



Young people,

PARTICIPATION, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
IN AN URBANIZING WORLD



UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

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Young people, Participation, and Sustainable Development in an Urbanizing World

A Working Paper

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Cover photos: Top, In Afghanistan, young people have positively participated in the Reconstruction Process. © UN-Habitat.

From left to right: For majority of young people, employment may not necessarily provide an income sufficient to cover basic necessities, Bangkok, Thailand. © Worldbank. Equipping youth with necessary skills helps them improve their access to livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan. © UN-Habitat. © UN-Habitat. Youth trainees construct the Moonbeam Youth Training Centre, Mavoko, Kenya. © UN-Habitat. Young people's access to education is the most tool achieving sustainable human development in Tetouan, Morocco. © Alessandro Scotti/UN-Habitat

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1. Introduction

Nearly half of the people in the developing world and 30% worldwide are under 25 years of age. One in five people is between 15 and 24 years old (United Nations 2004). It is estimated that 80% of global youth live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (UN-Habitat 2010). However, there is a stark disparity in their geographical distribution within and between continents, regions, and countries as well as between rural and urban areas. Young people are the core of a nation's future, yet this significant stakeholder is rarely involved in poverty reduction strategies, environmental planning, and sustainable urban development. Despite the momentum in the rhetoric on youth activism for positive social change, little regard is given to the views, opinions, needs, and perspectives of young people. In drawing attention to the relative neglect of young people in the 2006 World Urban Forum in Vancouver, Canada, Chawla, Bartlett, Driskell, Hart, and Olofsson (2006) noted that of the total of over 162 panels devoted to urban issues, only a handful of networking sessions explicitly focused on young people and their urban environments. Youth, on the other hand, were well represented, with over 500 young men and women from 52 different countries. The implication of this missing population in addressing issues of sustainable development is dire (Chawla et al., 2006).

Projects in urban development rarely reflect the manifold ways in which youth interact with and make active contributions to the communities in which they live. The role young people play, or might play, in sustainable urban development is yet to receive scholarly and policy attention. Urban development projects make few references



BELOW: Young people's access to education is the most tool achieving sustainable human development in Tetouan, Morocco.
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to youth that go beyond descriptions of child-oriented projects such as schools, day care centres, and playgrounds (Simpson, 1997). To mainstream the concerns, interests, and perspectives of youth in development—more specifically, sustainable socio-economic development—beyond mere acknowledgement of their needs remains a formidable challenge (Frank 2006; Chawla et al., 2006).

Recent decades saw movements towards incorporating young people's particular needs in urban development and planning. These movements are reflected in, among other things, the acknowledgement of children's rights by the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul in 1996. The launch of Children's Rights and Habitat (UN-Habitat, 1996) and the UNICEF Child-friendly Cities initiative are also important cornerstones. Although the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) does not directly refer to urban youth, it is an important framework within which states and international organizations operate. The UNCRC implicitly shapes many programs and activities that impact youth in cities. The recent recognition of urban youth as subjects of research is also the outcome of the remarkable growth in academic interest in children and youth in development contexts, and the body of academic research that intersects youth with policy issues is expanding (Chawla, 2002a; Chawla, 2002b; Chawla et al., 2006).

The needs of children and youth, particularly with regards to their living environment, have to be taken fully into account. Special attention needs to be paid to the participatory processes dealing with the shaping of cities, towns and neighborhoods; this is in order to secure the living conditions of children and of youth and to make use of their insights, creativity and thought on their environment. (UNHCS, 1996).

Young people in different parts of the world are impacted by and respond to complex processes of urbanization and its challenges: shortage of housing, inner city decay, urban sprawl, environmental degradation, inadequate infrastructure and utilities, inadequate health and educational services, increasing unemployment, and poverty (Chawla 2002a; Hansen et al., 2008; Yitbarek, 2008; Mahitome, 2008). The challenges they face in trying to establish a decent way of living are perpetuated by what is commonly called 'development-induced displacement' (see UN-Habitat 2005; Pankhurst & Piguët, 2009). For instance, urban renewal and slum upgrading projects in many parts of the global south continue to dispossess poor urban dwellers of inner-city landholdings (Yitbarek 2008). Relocation of inhabitants because of revanchist urban development policies, expansion of business district, and middle class condominium housing are all too common (Swanson 2007; Langevang 2008).

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