Don't want to go there	8.1%
Too far	7.2%
No one to go with	5.1%
Not enough money	2.5%
Crowded	1.7%
Messy	0.8%
No shady places	0.4%
Total	100%

Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

Access to Public Parks

The majority, 61% of respondents, said that they visited a park a few times per year, while 27% went monthly or two to three times a month, and 11% were daily and weekly visitors.

Table 4: How often do you visit a park?

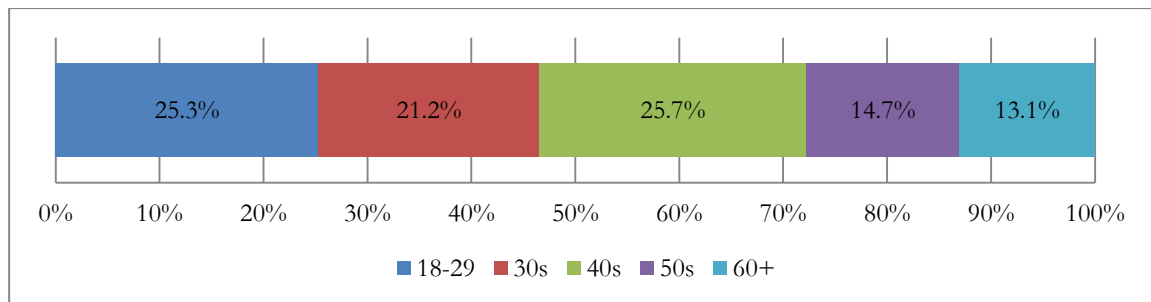
Frequency	Percent
Daily	3.3%
Weekly	8.1%
Monthly	14.6%
Twice or Thrice a month	12.6%
A few times per year	61%
Can't choose	0.4%
Total	100%

Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

There were no significant differences with regard to the gender of participants when it came to the frequency of park visitation. The survey showed that 52% visitors were male and 48% were female.

In terms of age, it was found that 26% of park users were 40-49 years old, followed by those between the ages of 18-29 (25%) and 30-39 (21%). Additionally, 13% of park users were over 60 years old.

Figure 6: Frequency of visiting public parks by age group (percent)

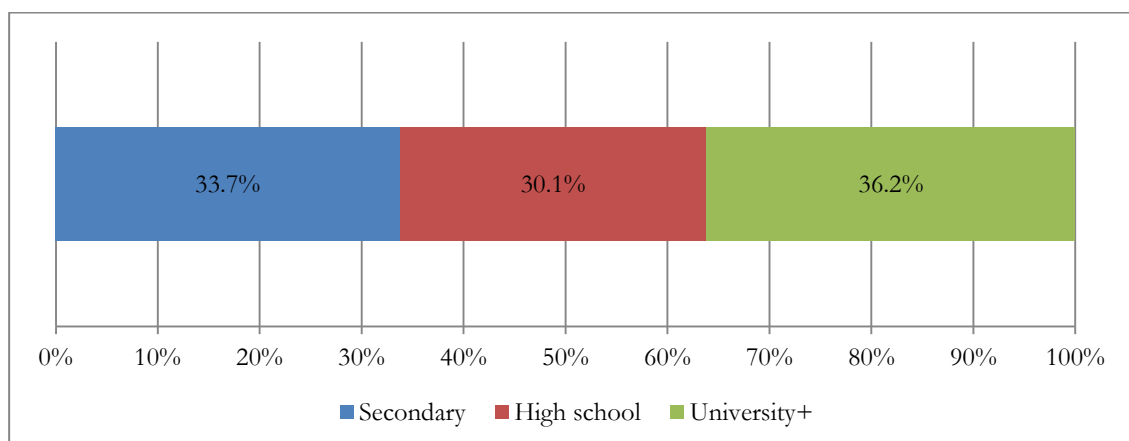


Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

No significant differences were observed in terms of the education levels of park visitors, but people with higher levels of education tended to have more access to public parks. Thirty-six percent of visitors were university graduates, followed by those who had a secondary education (34%) and those who had a high school education level (30%).

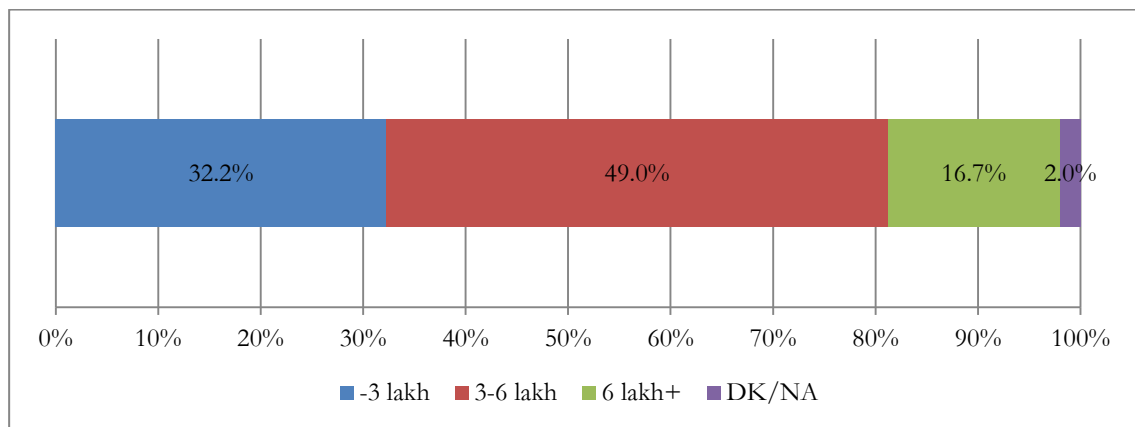
When income was considered as a factor, the survey found that 49% of park users had an income between 3-6 lakh kyat, 32% had an income of less than 3 lakh kyat, and 17% earned more than 6 lakh kyat.

Figure 7: Frequency of visiting parks by education level (percent)



Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

Figure 8: Frequency of visiting parks by income (percent)



Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

When asked about transportation to parks, more than half of respondents (55%) stated that they traveled to parks by walking or taking the bus (public transportation), while 37% drove cars or took taxis to parks. Fifty-seven percent of respondents stated that it took between half an hour and three hours to get to public parks, while 42% responded it took them less than half an hour. There was 1% of visitors who spent over three hours to visit parks.

Table 5: How do you get to the park?

Type of commute	Percent
Walking	22.8%
Bicycle	2.4%
Car	21.1%
Bus	32.1%
Train	0.8%
Taxi	15.4%
Motorcycle	3.3%
Others	2%
Total	100%

Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

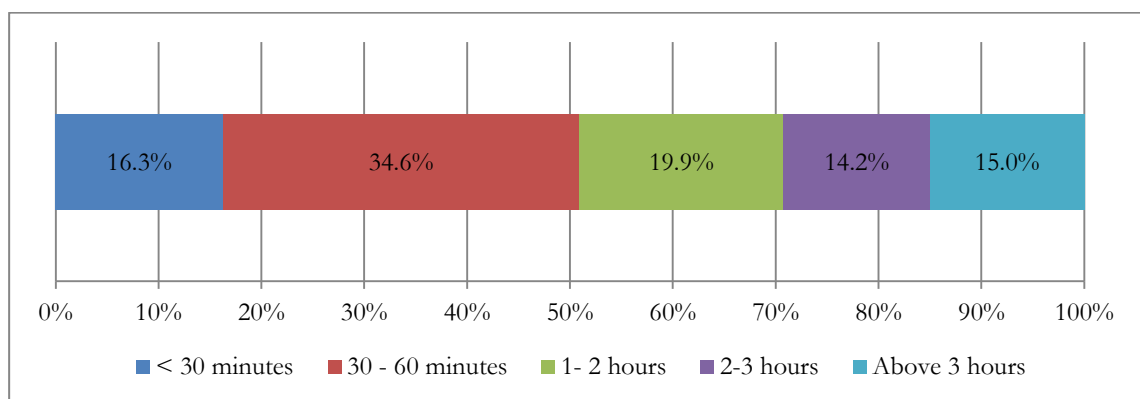
Table 6: How long does it take you to get to the park?

Duration	Percent
<30 minutes	42.3%
30- 60 minutes	33.7%
1 - 2 hours	20.7%
2 - 3 hours	2.4%
More than 3 hours	0.8%
Total	100%

Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

One third of the respondents said that they stayed in parks from 30 minutes to an hour; 20% replied they stayed from one to two hours; 16% stayed less than 30 minutes; and 15% and 14% stayed in a park for more than three hours or for two to three hours respectively.

Figure 9: How long do you stay in the park?



Source: MDRN survey data, 2019

CONCLUSION

The number of public parks in Yangon City does not meet the needs of its growing population. There is also an unequal distribution of parks among different townships. Therefore, it can be said that the existing number of public parks is insufficient to provide access to everyone. In the survey, the majority of respondents agreed with the previous statement. This can also be one of the reasons that the survey showed almost half of the total population had not visited public parks in the last three years, and the majority visited parks just a few times per year.

Access to public parks varied with age, education, and income to some extent. Those between the ages of 18-29 and 40-49 years old were found to be the main visitors of public parks. On the other hand, those who were elderly, over 60 years old, visited parks the least. University graduates and those with an income of 3-6 lakh were

more likely to visit parks than others.

Taking the bus and walking were the main forms of transportation used to visit parks by respondents. Public transportation and a walkable environment would support the accessibility of public parks in Yangon. It is worth noting that more than half of the visitors had to spend between half an hour and three hours just to get to a park.

Various age groups visited parks for different reasons. The majority of visitors came to parks for recreation; however, the younger groups also went to parks to meet up with friends and older groups went for exercise. These factors should be considered when developing new parks or redesigning existing ones. Moreover, it would be worth examining why people do not visit parks and what the underlying challenges are for them. This survey revealed a number of reasons: a) they did not have enough time to visit parks; b) they had age-related or health problems; c) they did not want to go parks; and d) parks were too far away to visit.

Finally, most people felt that it was easy and safe to go to parks and stated that the quality of parks was good. However, they demanded an increase in the number of public parks in Yangon City.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To ensure that parks are accessible to everyone, potential solutions include reducing the distance people have to travel to visit a park, increasing parklands, and accommodating the needs of elderly and disabled people. **Therefore, an overarching strategy should be developed to increase parklands.**

Strategy is an important tool for urban planning, and aims to guide long-term planning for new parks and improve access to existing parks. A comprehensive strategy should commit to:

- Protecting existing public parks and ensuring they remain open to the public to be accessible to all;
- Redesigning existing parks to be more attractive and accessible to all ages and groups;
- Seeking out opportunities to increase parklands, particularly in areas where there is little to no park space;
- Considering the needs of different social groups, such as elderly and disabled people in developing new public parks;
- Creating parklands in accessible and walkable environments close to where people live, rather than in remote areas such as the city outskirts and suburbs.

In developing a strategy, there should be a collective vision of the needs and priorities of residents as well as consideration of the value and importance of public parks to a city. ■

■ **Another Development (AD)** is a local Myanmar think-tank and a non-profit organization. The motto of the organization is “DIGNITY, PROSPERITY and COOPERATION” and the programs we anticipate rolling out in the coming five years reflect these principles. There are five themes that AD is focusing on: Human Rights, Multiculturalism, Decentralization and Federalism, Rural Economic Development and Social Enterprises, and E-government and E-citizen. AD was set up to be part of the solution to the problems and conflicts prevailing in Myanmar by advocating effective public policy change.

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