



A BETTER CHILDHOOD IN THE CITY

INTRODUCTION



Photo: David Isaksson/Global Reporting

We live in a rapidly urbanizing world. In 1981, for example, only 10 percent of Tanzania's population lived in urban areas; in 2002 this figure had risen to 35 percent and it is estimated to reach 50 percent in 2015. In many countries children and young people constitute half the population, and they need to be involved in how their surroundings are shaped.

In May 2006 the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida, and Save the Children Sweden arranged the seminar "A Better Childhood in the City" to discuss how the urban environment affects children, and how children's perspectives can be part of urban development and planning.

The aim of the seminar was to bridge the gap between different disciplines, and four distinguished speakers were invited to present their different expertise: Juma Assiago, Human Settlements Officer, UN-Habitat; Sheridan Barlett, Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development, London; Ewa Bialecka, Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden; and Aki Stavrou, Director, Integrating Ireland.

There is an intimate link between the physical environments that children and young people live in and the quality of their lives. Their housing, the water they drink, the air they breathe, the traffic on their streets, and the quality of their schools and neighbourhoods all have an impact on their health, happiness and long-term development. The significance of environmental influences on girls and boys tends to be poorly understood, and is often overlooked in policy and programming.

Children and young people should not only be encouraged to identify the problems and solutions in their local neighbourhoods, they should also, together with adults, be part of the action for change. A constructive involvement of young people will strengthen their feelings of responsibility towards their neighbourhoods and help make these safer and more pleasant places to live in.

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A BETTER CHILDHOOD IN THE CITY

The special needs of children and young people have to be part of urban development and planning - from the beginning and not as an afterthought. Children and young people must be listened to. They must be allowed to take an active role in the community and local life, and have a say in the decisions that will affect their lives and futures. Architects and city planners can best make a difference if they work together with local stakeholders and the community. These were some of the points discussed by the speakers at the seminar "A Better Childhood in the City".

MAKING SPACE FOR CHILDREN

"Secure housing and safe neighbourhoods are essential for children to thrive. Clean water and good sanitation, drainage and waste removal have to be provided. But the special needs of young children are not taken into account in the priorities set by most development assistance."

Sheridan Bartlett, Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development, London, called for a greater attention to children's and young people's perspectives in urban planning and development.

"The development world has learned a lot from the gender perspective and the effects it has had as it has been mainstreamed into programmes and interventions. We are

a long way from giving that same priority to a perspective based on age - but we need to take into account the different needs of children and youth."

In her speech Sheridan Bartlett focused mainly on small children and pointed out that they have particular needs. Children are at higher risk than adults from a range of environmental threats, which make them very dependent on their surroundings. If you ask children what makes a difference for them, they speak of a decent home that cannot be taken away from them. They also want clean surroundings, green areas and trees. "Everywhere I go children bring this up." Children want safety and freedom of movement, they need a variety of activities and places to be with friends. "They need to feel that they are part of the community and local life."

Housing and its surroundings affect health and safety as well as security, access to opportunities, and the quality of care that adults can provide. Research has shown that overcrowding and frequent relocation have a definite



Photo: David Isaksson/Global Reporting

impact on children, with effects such as higher blood pressure, lower academic achievement and exposure to more abusive behaviour by parents. Forced evictions can have even stronger affects, such as anxiety, nightmares, and withdrawal. "These reactions are very similar to the traumatizing consequences of having experienced war," said Sheridan Bartlett.

Every day environments of poverty expose children to a range of risks. Children are more vulnerable to pathogens, toxicants and pollutants. Children's immune systems are less well-developed; they take in more air, water and food relative to their body weight. They lack the capacity to assess danger and judge risks. "Children's play behaviour exposes them to hazards as they explore, touch, put things in their mouths and get into everything."

Water provision and sanitation are often far from adequate for young children and their caregivers. Very few young children, for instance, make use of community latrines. Their excreta tend to end up in drains, streets and yards where it presents a health hazard for all.



Photo: Stefan Bladh



Photo: Thomas Melin/Sida

"Children do not use latrines because they are afraid of falling in," Sheridan Bartlett said. "The holes are too big for them. They suffer from the smell, and they get pushed away by adults in the lines for the latrines. But there are alternatives, for example in many cities in India, where the organisation Mahila Milan has built special latrines for children. They are clean and well-lit facilities with handles and small squat plates that children are not afraid of falling into. Mothers can keep a look-out nearby and the walls have been brightened with paintings and tiles. These latrines are not expensive and have been a great success wherever they have been installed."

Water quality is another problem. Houses that lack piped water need to store water. This can easily become contaminated: "Children may use a scoop to drink water, put it on the floor, and when they use it again it can contaminate the water. If a scoop is not provided they may dip their hands in the water and soil the water that way," said Sheridan Bartlett. She pointed to a classic study from Brazil showing that infants in households



Photo: Johan Resele/Global Reporting

using public standpipes are five times as likely to die as children with water piped into their homes.

Two-thirds of environmental diseases affect children. "Children raised in dirty environments risk chronically weakened immune systems, and physical and mental stunting." Children under 14 also experience a 60 percent higher rate of injury than adults.

Sheridan Bartlett underlined the need to protect the places where children play and to improve safety in these areas. Children often play close to their homes, within easy reach of adults – this is especially the case with small children and girls.

"Playgrounds in far away corners should not be relied upon as the solution. Rather, we should improve the places where children already play – put up speed bumps, plant trees, get rid of waste. Around the world, urban children point to the need for more trees, and research backs them up. Vegetation has been shown to reduce stress and mental fatigue, increase interaction among neighbours, encourage

more creative play in children and decrease crime and anti-social behaviour. Places that work better for children work better for all.

Children's needs call for particular policies and standards in urban upgrading. These need to be integrated from the start. "Consulting with children and parents gives the best solutions and urban development is most effective when the community owns the process," was Sheridan Bartlett's conclusion.

IDEAS FOR A BETTER URBAN CHILDHOOD

- * Involve children in planning and actions for change
- * Improve places where children already play
- * Build separate toilets for children
- * Protect children from contaminated water
- * Improve standards for basic provision to address the concerns of children and their caregivers



Photo: David Isaksson/Global Reporting

CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

The means for realising children's rights in a supportive physical environment are summed up by the four basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

1. Children are recognized as having the right to survival and development (Article 6). Much of the Convention elaborates on this most fundamental principle. The principle implicitly states the right to adequate environmental conditions for good health and social, intellectual, and emotional development.

2. All children have equal rights, and no one shall be subjected to discrimination (Article 2). Regardless of age, gender, ability, religion, ethnic background or place of residence, all children have the same rights.

3. The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (Article 3). This principle indicates that physical planners and architects must consider the needs and wishes of all, especially the interests of children.

4. All children have the right to express their views on all issues that affect them (Article 12). This, like the other basic principles, must reasonably extend to the physical world they occupy and especially to the environments that they find most important in their everyday lives.

SAFER CITIES

Juma Assiago, Human Settlements Officer from the Safer Cities programme at UN-Habitat, discussed the situation for young people in urban areas and the programme Safer Cities, which aims to create a “Positive Youth Development Perspective”.

“National and local governments have a crucial role to play in meeting the problems of children and young people in urban settings. Youth participation is fundamental for society. Youth have to be seen as resources that can contribute to society. If we approach them as delinquents who need to be contained we will never achieve change. This attitude is the foundation of the UN-Habitat programme Safer Cities,” said Juma Assiago.

It is estimated that by 2030 more than 60 percent of the world’s population will live in cities, and that 60 percent of urban dwellers will be under the age of eighteen. Faced with rapid urbanization many cities are already unable to accommodate their populations, and rates of poverty and social exclusion increase steadily.



Children and young people do not have access to urban decision-making processes; their capacities and potentials are not being utilized to determine their present and future prospects.

“UN-Habitat tries to outline the arguments for giving children and youth, particularly the most vulnerable, a far greater role in urban governance – for example by creating forums for excluded groups.”

Youth crime and violence are increasing exponentially in cities in both the North and the South, and governments in both areas are increasingly confronted with challenges of how to address these problems.

“The recent upsurges in Paris and Sao Paulo show the dissatisfaction of young people in their lack of involvement in the policy formulation that impacts on their livelihoods. I describe this as ‘modern undeclared urban warfare’. It has similarities with civil war and is a reflection of the inefficiencies of public policies to create a civilized environment that provides opportunities to all for a decent life,” continued Juma Assiago.



To meet the need to give children and young people a far greater role in urban governance and in decision-making processes, UN-Habitat has developed a work programme on Safer Cities, with a methodology and measures addressing children and young people in city development strategies. Some of the principles are: democratic solidarity, prevention is better than a cure, decentralization, and inclusion.

The methodology builds on cooperation in law enforcement, social prevention and urban design. Some of the steps in the methodology are analysing the crime problem, building a coalition of interests who are involved in crime prevention in the city, and developing a multi-sectoral crime prevention strategy.

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