Open Public Spaces in Kozhikode: Impact Report

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1. Background

Like many rapidly urbanizing cities, Kozhikode in Kerala, India, has experienced significant urban growth in recent years. This expansion has increased the need to preserve, enhance, and create public spaces that promote health and wellbeing. Public spaces are the places in cities for social interaction, economic exchange, cultural expression, and environmental sustainability. In response to the emerging urban need to enhance public spaces, ESAF Foundation initiated the Livable Cities project in 2017 in partnership with the HealthBridge Foundation of Canada. One of the major objectives of the project was to improve the quality of cities by ensuring access for the most vulnerable to public spaces such as parks and beaches.

ESAF Foundation, in collaboration with the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT scheme (1), Kozhikode Municipal Corporation and the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), played a significant role in promoting public parks development through advocacy, technical guidance, and design recommendations. These efforts resulted in an increased budget for public spaces, which contributed to the successful completion of eight parks and three public beaches.

2. Impact

Results from the intervention included significant increases in daily footfall in the parks. Before the improvements, most parks had very low usage, typically between 5 and 80 visitors per day, with Ansari Park seeing around 300-400 users daily. After the interventions, all parks showed increased daily footfall, rising to 100-500 visitors, and in some cases, such as Ansari Park, reaching up to 3,000 users per day. Overall, this reflects a five-to twenty-fold increase in park usage across locations.
A similar pattern was observed in the beaches. Before the interventions, daily footfall ranged from 500 to 3,000 visitors. After improvements, this increased to around 8,000 visitors per day. This represents a two-to four-fold increase in the number of people accessing and enjoying these beaches.

(1) AMRUT 1.0 (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation) was a Government of India flagship scheme launched in 2015 to upgrade urban infrastructure. It targeted 500 major cities, focusing on water supply, sewerage management, storm water drainage, green spaces, and non-motorized transport to improve citizens' quality of life.

3. Understanding the Challenges

To achieve the above impacts, in 2015 ESAF conducted research across 25 beaches in Kerala to determine which facilities were available to visitors in these public spaces and the quality of those facilities. Seating and public furniture were limited, toilet facilities were inadequate and poorly maintained, and many spaces lacked proper walkways, making them difficult to use for older people, persons living with disabilities, and families with children. It was found that beaches were the least-used public spaces in Kerala and that no beaches had facilities to support people living with disabilities.

ESAF also conducted site visits to 8 parks to document existing conditions and assess their status. This situational analysis conducted in 2017 identified several gaps in the condition and use of parks. Based on these site visits, ESAF prepared an assessment report detailing the physical condition, usability, and key challenges of each park. The study found that maintenance was poor, with damaged infrastructure and non-functioning lights. Safety measures were insufficient, children's play facilities were either limited or unsafe, and waste management systems were weak. In addition, the design of many parks did not meet the needs of different user groups, which reduced their overall use and effectiveness. This report was formally submitted to the Municipal Corporation of Kozhikode to support informed decision-making. After the assessment phase, ESAF worked closely with the AMRUT project team of Kozhikode Municipal Corporation and DTPC to develop design proposals to improve and revitalise these public spaces. The design process emphasized the need to be inclusive, functional, and to meet community needs.

4. Strategy

4.1. Advocacy

To support the development of more inclusive and accessible public spaces, ESAF focused on supporting government institutions in implementing existing policies and projects related to inclusive, sustainable, and accessible urban development in Kerala. The approach emphasized collaboration with city governments, urban planners, tourism authorities, and other relevant stakeholders to strengthen the implementation of policy frameworks and improve public infrastructure. Key initiatives supported by ESAF Foundation included the *AMRUT Project of the Government of India and the Government of Kerala's Barrier-free and Accessible Kerala Tourism initiative*.

Within the AMRUT Project, ESAF identified opportunities to align its work on parks and other public spaces with the project's objectives for improving urban infrastructure and quality of life. Through consultations, technical discussions, and engagement with city governments, ESAF encouraged greater attention to accessibility, universal design, and the needs of different user groups in the planning and improvement of public spaces.

A key component of this approach was ensuring that public spaces could be used safely and independently by people with disabilities. ESAF therefore supported the implementation and strengthening of the Government of Kerala's Barrier-free and Accessible Kerala Tourism initiative by promoting universal accessibility in public and tourism destinations. This included encouraging the adoption of ramps, tactile walkways, wheelchair-friendly facilities, Braille signage, and other appropriate accessibility features. Engagement with tourism authorities, city governments, and community stakeholders reinforced the principle of "Tourism for All" and promoted accessibility as an integral part of public-space and tourism planning.

Through these policy and institutional engagements, ESAF sought to strengthen the connection between government programmes and practical improvements in public spaces, ensuring that parks, beaches, and other shared environments were more inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the needs of all users.

4.2. Partnerships

Partnerships played a central role in implementing and expanding the Livable Cities initiative in Kozhikode. ESAF worked closely with communities and government institutions to identify priorities, assess public spaces, develop recommendations, and support the implementation of more inclusive public spaces. In particular, ESAF collaborated with the AMRUT Project team of Kozhikode Municipal Corporation on assessments and design recommendations for inclusive park development across the city. These partnerships helped build government support and contributed to increased investment in public space improvements. For beach accessibility, ESAF partnered with the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), the Department of Tourism of the Government of Kerala, the Department of Port and Harbour Engineering, and the Public Works Department (PWD) to support improvements that made the beach more accessible and inclusive.

The *UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme (GPSP) Grant supported* the redevelopment of Ansari Park, enabling ESAF to implement the park as a pilot project for inclusive public space development. In addition, ESAF worked with local communities, community-based organisations, persons living with disabilities, children's groups, and civil society organisations to ensure that public space interventions reflected local needs and encouraged long-term community ownership.

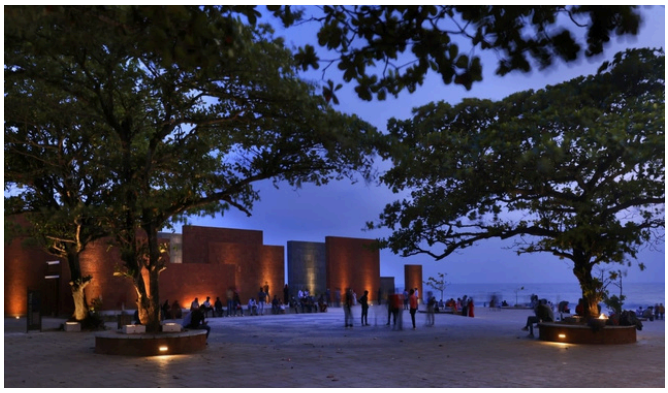
These partnerships strengthened coordination between civil society and government agencies, supported evidence-based advocacy, and enabled the scaling of inclusive public space initiatives across Kozhikode and other parts of Kerala.

4.3. Community Engagement

Community engagement served as a key strategy for advancing advocacy goals related to inclusive public spaces. ESAF strengthened participation by connecting community-based organizations and developing a Livable Cities Network that supported advocacy campaigns, awareness-building activities, and public participation processes. Through community events, consultations, clean-up drives, participatory workshops, and awareness programs, ESAF encouraged residents, children, persons living with disabilities, and local stakeholders to actively engage in discussions on accessibility, inclusion, and public space development. These activities helped generate public support, strengthen community ownership, and provide evidence-based recommendations that informed advocacy efforts with city governments and policymakers.

5. Projects

Our strategy of advocacy, community engagement, and multi-sectoral partnerships supported local action and strengthened collaboration among key stakeholders. These approaches were translated into on-the-ground projects that demonstrated how we could work collaboratively to improve public spaces, strengthen community participation, and respond to the needs of diverse urban populations.



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Project 1: Ansari Park

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With support from the *UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme,* ESAF Foundation redeveloped Ansari Park as a pilot project for inclusive public space development. Before the intervention, the park functioned as a conventional public park with limited accessibility and minimal consideration for the needs of diverse users. The redevelopment focused on improving accessibility, safety, and ease of movement for persons with disabilities, older persons, children, and other vulnerable groups.

The project introduced accessible and barrier-free walkways, seating areas, improved circulation spaces, children's play areas, and other design features that reduced physical barriers and encouraged wider public use. The park was developed as a model to demonstrate how neighbourhood public spaces can be designed to be more accessible, welcoming, and inclusive for all users.

Alongside the physical improvements, ESAF implemented a range of community engagement activities to promote people-friendly public spaces and encourage community ownership. These included “Parks for All” programs- events organised to use the park as a shared space to demonstrate inclusion, open-space art competitions, special-day observation events, park clean-up drives, participatory design workshops, capacity-building sessions, awareness activities, and public events. ESAF also facilitated child-led consultations and incorporated children's recommendations into discussions on park improvement and accessibility.

Minecraft was used as a participatory tool to help children and community members visualize, design, and share ideas for more inclusive and engaging public spaces. Through these activities, community members were able to contribute directly to the planning process and express their needs and preferences.

The project demonstrated the value of safe, accessible, and inclusive parks for people of all ages and abilities. The improved facilities increased the usability of the park while creating opportunities for recreation, social interaction, and community participation. The engagement process also strengthened dialogue between community members and local authorities on public space planning and management.

Ansari Park emerged as Kerala's first inclusive model park, showing how thoughtful design and community participation can improve the quality and public value of urban spaces while reducing physical and social barriers.

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The success and visibility of Ansari Park helped establish ESAF Foundation as a key stakeholder in advocating for inclusive and people-centred public spaces. The project demonstrated the benefits of investing in accessible public spaces and strengthened engagement with government departments and local bodies. Experience and lessons from Ansari Park informed the planning and development of other parks in Kozhikode district.

Between 2017 and 2022, the city invested over USD 334,000 in public space improvements through the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT 1.0). By 2021-2022, Kozhikode had developed eight well-maintained parks featuring inclusive walkways, adequate seating, open gyms, and children's play areas. These investments significantly improved the quality, accessibility, and usability of public spaces, creating a more welcoming urban environment for residents of all age groups.

Project 2 : Inclusive Beach Development

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In 2017, ESAF Foundation launched its first 'Beach for All' Campaign in Kochi (Ernakulam District, Kerala) to demonstrate the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in accessing public beaches and to advocate for inclusive infrastructure improvements. The campaign adopted a participatory approach by involving persons living with disabilities, local communities, civil society groups, and government representatives in activities that showcased the possibilities of accessible beach design.

Building on the success of the campaign, ESAF implemented inclusive beach development initiatives in Kozhikode district. These included beach clean-up drives, coastal marathons, awareness campaigns, stakeholder consultations, public engagement programs, the dissemination of inclusive beach development manuals and the ESAF Handbook for creating barrier-free infrastructure in public and tourism spaces. ESAF also organized the 'Beach for All' campaign at Gotheeswaram Beach, which marked the first organized public activity at the site. The initiative introduced the beach as a shared public space and encouraged residents to recognize its social, environmental, and recreational value.

Activities were carried out at Gotheeswaram Beach and Beypore Beach in Kozhikode district to demonstrate how beaches could be redesigned to accommodate users with diverse mobility needs through accessible pathways, barrier-free movement, improved public amenities, and inclusive infrastructure. ESAF also provided technical support to the Department of Tourism of the Government of Kerala as part of the State's *Barrier-free and Accessible Kerala Tourism* initiative for improving accessibility at beach destinations across Kerala.

Government action also extended to developing accessible beaches and inclusive tourism initiatives. Public events and community engagement activities organized at Gotheeswaram Beach generated strong public interest and highlighted the potential of the beach as an inclusive public space. Following this, government authorities approved approximately USD 50,000 for infrastructure improvements. Planned interventions included barrier-free walkways, ramps for persons with limited mobility, play areas for children, accessible toilets, and organized parking facilities.

To support government implementation, ESAF facilitated a series of consultations and meetings with stakeholders to emphasize the importance of inclusive public spaces. These discussions resulted in practical recommendations related to accessibility, infrastructure improvements, safety measures, and essential public services. Community events were also organised to increase awareness and encourage local participation in the planning process. This approach strengthened community ownership and ensured that local needs and priorities were reflected in development plans.

The initiative was implemented in collaboration with several government departments and institutions, including the *District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), Kozhikode Municipal Corporation, the Department of Port and Harbour Engineering (Government of Kerala), the Public Works Department (PWD),* and the Hi-TIDE Project under the Member of the Legislative Assembly of Beypore constituency.

Parallel improvements were also carried out at other beaches under the Barrier-free and Accessible Kerala Tourism Project of the Department of Tourism of Govt. of Kerala. At Kozhikode Beach, infrastructure improvements were implemented by the Kozhikode Municipal Corporation between 2019 and 2023 with an investment of around USD 40,000.

At Kappad Beach, the Chemanchery Grama Panchayat (Local Self-Government Institution) implemented the first phase of infrastructure improvements during 2021-2022, with an allocation of approximately USD 100,000. Building on this progress, the Government of Kerala granted Administrative Sanction during 2025-2026 for an additional allocation of approximately USD 400,000 to initiate the second phase of development. At Bhatt Road Beach, the Kozhikode Municipal Corporation implemented accessibility improvements during 2021-2022, with an investment of approximately USD 100,000.

Together, these interventions contributed to creating more inclusive, accessible, and environmentally responsible public spaces across the region. ESAF's policy-level advocacy played an important role in influencing the state government to allocate resources for strengthening infrastructure at Kappad Beach.

These efforts also contributed to *Kappad Beach becoming the first beach in Kerala to receive the prestigious Blue Flag Certification,* recognising its commitment to environmental sustainability, accessibility, safety, and responsible beach management.

Building on these experiences, the Beach for All campaign was expanded to identify and improve lesser-known beaches in the region. The campaign aimed to expand inclusive public spaces beyond major tourist locations and promote future beach development that remained community-oriented, accessible to all users, and environmentally sustainable.

Since 2017, approximately 8,000 people have participated in Beach for All campaign activities, including 3,795 persons with disabilities. The campaign helped raise awareness among policymakers and contributed to the establishment of accessible beaches through Kerala's Barrier-free and Accessible Kerala Tourism Project, strengthening support for inclusive development across the state.

6. Conclusion

By combining community participation with government support, the project helped improve parks and beaches, making them more accessible, safe, and active. Increased use of these spaces shows that when public spaces are well-designed and maintained, people respond positively. The work also highlights the importance of listening to community needs and involving local groups in planning and upkeep. Partnerships with government agencies played a key role in scaling these efforts and securing long-term investments. While challenges remain, especially in ensuring full inclusion, the progress made provides a strong foundation for future work.

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TRANSFORMING PUBLIC SPACES IN KOZHIKODE

Making Parks and Beaches Accessible, Inclusive and Livable for All

1. EXPANDED REACH AND USE

More people are using and living closer to improved public spaces.

8,000 – 30,000
people live within 2 km of the 8 parks and 4 beaches

PARKS (Per week)

BEFORE REDEVELOPMENT		AFTER IMPROVEMENTS
300 – 800 visitors	→	4,000 – 15,000 visitors

BEACHES (Per week)

BEFORE REDEVELOPMENT		AFTER IMPROVEMENTS
3,000 – 5,000 visitors	→	10,000 – 40,000 visitors

2. HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The redevelopment of parks with walking paths, open gyms and accessible infrastructure has encouraged children, adults, older persons and persons with disabilities to walk, exercise and spend more time outdoors.

Accessible beach walkways and outdoor fitness facilities have similarly promoted active recreation and healthier lifestyles.

3. INCLUSION AND REDUCED DISCRIMINATION

Wheelchair-accessible pathways, ramps, inclusive seating and open gyms have enabled persons with disabilities to participate more fully in recreation and community life while benefiting families, older persons and other users.

57,777+
registered persons with disabilities in Kozhikode district can potentially benefit, in addition to other residents and visitors.

4. REDUCING SPATIAL INEQUALITY

By redeveloping eight previously underutilized parks across different neighbourhoods, the project has expanded equitable access to quality public spaces and reduced geographic disparities in recreational infrastructure through universal design features.

5. EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Accessible parks and beaches have strengthened the independence and confidence of persons with disabilities while creating safer environments for all users.

1,200
persons with disabilities engaged

700
women engaged through community groups

2,500
school children engaged