Children, Cities and Housing: Rights and Priorities

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discussion paper

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Contents

List of figures

List of tables

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
CCRI	Children's Climate Risk Index
Habitat III	United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Quito, Ecuador, October 2016)
HUD	United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MODA	Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPHI	Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN-HABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRD	United Nations Centre for Regional Development
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US HRSA	United States Health Resources & Services Administration
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Globally, an estimated 1.6 billion people live in inadequate housing.[1] This includes 1 billion people living in informal settlements and slums, approximately 350 million to 500 million of whom are children (younger than 18).[2] Children living in poverty and inadequate housing are arguably one of the most vulnerable groups globally because of multidimensional poverty and their dependence on others and their surrounding environment to meet their basic survival and development needs. Children's well-being, including their cognitive development, health and education, is significantly impacted by the quality of their housing. Children living in inadequate housing are often more vulnerable to disasters, climate change, conflict and global pandemics. Although inadequate housing exists in both urban and rural settings, research into the so-called "urban advantage" demonstrates that in many countries the most disadvantaged children in urban areas are worse off than children in rural areas.[3] **By 2030, 60% of urban residents will be children living in inadequate housing in the**

> **"Adequate housing** means more than a roof over one's head. It also means adequate privacy; adequate space; physical accessibility; adequate security; security of tenure; structural stability and durability; adequate lighting, heating and ventilation; adequate basic infrastructure, such as water-supply, sanitation and waste-management facilities; suitable environmental quality and health-related factors; and adequate and accessible location with regard to work and basic facilities, all of which should be available at an affordable cost."
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> **— United Nations, 1996**

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[1] UN-HABITAT (2021), Urban Indicators Database.
[2] United Nations Population Fund (2007), UNFPA *State of World Population, 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth*.
[3] UNICEF (2018), *Advantage or Paradox? The Challenge for Children and Young People of Growing up Urban*.

Global South,[4,5] further increasing the urgency for policymakers, multilaterals and development practitioners to address the urgent need for adequate housing. This discussion paper examines the combined challenges and vulnerabilities children in urban areas face because of poverty and the inadequacy of their housing, which in turn affects their access to food, sanitation, health care and education; impedes the realization of children's rights as enshrined in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child; and compromises the ability of humanity to achieve a sustainable future for all.

Adequate housing[6] is a right of every person, regardless of age, gender, race or income level, and is the foundation for all human development, well-being and survival, as recognized by Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or UDHR, and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, or ICESCR. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or UNCRC, outlines the distinct, inalienable and universal rights of children everywhere. Development organizations and policymakers use the UNCRC to inform their policies and programming for children and families. This document was the first of its kind to be universally ratified and to endorse children as having rights on a global stage. **Article 27 of the UNCRC recognizes the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.** It also recognizes the need for governments to take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for a child's care with implementing this right and to provide material assistance and support programs, specifically regarding nutrition, clothing and housing. Similarly, the UDHR highlights access to food, clothing, medical care, social services and housing as key components of an adequate standard of living. Despite these acknowledgments, millions of children are living in informal settlements and slums in inadequate housing, and this number continues to grow. This paper calls for the specific right to adequate housing to be elevated, especially given its foundational nature for the achievement of other rights contained in the UNCRC, including the right to life, survival and development (Article 6); right to privacy (Article 16); right to health (Article 24); right to social security (Article 26); and right to education (Article 28).

The gap in current housing policies and programs derives from children being primarily viewed only within the context of family and household units, which is reflected in the mechanisms through which they can access housing and basic services. Research indicates, however, that children living in extreme poverty are expected to become independent at an earlier age in order to reduce the economic burden on their families. There are many examples of children operating outside of traditional family units, including unaccompanied and separated migrant children, orphans, and street-connected children. Children living without the support of a family system are increasingly vulnerable to violence, injury, abuse, exploitation, exposure to crime and drugs, and social and economic exclusion. With an increasing number of child-headed households and children representing a significant portion of the population in urban slums, new development approaches and practices are required to elevate the voices of children, protect their rights, and more directly address their housing needs and priorities.

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[4] Thomas de Benitez, et al. (2003), Youth Explosion in Developing World Cities: Approaches to Reducing Poverty and Conflict in an Urban Age.

[5] The term Global South is used here to refer broadly to the regions of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania. It "references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained." (Dados and Connell, 2012).

[6] General Comment 4 of the U.N. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights outlines several conditions that must be met for housing to be considered adequate, including legal security of tenure; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; and cultural adequacy. (OHCHR, 1991, CESCR General Comment No. 4)

The growing climate crisis and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have compounded existing environmental, social and economic inequalities and vulnerabilities faced by children living in informal settlements and slums, increasing their susceptibility to the impacts of flooding, stresses from extreme heat or cold, poor air quality, overcrowding, etc. Extreme weather, disasters and public health emergencies also disrupt children's education and reduce their longer-term resilience and development opportunities. This double vulnerability requires urgent action to improve the adequacy of housing and settlement environments. When addressing the housing deficit for these children, it is necessary to understand their specific needs and priorities, as well as the unique challenges they face in urban areas.

Addressing the growing number of children living in inadequate housing in urban areas requires prioritization, partnerships, community engagement and elevation to ensure that the well-being of the next generation is not compromised and that this significant population cohort is not missed altogether in the design and implementation of relevant policies and programs. Given the scale, complexity and the challenges related to providing adequate housing in urban areas, building multisector and multistakeholder partnerships is necessary to raise awareness; pool resources and expertise; and support the co-creation, implementation and scale-up of viable solutions. **This discussion paper calls on policymakers, practitioners in the international development sector, academia and researchers, children's rights activists, the United Nations, international civil society organizations, the private sector, and the media to:**

- **Promote equitable urban futures by addressing the housing needs and priorities of children**, especially those who live in informal settlements and slums or on the streets without secure tenure and access to basic services, as a critical component of urban inclusion and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for a sustainable future for all.
- **Build urban resilience by developing social protection systems** to improve children's access to adequate housing and improve their resilience to economic,

social and environmental shocks and stressors in urban settings. Governments and stakeholders should implement long-term policy solutions that include the provision of regulatory systems to support the provision of adequate housing and scale-up of social protection systems.

- **Use innovation and technology along with people-centered and community-led approaches to facilitate better data collection and management systems**, evidence-based programming and planning, and the coordination of local, regional and national data and information.

- **Encourage development of comprehensive urban housing strategies and programming that are built on people- and child-centered approaches**[7,8] and ensure the participation of individuals from vulnerable and marginalized populations in governance, decision-making, planning and implementation.

- **Allocate more resources and technical expertise to child-appropriate urban planning and governance** in the upgrade of informal settlement and slums, with a focus on improving the adequacy of housing and settlements, energy efficiency, green recreational spaces, neighborhood and street safety, and finding local solutions to mitigate the impacts of climate change and other shocks and stressors.

- **Build multisectoral and multistakeholder partnerships to address the housing and development needs of children in urban areas** through a common vision and shared objectives, and pool together resources, knowledge, innovation and capacity to achieve greater outcomes and impact.

- **Raise awareness and visibility of the challenges children in cities are facing because of inadequate housing and advocate for better policies, programming and resourcing** to support the upgrading of informal settlements and slums, prioritizing children's health, well-being, and inclusion and integration into broader city systems.

A wealth of research demonstrates a direct correlation between the quality, location and affordability of housing and a child's ability to survive and realize their full potential. The transformational impact of housing for all — regardless of age — demonstrates how children's access to adequate housing helps eliminate child poverty, improves health and mental well-being, creates enabling educational environments, reduces gender inequalities, increases access to basic services, and ultimately is a key contributor to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and building a sustainable future for the next generation.

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