CITIES FOR CHILDREN: AN OVERVIEW OF RELEVANT ISSUES

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This paper is the first in the Research Series: Cities for Children and Youth.

About the Research Series: Cities for Children and Youth
The Research Series: Cities for Children and Youth is published by Global Alliance – Cities 4 Children. This series will include publications reflecting on a range of issues faced by urban children and youth and will shed light on promising initiatives and practices for sustained change. The series aims to inspire action, add to knowledge, improve program/project design and advocate for children's and young people's rights in the urban agenda. It is aimed at practitioners, policy makers, government officials, researchers and advocates for better cities for children and youth and will include a range of publications:
- Evidence to action briefs: These will be short research summaries about different topics that are important to address when thinking about child rights and the well-being of children and young people in urban contexts.
- Case studies of success from different urban contexts to inspire change and action
- Country/city reports about the situation of children in urban areas
- Practical tools to work with children and young people to encourage their participation, better understand their needs and support their contributions in the urban context.
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SUMMARY

Child poverty and the violation of children's rights are increasingly urban phenomena. An estimated billion people live in overcrowded, inadequate housing without basic services or secure tenure. More than a third are children and adolescents, living in conditions that challenge their rights, well-being, and long-term prospects. Yet urban children have surprisingly few global champions, and can often be overlooked in more general agendas. This briefing provides an introduction to the status of children in urban areas, focusing on the most marginalised and deprived children and the range of issues they face, including the impacts of migration, poverty, hunger, conflict, disease and vulnerability to disaster. But it also highlights the opportunities to manage urbanisation better so that children and adolescents in cities can survive, learn, contribute and thrive.
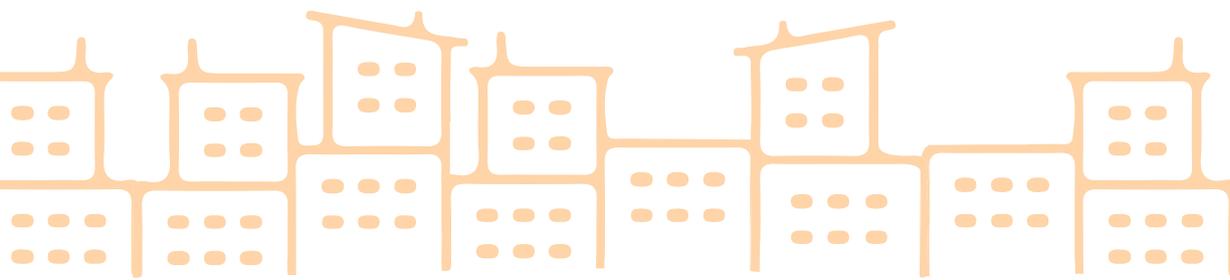
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ACRONYMS

DHS   Demographic and Health Surveys
MICS   Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
UN   United Nations
UNICEF   United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

INTRODUCTION: CHILDHOOD IN AN URBAN CONTEXT

1.1 Childhood is increasingly an urban experience

A large and growing share of the world's most vulnerable and deprived children live in urban areas in the global South. Child poverty and the violation of children's rights on all fronts are becoming increasingly urban phenomena. The world's urban population is now 4.4 billion, over 56% of the total.[1] Of these urban residents, 3.4 billion live in low-and-middle-income countries of the global South. At least a billion of them live in overcrowded, inadequate housing without basic services or secure tenure, often at high risk of eviction and the impacts of disasters and climate change. Infants, children, and adolescents account for more than a third of deprived urban residents, living in conditions that challenge their rights, well-being and long-term prospects. Given their large numbers, these children have surprisingly few global champions, and can often be overlooked in more general agendas.

Over the next three decades, United Nations (UN) projections show the urban population in low-and middle-income nations growing by 2.5 billion, mainly in Asia and Africa. There has been an astonishing lack of preparation for this surge of well over 50%, which of course implies a huge increase in the number of urban children. To compound matters, the proportion of urban residents living in what the UN defines as slum conditions has begun to rise again after a decline between 2000 and 2014.[1] In the face of rapid urbanisation, local governments struggle to keep up with the demand for affordable services and housing. The Covid-19 pandemic is only intensifying these challenges.[2]

While urban areas are major catalysts for growth and development, the benefits of their prosperity are not equally shared. As economies grow, they also become more stratified. In cities around the world, severe deprivation exists side by side with concentrations of wealth, often hidden by misleading averages and lack of data. There is strong evidence that poverty, hunger, disease and vulnerability to disaster are becoming increasingly prevalent in many urban areas.[3] This has significant long-term implications for children of all ages. Endemic conflict and violence in many cities can add to the risks. The situation is frequently exacerbated by the lack of affordable healthcare, childcare and schooling, as many governments are unable or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities on these fronts.

To stay relevant in the context of complex, dynamic and evolving global realities, international agencies must engage explicitly and collaboratively with the urban scene and with those who live and work there. This includes many international agencies that have been reluctant to work in urban areas or to develop an urban policy.

Children account for more than a third of deprived urban residents. These children have surprisingly few global champions.

1.2 Migration into cities: people on the move

Although most of the massive projected growth in urban areas will be fuelled by the natural increase of the urban population, the critical role of human migration cannot be overlooked. Many of the urban poor are people who have come from elsewhere, most often as migrants from rural areas in search of opportunity. Despite the benefits of this urbanisation for more general development, most governments have little enthusiasm for this trend and a growing number support policies to curb migration to urban areas.[4] Migration continues, however, and in many nations and regions, is increasingly accompanied by an influx of refugees and internally displaced persons, attempting to find a safe haven in the context of conflict or climate-related disasters or pressures, which are often overlapping conditions. There were almost 80 million forcibly displaced people in the world at the end of 2019: an increase of almost 9 million over the previous year. Over 40% of them are estimated to be under 18 years of age.[5] More and more, these people end up not in humanitarian camps, but in urban areas throughout the global South, attempting to rebuild their lives.[6] In some extreme cases, they may make up a substantial proportion of the local population. But whether migrants by choice or not, these people on the move most often end up swelling the population in the poorest urban settlements, facing all the same risks and hardships as other residents, but often also discrimination from local people and officials. This can add considerably to the hardships faced by their children, and among other things can complicate access to schools and other services.[7]

Among these people on the move are many children and youth unaccompanied by family. Shahin Yaqub's authoritative overview cites evidence from a number of countries pointing to the sheer numbers of sometimes quite young children who head to cities from rural areas.[8] For instance, in Nepal 8% of children and adolescents aged 5 to 14 years old become independent migrants. In Burkina Faso, it is over 9% of 6- to 17-year-olds and in Benin, 22% of 6- to 16-year-olds. Surveys in low-income urban areas find many working children and adolescents are recent migrants without accompanying family: in Ethiopia, only 17% lived with parents and in Thailand, only 12%.[8] More recent studies expand on Yaqub's findings.[9] Concern about these independent young migrants is often presented in terms of child trafficking. But a growing literature has demonstrated that most are purposeful migrants responding to structural economic realities.[10] These young people, like their elders and along with the many unaccompanied young people displaced by conflict, most often end up living in the poorest urban settlements or sometimes on the street, facing intense competition for limited resources.

Over 40% of the almost 80 million forcibly displaced people in the world are estimated to be under 18 years, and a growing number end up in urban areas.

1.3 The disappearing urban advantage

It has long been assumed that government policies favour urban populations over rural populations, resulting, for instance, in lower infant and child mortality rates and in better access to public services for urban residents. But this is often not the case[3]. The concentration of middle- and upper-income groups in urban areas distorts urban averages, masking the situation of the poorest, and creating the perception of an 'urban advantage'. Where data are available from informal settlements, they show that health, education, and basic service provision are much worse than for the city at large, often comparable to and sometimes worse than those endured by low-income rural populations.[11]

Rapidly growing urban numbers, when not accompanied by good governance and increased investment, mean growing backlogs in service provision, a declining quality of life and the disappearance of the vaunted urban advantage. In Nigeria for example, over 36% of the urban population had water piped into their homes in 2000. By 2017, this was down to less than 15%. In Haiti, the decline over the same period was from 66% to 20%.[12] In a growing number of countries, while rural child mortality rates are improving, those in urban areas are stagnating or becoming worse.[13] In Bangladesh, over 80% of children now complete primary school – yet children in Dhaka's slums face significant obstacles in accessing and attending primary school.[14] In Nairobi, the proportion of children attending public primary school is about one third of the proportion for the rest of the country.[15] Too many urban areas, in short, are lagging behind, with critical implications for children and adolescents.

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2. DATA LIMITATIONS: WHO AND WHERE ARE THE URBAN POOR?

2.1 The urban poor: undercounted and invisible

Formal figures suggest that the urban share of global poverty is rising, while both the share and the absolute number of those in rural poverty decline.[16] There is, however, no reliable global assessment of the number of urban residents who face serious deprivation. They remain undercounted and, in many cases, invisible.[3,17] There are different reasons for this, depending on the dimensions of poverty and deprivation being considered.

Most income poverty lines give scant attention to the actual cost of living in an urban area or the availability of basic services. Rent, transport, food, healthcare, schools, electricity, water and often even the use of a toilet must all be paid for. The costs certainly exceed the capacity of those earning the US$1.90 per day that is the international standard for poverty. Tied to a cash economy, many households that are not technically 'poor' struggle to get by, often paying more for water, schooling or health services in their unserved communities than middle class residents do.

When living conditions are the measure of deprivation, reliable estimates are also problematic. Figures for the number of people living in what the UN defines as slums (over 880 million residents in 2014[18]) are somewhat lower than those estimated for informal settlements (over a billion). 'Slums' and 'informal settlements' are frequently equated. While there is considerable overlap, the word 'slum' technically refers to living conditions, while 'informal settlements' refers to settlements that are in contravention of laws and regulations. Either way, these figures certainly underestimate the number of people living in untenable conditions – and therefore also the number of children growing up in environments without their basic rights being met.

The estimate of a billion informal urban dwellers is backed with statistics from a range of cities and nations where informal settlements account for 40–70% of residents. But these figures are drawn from a small sample in relation to all urban areas. It is also not possible by means of census data to separate out those in informal settlements or slums from other households.[19] Household surveys such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)[20] are another resource, but their sample sizes are too small to provide adequate data for particular cities – far less for informal settlements within cities. Other constraints include the reluctance of survey and census interviewers to work in settlements that often have no map and no street names, and where they may face hostility from interviewees whose status is irregular. In short, whether the numbers refer to the income poor, or to the residents of slums or of informal settlements, the estimates are made based on limited and inadequate data.[19]

Where there is local capacity to gather relevant data, it often reveals the extent of poor-quality and overcrowded housing both in slums and in areas not properly classified as slums or informal settlements, along with a whole range of other deprivations and exclusions that can be masked by official statistics. Where urban figures actually include the poorest and disaggregate the averages, the extent of the disadvantage becomes still more obvious. For instance in

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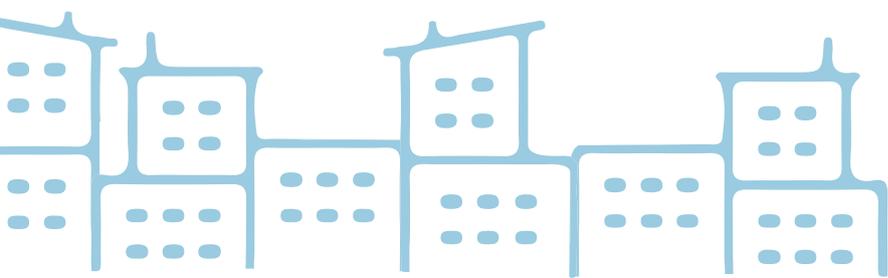
Bangladesh, when the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) results were disaggregated by district and sub-district in 2009, it was possible for the first time to distinguish the under-five mortality rate in Dhaka slum areas (95 per thousand) from that in rural areas (66 per thousand) and in the rest of the city (42 per thousand).[21] Since then, the Bangladesh MICS analysis has regrettably reverted to a simple urban-rural disaggregation, which fails to reveal the all-important urban disparities.

2.2 The overwhelmingly young urban population

There is also no authoritative account of the age composition of urban populations globally, although we know this is a very young population in Asia, Latin America and especially in Africa. Some estimates suggest that up to 60% of urban dwellers will be under 18 in 2030, with higher numbers among those in poverty.[22] Fertility rates are dropping globally, but in many countries, they remain higher in poor urban settlements than elsewhere: a reflection of limited access to reproductive health services and low levels of maternal education. High child mortality rates in poorly served areas are also widely recognised as an important factor in encouraging fertility rates to rise (to ensure some children survive).[23]

The relative numbers of poor urban children and adolescents are projected to remain high for some decades, especially in Africa, and the resulting high dependency ratios[24] add to the challenges for poor households.[25] The number of children in a household relative to adults plays a significant part in determining how critical other dimensions of poverty actually are – it affects how far income needs to be stretched, whether it is reasonable for all household adults to work, how serious the absence of basic services is, how critical it is that calories be regularly available (because of the different impacts for children of periods of low intake). In addition to high fertility rates, unaccompanied child and adolescent migration contributes to a large 'youth bulge' in many poor urban settlements, especially in Africa. This phenomenon presents a challenge, but given the resourcefulness and energy of many young people, it is also seen by some as an opportunity.[26]

2.3 The geography of children's poverty

It is important for practical reasons to be able to identify where the poorest families and children are located if they are to be targeted and assisted. In very broad terms, Asia has the most people living in urban poverty, although the highest proportion of urban residents in poverty is in Africa. This is not the same thing, however, as locating these urban poor children or identifying the deprivations they face. As with finding reliable information on the numbers of children more generally living in urban poverty, or indeed the numbers of the urban poor, existing data sources are insufficient.

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The most comprehensive information on living conditions should come from the census in each country, which in theory provides detailed data on every household (although as noted, data on many informal settlements are often missing). But the range of data relevant to children that can be drawn from censuses is quite limited. And census authorities in many nations do not provide local governments and civil society with disaggregated census data – essential for showing how conditions vary by ward and district.

Household sample surveys include far more detail, yet they cannot link the data to specific locations because they are only sample surveys, intent on producing averages. The richest spatially disaggregated data available comes from community-driven surveys conducted in many informal settlements. These are only available for some cities, however, although for those cities they are a potentially valuable source of information for agencies seeking to target the poorest children.

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Currently, then, there is no reliable global or even national means of identifying the poorest urban children, or the particular groups of these children who may be especially vulnerable. There are migrant and refugee children (with and without family), children who work (often in hazardous or in hidden occupations such as domestic labour), children connected to the street and young people who are unable to find adequate work, and who may be drawn into transactional sex or other dangerous solutions. There are children with HIV, children from households that lack formal papers needed to access public services, children who cope with disabilities in the most challenging urban settings, very young children who are left unmonitored at home because caregivers work long hours often at a great distance, children who face harassment and worse on their way to school or even at school, children who have to harden themselves to high levels of neighbourhood violence, children who deal with the chronic anxiety that typifies those who face eviction, children in conflict with the law, or recruited to join gangs. The list goes on. And these are not discrete identities. Children and young people can face several of these markers of deprivation, discrimination, and injustice at the same time. If we cannot pin down their precise numbers or locations, we can certainly identify some of the range of risks they face.

Lest the picture be distorted though, it should also be noted that many urban children in poverty manage to thrive in the face of daunting obstacles. It is tempting to use the word resilience here, but that is a tricky route to take, implying as it does that a failure to thrive and succeed lies somehow within the child rather than the circumstances. Resilience is not an individual attribute as much as it is an expression of often-complex interacting measures of support, and care should be taken that the term is not inadvertently used as a way to condone official neglect.[27]

3. URBAN POVERTY: RISKS AND CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN AND HOUSEHOLDS

The difficulties and deprivations that challenge the lives of urban poor communities represent a variety of risks and inequities that can disproportionately affect the well-being of children. This section discusses some of the more pressing issues.

3.1 Informality and illegality

Informal solutions are fundamental to the survival of the urban poor, and are an intrinsic part of urban development.[28] For those who cannot afford formal housing, with all the services, benefits and conveniences that should accompany it, and for those who cannot find a way into formal employment, informality provides an alternative route to accessing the most basic requirements of life. This is a fact of life for more than half the urban population in nations throughout the global South. In many urban areas, the majority of the population depends on these informal solutions. This is especially the case in sub-Saharan Africa. In Lagos in Nigeria for instance, over two thirds of the population is estimated to live in slums or informal settlements;[29] and in Bamako in Mali, 82% of employment is in the informal sector.[30]

Informal solutions have rightly been seen as an expression of resourcefulness and vitality. But at the same time, they often end up perpetuating and deepening poverty and inequality. Because many urban residents cannot afford the formal land and housing market, they turn to unauthorised settlements, where they may be able to construct or rent shelter, but where they often lack almost everything that adequate housing should imply. This starts with legal property rights and the benefits of citizenship. Without a formal address, residents can be denied public services, identity documents (ID), access to social protection and entitlements, credit, insurance, the rule of law and even the vote. Many face the constant threat of market and development-driven eviction, generally without warning, nor recourse to eviction or alternatives for relocation. Unregulated housing also means that rental costs can increase and tenants may have no security.[3]

Living in an informal settlement also means more limited access to the basic services and amenities that are in theory more accessible in urban areas – water, sanitation, waste collection, roads, schools, healthcare, police protection and emergency services. This all has profound implications for boys and girls of all ages – not only in terms of survival, health, schooling and opportunity, but also their sense of self. The most challenging aspect of poverty for many urban children is the shame they feel about their material conditions. Piles of uncollected trash, filthy common toilets, bad smells and run-down surroundings are often experienced by children and young people as painful reflections of their own worth[31]. Many young people suffer from social stigma as a result of where they live, and can face police harassment and obstacles in finding jobs.[32]

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Informality extends to livelihoods. Most of the urban poor rely on the informal sector for income. For all that it offers as a means of survival, informal work tends to be unpredictable and poorly paid, and those who depend on it are vulnerable to exploitation. For the very high numbers of young people in urban areas, the lack of access to reliable employment can be even more serious, with unemployment rates far higher than for adults, a reality that is being further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic[33]. Youth unemployment is widely assumed to have a destabilising effect, fuelling violence, extremism and upheaval. While these assumptions are often based on simplistic stereotypes, there is no question about the multiple challenges facing urban young people in this situation who, among other difficulties, frequently struggle to achieve the adult status and respect that accompanies proper employment.[29]

3.2 Food security and malnutrition

The conditions surrounding urban poverty have a distinct effect on food security, which is dependent in urban areas on multiple factors, including affordability, access and safety.[34] For many urban dwellers who lack space and refrigeration, food must be purchased on a daily basis, and more cost-effective bulk purchases are not possible. Especially where work is informal and insecure, the capacity to purchase adequate amounts on a daily basis can be unreliable. Food safety is also an issue, and there are links between rapid urban growth and the emergence of infectious food-borne diseases[35] exacerbated by generally poor levels of sanitation.

The implications for young children in particular can be disproportionally extreme. While adults and older children can manage periods of scarcity or fewer meals in a day, young children need regular feeding to thrive. Malnourishment can undermine health and have long-term implications for physical and cognitive development.[36] In Bangladesh, the proportion of children aged under five living in slums who were severely underweight or stunted was found to be nearly double that of children living in non-slums.[37] Not only are malnourished children more vulnerable to other causes of ill health, they are also less likely to cope with the added stress of the extreme weather events that are increasingly common and that most significantly affect poor urban settlements.

The problems are not limited to stunting and wasting. The 'triple threat' of malnutrition[38] also includes being obese and overweight, and this is especially prevalent in urban areas. Although most often described with regard to mothers, it can also be an issue for children, related to both the quality of the urban diet, with its more frequent reliance on sugary drinks and packaged snack foods, and the lack of physical activity.[39] The implications of food insecurity will be taken up in more detail in a separate brief.

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3.3 Basic infrastructure and the impact on health

When people and businesses and their wastes are concentrated in particular settlements without the underpinnings of supportive infrastructure and services, there is inevitably a large preventable disease burden, and infants and young children tend overwhelmingly to be the victims. For instance, children experience the great majority of all diarrhoeal disease, still the second-highest cause of mortality among children aged under five. DHS data from 45 countries indicate that urban slum residency has a significant influence on infant health over and above individual or household characteristics. In Nigeria for example, mortality for infants related to unimproved water and sanitation was higher by 38% than for infants in adequately served neighbourhoods.[40] In an urban slum community in Nepal, where 40% of children under five had experienced diarrhoea in the last three months, occurrence was related to untreated water, inadequate capacity for handwashing and the absence of a toilet within the house.[41]

Sanitary conditions are also closely tied to malnutrition, which is not solely a function of access to food, but also a matter of children's capacity to make good use of the calories available. This is a particular worry in unserved urban settlements, where diarrhoea, as well as the energy involved in fighting off infection, can squander calories that would otherwise go to growth. In a vicious cycle, malnutrition also makes children more vulnerable to diarrhoea.[42]

The Covid-19 pandemic, although its effects are not concentrated on children, sheds a harsh light on the inequities facing the urban poor, exposing and exacerbating their disproportionate risk. As of May 2020, some poor areas of New York City, for example, had experienced death rates from Covid-19 nearly 15 times higher than other areas.[43] The same disproportion is being shown to hold true in the global South, as research increasingly reveals the scale of the impacts in poor urban settlements.[44] Along with the absence of supportive healthcare services and uncertainties of getting food, the issues of high density, inadequate water supplies, poor sanitation, drainage and waste collection, and the lack of secure, adequate housing make social distancing and self-quarantine impractical, and foster the rapid spread of the virus.[45] Added to this are the massive economic impacts and the level of social stress that this imposes on families, as will be discussed in a separate paper in this series on Covid-19.

3.4 Air pollution and respiratory disease

Both ambient air pollution in urban areas and the household pollution that results from the use of unsuitable fuels in overcrowded and poorly ventilated housing contributes to high rates of respiratory illness, especially in young children. The situation in informal settlements surrounding Ulan Bator in Mongolia provides an extreme but not unusual example. Well over half of the city's most marginalised residents live in these peripheral areas, burning raw coal for heat and cooking, supplemented by plastic bottles and rubber tires to cope with cold weather when the coal runs out. Respiratory ailments have more than doubled over the last ten years, with the increase highest for young children, whose lung function was found to be 40% lower than that of children in rural areas.[46] Mortality from respiratory infection is heavily influenced as well by malnutrition, which was estimated to be responsible for over 60% of deaths from respiratory infections.[47] Air pollution, already more extreme in urban areas, can be especially severe in areas where governments do not collect waste and residents have no solution but to burn it close to where they live. All of this will be further detailed in a separate paper in this series on air pollution.

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3.5 Injuries and everyday hazards

Unintentional injuries, a significant cause of death and disability for children worldwide, are a particular concern for those in overcrowded and underserved urban settlements, where hazards such as road traffic and the threat of rapidly spreading slum fires can be especially challenging. Worldwide, road-traffic accidents are the principal killer of young people aged 15–29 and of boys aged 5–14. They are also in the top five for girls aged 5 and over.[48]

Flimsy construction, unprotected roofs, exposed wiring, unprotected cooking arrangements in crowded homes, uncollected debris, open drains, and an absence of sidewalks and safe crossing places all contribute to higher rates of injury. A study in several urban slums in Vellore in India, for instance, found a prevalence rate of unintentional injury of 39% over a three-month period among children from one to five years of age; children in overcrowded homes were at higher risk, as were those with working mothers.[49] In a Dhaka slum, where 43% of sampled children had been injured, the highest number of injuries was due to burns (33%, mostly among younger children), followed by road-traffic accidents (29%) and occupational injuries (14%).[50]

3.6 Disasters and climate change

The challenges and risks faced by households in informal settlements are intensified in many urban areas by the mounting hazards associated with more extreme weather, to which they are disproportionately at risk. Cities, with their concentrations of population and assets, can face particularly high levels of risk, especially those in areas hit by cyclones/hurricanes or with flood-prone coastal, riverside and watershed locations and locations with intense heatwaves. Exploiting urban economies of scale and proximity can give cities a strong adaptive capacity, but the benefits seldom extend to all parts of a city. Informal settlements are often in the most hazardous locations – on flood plains, on hillsides at risk of landslides and on sites close to waste dumps, including those with industrial wastes. Moreover, they are often unserved by the risk-reducing infrastructure and services that would enable them to prepare for and better withstand extreme conditions. Housing, in addition, is often flimsy and vulnerable, and what provision there is for water and sanitation may be vulnerable to damage and contamination. The 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Global Assessment report emphasised for the first time the particular vulnerability of poor urban populations and their more limited capacity to prepare for, withstand and recover from a range of weather extremes.[51] But there are also examples of cities that have dramatically cut the impact of extreme weather disasters from which we can learn.[52]

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3.7 Urban violence, conflicts and fragility

In a 2014 overview, Moser and McIlwaine describe the complex spectrum of urban violence as 'an intractable component of development' inextricably linked to poverty and inequality.[53] In most cities, spatial boundaries, whether material or symbolic, segregate the middle class and wealthy from growing numbers of those in poverty, reinforcing inequalities and concentrating both privilege and deprivation. This can contribute to especially high levels of violence in poorer communities, as illegal activities become concentrated in neglected, unpoliced areas, and as the erosion and neglect of public space sabotages civility. When the authorities lack the capacity or legitimacy or political will to deliver basic services and guarantee the safety and security of local residents, this failure can be both a response and a contribution to violence.

Urban violence can extend to full-blown conflict, an increasingly common feature of the urban scene in many parts of the world, often involving armed struggles over access to land and scarce urban resources.[54] These conflicts, often anchored in poor urban settlements, can contribute further to the emergence of what has become known as the 'fragile city'.[55]

At the same time, these more spectacular manifestations can mask the everyday violence that can be frequent and acute in the unserved settlements of the poor.[56] The absence of street lighting and long distances to toilets can make young girls and women especially vulnerable to violence and harassment.[57] High density and poor provision contribute to stress, frustration and tensions at both household and neighbourhood level, resulting in higher levels of frustration and abuse.[58] Cramped lanes, shared water taps, a lack of waste collection, high noise levels and violations of perceived boundaries can all lead to hostility between neighbours, often resulting in restrictions for young children who are denied the right to play outdoors, where they may contribute to irritation and conflict.[59] As Michael Taussig put it over 15 years ago, with reference to Colombia, the 'headline-grabbing' dramas are important, but 'the more fundamental issue in many ways is the sordid everyday one of grinding poverty, street crime, and the nightmare life of kids.'[60]

3.8 Lack of safe common and public spaces

While this has just been alluded to, it is important to focus in more detail on this significant problem for urban children and young people. It makes sense first to clarify the distinction between 'common space' and 'public space', terms that are frequently used interchangeably. Public space is generally under the control of the state (like parks or recreational facilities), or is privately owned and developed but open to the public (like malls or theme parks). By contrast, common space is community space that is shared and used in common. It *can* include public space where this has been provided, but importantly it also includes alleyways, stairways, vacant lots, sidewalks, roof tops, courtyards, local streets and hangouts – space that is locally controlled and negotiated. This kind of common space tends to be far more important to young children, especially in neighbourhoods that suffer from a lack of public provision. The availability of safe, attractive supportive space close to home can provide them with important opportunities and safeguards, especially when their homes are crowded and inadequate.[61]

It goes beyond just opportunities for play. Places that draw adults out to socialise, walking routes and roads that are safe from traffic (especially for children's journeys to school), pedestrian crossings, proper street lights, adequate waste removal and drainage all improve common space in a locality and contribute to the quality of children's lives in multiple ways, improving health, supporting social development, minimising stress and reducing violence. Yet too often in densely built settlements, the critical need for shelter takes priority over any attempts to reserve space for common use.[62] An especially troubling concern for both children and adults is the widespread lack of green space. Where there is no access to the restorative quality of the natural environment, the well-documented 'mental fatigue' that results from overcrowding and other stressful conditions can also contribute to poor social functioning and higher rates of aggression, often taken out on

Too often in densely built settlements, the critical need for shelter takes priority over any attempts to reserve space for common use.

children.[63] Yet these extremely valuable shared environments can be non-existent in many urban settlements. The provision of public space and amenities is also important of course, especially for older children who want access to sports and recreation, and who are able to make use of facilities further from home. But it is important to recognise that the provision of a pleasant park a mile or two away does little to contribute to the everyday lives of young children.

3.9 Cumulative impact of multiple deprivations and challenges

Communities – and the households and children within them – that must cope with one form of risk or hardship are also most likely to be subjected to others. Urban households that suffer the most from the impacts of climate change, for instance, are generally those living in settlements on flood plains or steep hillsides, and in marginalised areas unserved by the drains and all-weather roads that protect their wealthier neighbours. Informal settlement residents who face ill health because of the lack of proper water provision and sanitation are also likely to be those without easy access to health facilities. Families that face eviction are often those least equipped to cope with the loss of their local employment. These kinds of challenges and risks exacerbate the many injustices that already burden the lives of the urban poor. And when families come under pressure, children are often the end point where the costs accumulate.
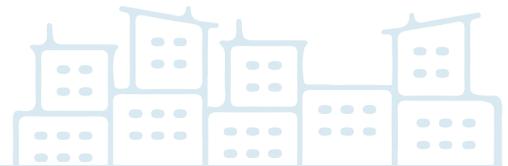
4. GOING FORWARD: THE ROLES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

An important acknowledgement here is that urbanisation per se is not a deplorable crisis, however many challenges it brings, but a phenomenon that needs to be managed. As McGranahan and Satterthwaite put it, 'We are not facing an urban explosion that needs to be restrained, but the latter part of an urban transition that needs to be steered.'[63] Local governments have an especially critical role in this regard, as will be detailed in a subsequent paper in this series on governance in urban areas.

Through processes of decentralisation, urban authorities have increasing responsibility for meeting local citizens' basic needs. But more often than not, this is not accompanied by adequate resources or support for the job, a reality complicated by often rapidly growing populations. Poor governance can be a function of political will, but it is also a matter of capacity. Given the constraints, it is not surprising that many local governments avoid responsibility for the informal settlements within their jurisdictions.

Yet many local governments have also had a significant role in lifting people out of poverty[64]. Usually this has meant a willingness to engage in practical ways with organised groups of the urban poor, and there are copious examples of situations where this kind of 'co-production' –

supporting and building on the self-help strategies of people in poverty – has helped to address the material needs of those in low-income settlements[65]. Few solutions to the needs of the urban poor can go to scale without the involvement of local authorities, and the situation offers considerable scope for collaboration.

Despite the serious challenges associated with poverty in urban areas, there are also many opportunities to capitalise on efficiencies of scale and proximity, on urban concentrations of resources, and on the proven creativity and resourcefulness of people in poverty, especially when they are organised and when they have the space to explore what works for them. Given the projected growth of urban areas and urban populations over coming decades, there will be plenty of opportunity to capitalise on these strengths and successes, and to work towards building the kinds of cities that will ensure urban children and adolescents can survive, learn, contribute and thrive.

While local governments, in partnership with the urban citizens they represent, are the frontline in this massive global transition, they frequently lack the resources and capacity to manage the scale of the challenge. This requires the commitment of other actors as well to support, facilitate and supplement the critical efforts of this primary partnership. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector, international agencies and governments around the world all play a necessary role in the creation of a just and equitable urban world, fit for children.

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