

Building better cities with children and youth

SUMMARY: Half the world's children now live in urban areas – and the most pervasive violations of their rights are related to their living conditions. But this has not been a priority on the agendas of local governments, international agencies or organizations focused on children's welfare. Small children in poor urban areas are at especially high risk in terms of their health and survival. This Brief focuses more specifically on older children and youth who face limited opportunities for constructive engagement in their own communities, and who are often viewed by the adult world with the kind of suspicion and hostility that is often directed at minority sub-cultures. Children and youth have a right to a voice in matters that concern them; they are experts on their own environments, well placed to identify the problems that concern them and the solutions that best address these concerns.

There are precedents to show how to do better: mainstreaming attention to children's needs into the routine practices of local governments; giving greater attention to children's own perceptions; and drawing on the proven energy and creativity of children and young people to contribute to making their cities better places. This Brief has details of precedents that include:

- Evaluations by children of their own urban neighbourhoods and how they could be improved; these also show how urban neighbourhoods can provide a richer and more supportive environment for children in low- and middle-income nations (with examples from Buenos Aires and Bangalore) than in high-income nations (with an example from Melbourne).
- An initiative in Johannesburg, where children evaluated their environment and reported on their needs and priorities to city authorities, and a municipal authority in Brazil (Barra Mansa) that fully involved children in city government and in participatory budgeting.
- Programmes in the Philippines and in Brazil that successfully encouraged local governments to better address the needs and priorities of children.
- Child-friendly city programmes in many nations and the legal, institutional, budgetary and planning measures that underpin them. Assessments of these experiences by children were generally positive, although they find that city administrators can be unreliable in implementing their promises and often retain control of processes where children had expected more autonomy.

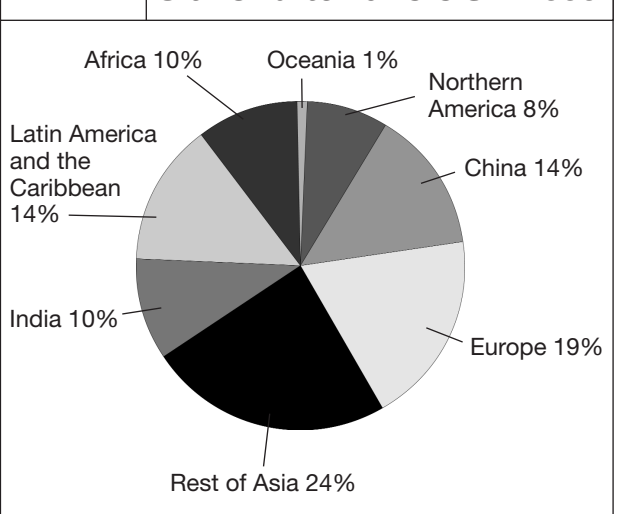
These precedents also show how children's participation becomes not only an objective in its own right but also a practical instrument for creating better cities.

I. INTRODUCTION

HALF THE WORLD'S children now live in urban centres. Most live in low- and middle-income nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, since these regions now have most of the world's urban population – see Figure 1. In most cities in these regions, 40–50 per cent of the population are under 18 years of age.⁽¹⁾ Yet political systems and bureaucratic structures fail to ensure that their needs are adequately met and that their priorities influence political processes. This is especially the case for the hundreds of millions of urban children who live in poverty, in living conditions that threaten their health, safety, confidence and prospects for the future.

1. UNICEF (2002), *Poverty and Exclusion Among Urban Children*, Innocenti Digest 10, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy.

Figure 1: The distribution of the world's 3 billion urban dwellers in 2000



This is a Brief of the October 2002 issue of the journal *Environment&Urbanization*, which was on the theme of **Building Better Cities with Children and Youth**. It draws on the papers in this issue (which are listed on the back page, along with details of how to obtain the issue or obtain copies of individual papers electronically). This summary, produced with support from the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID), is to allow the journal's main findings to reach a wider audience.

2. See, for instance, a recently published assessment of the deficiencies in provision for water and sanitation in urban areas: UN-Habitat (2003), *Water and Sanitation in the World's Cities; Local Action for Global Goals*, Earthscan Publications, London, 274 pages.

3. See, for instance, the example of Porto Alegre described in the paper by Rualdo Menegat listed on the back page; also Hardoy, Jorge E, Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite (2001), *Environmental Problems in an Urbanizing World*, Earthscan, London.

4. See reference 1; also see reference 3, Hardoy, Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2001).

5. See, for instance, the example of Barra Mansa described in Box 2. For more details on what urban governments are doing or can do for children, see Bartlett, Sheridan, Roger Hart, David Satterthwaite, Ximena de la Barra and Alfredo Missair (1999), *Cities for Children: Children's Rights, Poverty and Urban Management*, Earthscan, London, 305 pages.

6. Only Somalia and the USA have failed to ratify the Convention, making it the most widely accepted international treaty in existence.

7. Articles 12, 13, 14, 15 and 31.

8. This network is currently coordinated by a Secretariat at UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence. The Secretariat serves as a clearing house for relevant experiences and information, and works at identifying and promoting the factors that make a city child-friendly.

9. See the papers by Louise Chawla and by Jill Swart Kruger with Louise Chawla listed on the back page.

10. See the chapter by Nilda Cosco and Robin Moore in Louise Chawla (editor) (2001), *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*, Earthscan Publications and UNESCO Publishing, London and Sterling VA, 254 pages.

11. Driskell, David, Kanchan Bannerjee and Louise Chawla (2001), "Rhetoric, reality and resilience: overcoming obstacles to young people's participation in development", *Environment & Urbanization* Vol 13, No 1, pages 77-89 (which can be accessed at no charge at <http://www.ingentaselect.com/09562478/v13n1/>).

12. See the paper by Asociación Arte y Cultura (ASOARTE), Asociación Mision Mixta (AMM),

Urban areas are assumed by most development specialists to benefit from "urban bias" in government policies and investments, but there is little evidence of any bias benefiting low-income urban groups in most nations.⁽²⁾ Urban areas have potential "urban advantages", such as above-average per capita incomes and economies of scale and proximity, that make it cheaper to reach their inhabitants with good-quality provision for water, sanitation, drainage, health care, schools, day care and emergency services.⁽³⁾ So it should be easier and cheaper to serve children's needs in urban areas and to get cost-recovery. But this potential "urban advantage" becomes an urban disadvantage without effective, responsive local governance to ensure that infrastructure and services are available. Concentrating people and their wastes into cities, without provision for water, sanitation, drainage, garbage collection and health care, makes these among the world's most threatening environments, especially for children who are more vulnerable to most of the health risks from accidents and infectious and parasitic diseases.⁽⁴⁾

Attitudes towards children both in terms of their needs and their rights are changing. Many city governments are experimenting with ways to more fully involve children in governance issues – in their schools and neighbourhoods and even in city government.⁽⁵⁾ Much of this has been stimulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, and almost universally ratified since then.⁽⁶⁾ The Convention emphasizes protection and provision for children to ensure their survival and healthy development. But it also stresses the rights of children to inclusion and acceptance, and to a voice in defining and responding to the issues that concern them.⁽⁷⁾ Children are presented in the Convention not simply as a group in need of care, but as fellow citizens.

There have been efforts all over the world to take this new vision of childhood on board and to work with its implications. Two of the more far-reaching initiatives for urban areas have been the Child-Friendly Cities movement, a loose network of cities with governments committed to making them better places for children and to involving children in this process;⁽⁸⁾ and the Growing Up in Cities programme that has supported children in low-income urban neighbourhoods all over the world to assess their local environments and to work with local officials to improve them.⁽⁹⁾ Both initiatives have responded to the premise that children have strong feelings about their relationship to their local environments, as well as the capacity to work constructively with adults to improve their surroundings.

II. ACCESS, SAFETY AND INCLUSION

CHILDREN IN ALL nations express a powerful desire for inclusion in the life of their communities. Many urban neighbourhoods provide a rich and supportive environment for children. Researchers in Boca Barracas in Buenos Aires, Argentina, found that children there felt welcome and safe on the sidewalks and in the plazas and cafes of their neighbourhoods despite poverty and rundown surroundings.⁽¹⁰⁾ Children in the low-income self-built settlement of Sathyanagar, on the periphery of Bangalore, had a variety of spaces where they could gather to play or to participate in community activities where, despite the poor quality of the built environment, the children felt safe and had rich and diverse social lives.⁽¹¹⁾ But many urban children feel isolated and excluded. Traffic, hazardous surroundings, social fears, violence, inadequate transport, an absence of public space and facilities, and a general lack of interest and concern about their priorities all conspire to make many cities unfriendly places for children and young people.⁽¹²⁾ Box 1 reports on what children identified as the positive and negative aspects of their neighbourhoods in Johannesburg.

The informal opportunities for play and socializing do not generally improve as cities become more "developed". In Melbourne, Australia, for instance, young people are regulated by curfews and restrictions, and are often treated as intruders in public space.⁽¹³⁾ As in many other countries, young people are viewed by the adult world with the kind of suspicion and hostility that is often directed at minority sub-cultures – an expression of the human tendency for intolerance and moral censure of "the other". When the implications of these problems for young people are addressed, the most common solutions involve either segregated "special places" or a process of negotiation about the use of common space that can have positive outcomes but that implicitly suggests a lesser right to the public domain for those who are not yet adults.

This kind of "segregation" is not unique to older children and adolescents. For instance, in New York, there is a long-standing trend to "contain" younger children within playgrounds, essentially separating them from the social life of their communities with the rationale that this will keep them safe from physical dangers and bad influences.⁽¹⁴⁾ Children have always resisted this trend, expressing in various ways their preference for spontaneous play close to home and the everyday life of family and neighbours. Playgrounds can be integral parts of the urban fabric, responsive to children's needs; but too often they substitute a narrow range of physical activity for the diversity and flexibility that children more naturally crave. Children's integration into neighbourhood life is

Box 1: Children speak out on local conditions in Johannesburg

Groups of children aged 10–14 from four low-income neighbourhoods in Johannesburg worked together during a school break to evaluate their settlements and develop recommendations for city authorities. The children drew images of their daily routines and of themselves in various settings (home, school, neighbourhood). They used green stickers to show favoured places and red ones to indicate problem areas. Following transect walks, the children located their homes on a formal map. Boys and girls met separately to identify and prioritize problem areas and came together to share findings. Children worked in pairs to draw proposed solutions to problems on cards that were then stuck on the map. They then prioritized area improvements by voting with stickers.

The children felt seriously restricted by their threatening surroundings. They are harassed on public transport and frightened by drunks on the street. They take their chances on busy streets with no working traffic signals or proper sidewalks, and in parks filled with drug users. Open space is commonly taken over by adults engaged in illicit activities. All the children speak of their anxiety about using public space and the girls stress their fear of rape. Even when there is adequate provision of the kind of green open space children enjoy, this does not necessarily mean they will feel safe enough to use it. These children make it clear that they cherish informally “found” places in their local neighbourhoods rather than the purpose-built settings provided by adults. In a Soweto neighbourhood, for instance, they love to gather and play on a stretch of green lawn by a garage near a busy intersection. When asked for their recommendations, these children talked about improving and protecting existing areas where they played, removing litter, slowing traffic with speed bumps, policing public areas and installing street lights – rather than creating special separate facilities for play and recreation.

SOURCE: Swart Kruger, Jill with Louise Chawla (2002), “We know something someone doesn’t know ... children speak out on local conditions in Johannesburg”, *Environment&Urbanization* Vol 14, No 2, pages 85–96.

Fundación Grupo Experimental de Alternativas Culturales (GEAC) and Asociación Mujeres Activas por un Futuro Mejor (MAFUM) listed on the back page.

13. See the paper by Karen Malone listed on the back page.

14. See the paper by Roger Hart listed on the back page.

15. See the paper by Roger Hart listed on the back page.

16. See the paper by Gillian Mann listed on the back page.

17. See the paper by Margaret Shaw and Lullu Tschiwula listed on the back page.

18. See the paper by Asociación Arte y Cultura (ASOARTE), Asociación Mision Mixta (AMM); Fundación Grupo Experimental de Alternativas Culturales (GEAC); and Asociación Mujeres Activas por un Futuro Mejor (MAFUM) listed on the back page.

19. See the paper by Louise Chawla listed on the back page for an overview of children’s right to participation, especially as it pertains to community development and the planning of the local environment. This provides a rationale for children’s involvement and some basic principles for making it work.

20. See the paper by Louise Chawla listed on the back page.

21. See, for instance, the papers by Jill Swart Kruger with Louise Chawla, by Louise Chawla and by Eliana Riggio listed on the back page.

22. See the paper by Mary Racelis and Angela Desirée M Aguirre listed on the back page.

fundamental to the development of a democratic civil society. When formal provision becomes the solution to all of their play needs, there is an implicit danger that this kind of integration will be undermined.⁽¹⁵⁾

Another cause for insecurity and exclusion from the public domain is the situation of children belonging to marginalized minority groups. For instance, Congolese refugee children living in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, live lives filled with anxiety.⁽¹⁶⁾ To avoid being confined to refugee camps, most must conceal their identity. Even when legally resident, they often face discrimination and harassment. Children say they never feel completely at ease. They are burdened by the worries of their parents, mocked at school and in public by those who guess they are Congolese, and isolated from any kind of community life. “Home” is a distant place that many of them have never seen, yet there is little hope of real integration in their current setting. Their exclusion and anxiety results in a *circumscribed sense of personal and political identity*.

If young people are at high risk of victimization in some urban environments, they are also those most frequently involved in delinquent behaviour. Certain factors put children at risk of offending – among them, poverty, a poor environment and a lack of facilities and opportunities.⁽¹⁷⁾ Children who have been victimized themselves are more likely to victimize others, and children denied a sense of belonging and opportunity within their communities are more likely to seek these within the smaller social world of the youth gang. Research conducted by four youth groups in Cali, Colombia, finds that, in the absence of parks, recreational spaces and constructive opportunities within the community, the street becomes the most important locality for young people to interact and hang out, often as gang members.⁽¹⁸⁾

III. PARTICIPATION

THERE IS GROWING recognition of the importance of involving children in assessing their environment and identifying how their neighbourhoods might be improved. Children have a right to a voice in matters that concern them. They are also experts on their own environments, well placed to identify the problems that concern them and the solutions that best address these concerns. “Having a voice” can take many forms, from the chance simply to describe the realities of their own lives to actually being involved in practical decision-making and planning.⁽¹⁹⁾

At least in international agreements, governments recognize children’s right to participation – as in the relevant articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Agenda 21 and the Habitat Agenda.⁽²⁰⁾ These all reflect an agreement that *children and youth are not only a population with special needs but also one with special energies and insights that they can bring to the process of human settlements development*. But even when children are consulted and given the chance to identify problems, they can seldom make changes on their own. There have to be processes and mechanisms that institutionalize their inclusion as part of routine practice.⁽²¹⁾ In this way, their participation becomes not only an objective in its own right but also a practical instrument for creating better cities.

Often, only lip service is paid to the value of participation, and the attention given to children’s involvement can be superficial at best. Programmes in five “child-friendly” cities in the Philippines, for instance, have stimulated local governments to become far more active partners on behalf of children; but community views and voices – those of both children and adults – are generally still missing in these processes.⁽²²⁾ Most officials pay only token attention to their young constituents and

Box 2: Involving children in local government; the example of Barra Mansa

In the city of Barra Mansa, more than 6,000 children have been involved in discussions and assemblies about how to improve their city. Children and youth take part in neighbourhood assemblies where they debate the most pressing issues and elect district delegates. The district delegates meet in a municipal assembly and elect 36 children (18 boys and 18 girls) to be child councillors. All children aged between 9 and 15 can participate, nominate candidates and vote in the assemblies, but only those who attend school are eligible for election. Children younger than 9 or older than 15 may participate in the process but are not eligible to vote or to be elected.

The children's council manages an annual budget of US\$ 125,000 for investment in public works and services based on the priorities of the children and teenagers who take part in the assemblies. The council meets regularly, weighs up child priorities for improvement in various parts of the city, allocates funds and follows the chosen projects through implementation, dealing with the often frustrating realities of local bureaucracy. Projects undertaken have included repairs to schools and school equipment, tree-planting, repairs to drains and sewers, and better security in low-income areas. At one school, a new all-weather sports surface was installed; in another neighbourhood, lighting was put into a tunnel where children often play in the evenings. These investments improve neighbourhood quality in response to children's priorities but also provide children – both those elected and those who meet to discuss their concerns – with a genuine chance to apprentice in the skills of active citizenship.

SOURCE: Guerra, Eliana (2002), "Citizenship knows no age; children's participation in the governance and municipal budget of Barra Mansa, Brazil", *Environment&Urbanization* Vol 14, No 2, pages 71–84.

23. See the paper by Mary Racelis and Angela Desirée M Aguirre listed on the back page.

24. See the paper by Marco Corsi listed on the back page.

25. See the paper by Alberto Minujin, Jan Vandemoortele and Enrique Delamonica listed on the back page.

26. See the paper by Alberto Minujin, Jan Vandemoortele and Enrique Delamonica listed on the back page.

27. Many examples are given of such programmes in the paper by Eliana Riggio listed on the back page; see also <http://www.childfriendlycities.org>

28. See the paper by Mary Racelis and Angela Desirée M Aguirre listed on the back page.

shrug off advocacy for children as not requiring their special attention.⁽²³⁾ But there are examples of how effectively children can respond when there are real channels to include them, as shown by the involvement of children in local government in Barra Mansa – see Box 2.

Child-Friendly City initiatives in a number of Italian cities have actively involved children in planning and decision-making.⁽²⁴⁾ Projects have focused on the management of green areas, the establishment of cycle routes and pedestrian streets, and the rehabilitation of public space. Children have been involved, sometimes through their schools, sometimes through design workshops, sometimes through formally established channels within local government. Assessments of these experiences by children were generally positive, although many children also expressed disappointment and scepticism. They pointed to the unreliability of city administrators in implementing their promises and the tendency of adults to retain control of processes where children had expected more autonomy. Some children acknowledged that their own ideas and expectations had been unrealistic, but many felt their contribution was not taken seriously by adults. Routine and on-going negotiation between groups of children, their facilitators and city personnel is needed to maintain a shared understanding at all steps along the way.

IV. BROADER RESPONSES TO URBAN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

ENSURING THE NEEDS of children are met requires more than special children's programmes. Many of the investments and services that "make a difference" for children are the responsibility of national or state/provincial authorities, not city authorities. Most governments still use definitions of poverty that fail to capture many of the deprivations suffered by low-income groups.⁽²⁵⁾ Economic growth does not necessarily reduce either monetary or non-monetary aspects of poverty. Investment in children can be the most effective route to eradicating poverty, representing as it does a long-term investment in potential that can easily be lost.⁽²⁶⁾

Success in providing more effectively for urban children is clearly anchored in political will on the part of local government and in an explicit commitment to the kinds of changes that make it possible to address children as a priority. There is now sufficient experience with Child-Friendly City initiatives to be able to identify the institutional, legal and budgetary measures that have been most effective in making cities work for children.⁽²⁷⁾

In Child-Friendly City programmes in the Philippines, provision for children in a number of low-income neighbourhoods focused on 24 specific goals relating to reasonable levels of health, nutrition, education and protection.⁽²⁸⁾ City authorities were encouraged to allocate resources for children's needs, to gear local institutions to serve children better, to work on convergent service delivery, and to improve the capacities of families to support their children. An award system encouraged political will and the ability to deliver services. There were undoubted successes but also shortcomings in most of the settlements, as seen through community eyes, because the programmes were still top-down and had a limited reach. Only in one city (Cebu) were there high levels of community participation.

UNICEF's Municipal Seal of Approval project in the state of Ceará (Brazil) also used an award

29. See the paper by Patricio Fuentes and Reiko Niimi listed on the back page.

to stimulate improved performance by over 100 municipal authorities on a number of child-related indicators. Results have included a 35 per cent decrease in infant mortality in those aged over five, a 50 per cent decline in child malnutrition, and improved school attendance and health care. Major emphasis was placed on communicating results to the public in accessible and involving ways. In turn, increased public awareness and expectations contributed to better accountability and performance at the municipal level. This initiative is a reminder that there are many effective routes to constructive development, and no one recipe for ensuring children's rights.⁽²⁹⁾

V. CONCLUSIONS

THE MOST PERVASIVE violations of children's rights worldwide are related to their living conditions. But attention to the challenging environments of urban children has not been a priority on the agendas of either local governments, international agencies or organizations focused on children's welfare. This critical concern tends to fall between the cracks. Organizations and agencies that focus on children respond more often with social services and interventions, and organizations that deal with the material aspects of urban life generally have little awareness of the needs and priorities of children and young people.

But there are precedents for alternative approaches, as illustrated by the examples given in this Brief, that:

- mainstream attention to children's needs into the routine practices of local governments;
- give greater attention to children's own perceptions of their situation; and
- draw on the proven energy and creativity of children and young people to contribute to making their cities better places for everyone.

FURTHER READING

See the issue of *Environment&Urbanization* on which this Brief is based; see details below on how to order a copy.

Bartlett, Sheridan, Roger Hart, David Satterthwaite, Ximena de la Barra and Alfredo Missair (1999), *Cities for Children: Children's Rights, Poverty and Urban Management*, Earthscan, London, 305 pages.

Chawla, Louise (editor) (2002), *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*, Earthscan Publications and UNESCO Publishing, London and Sterling VA, 254 pages.

Driskell, David in collaboration with members of the Growing Up in Cities Project (2002), *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth: A Manual for Participation*, Earthscan Publications, London.

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Street life: youth, culture and competing uses of public space – Karen Malone

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