

CHILDREN AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN URBAN AREAS

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SUMMARY

This evidence into action brief summarises the state of research on the topic of urban children and local governance, and proposes ideas for action.

Children and young people make up 30–40% of most urban populations in the global South. Yet their needs and rights often have little impact on the policies, programmes and decisions that profoundly affect their lives. Local governments often pay little attention to children’s realities or their specific needs, even when they play a significant role in tackling urban poverty and exclusion. This brief considers the role of local government in poor urban areas, the resources that support or constrain this role, and the critical involvement of civil society, NGOs and communities. Giving examples from practice, it discusses the active contribution of children and young people to effective local governance processes that also address their priorities. It also recommends specific practical actions for NGOs and other child-focused agencies.

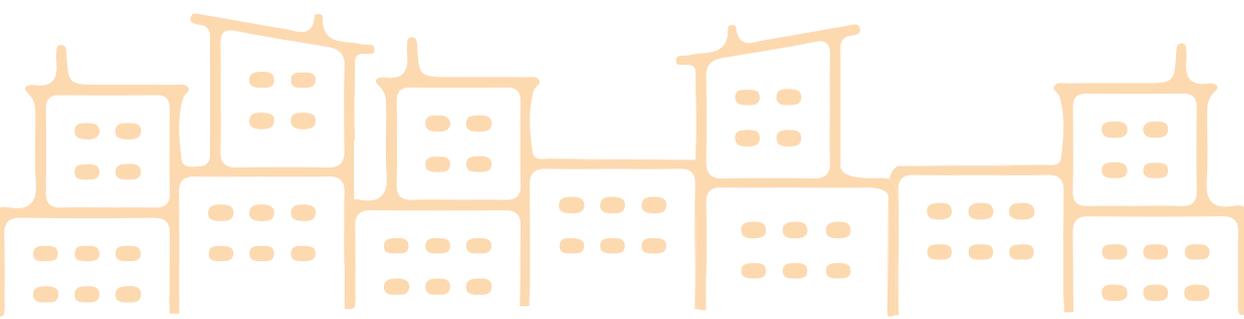
- Effective local urban governance requires well-designed partnerships between local governments, the urban poor, civil society and NGOs. This is critical to co-production processes which engage the energy, resourcefulness and solutions of local residents, especially in the absence of sufficient government resources.
- Children and young people also have a significant role to play. They are citizens with their own particular needs, rights and capacity to contribute. Their involvement should be integral to local governance partnerships, going beyond short-lived projects to an integrated, sustained and meaningful presence.
- NGOs can help local authorities to define and sharpen their work with urban poor communities and children and foster relationships in different sectoral domains. NGOs can also help with brokering, supporting and leveraging partnerships and collaborative problem solving with communities and children that can be taken to scale.
- NGO advocacy at policy level is crucial to inclusive urban development as it will support more child-friendly action at the local level. NGOs should work with both networks of local authorities and federations of the urban poor to represent the interests of and implications for children and young people.

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ACRONYMS

| | |
|-------|--|
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| OPP | Orangi Pilot Project |
| PB | Participatory budgeting |
| SDI | Slum/Shack Dwellers International |
| WIEGO | Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing |



1. INTRODUCTION: WHY LOCAL GOVERNANCE MATTERS

The well-being of urban children¹ and the stability of their households are tied to the underlying causes of economic change in urban areas, to good economic performance and enabling policies nationally and to fair distribution of the benefits of economic growth. But they are also critically tied to the quality of local governance, both within towns and cities and their larger districts. Almost all policies, programmes and decisions by governments, local and otherwise, have implications for children and young people wherever they live. But for urban children and their families, whether they are long-standing residents, recent migrants, displaced people or others in precarious situations, local government and the quality of its engagement with other partners takes on particular significance.

In many if not most urban settings, local authorities are responsible for many of the realities that define local poverty, that support or constrain the capacity of the poor to address their own conditions, and that contribute to the realisation or violation of children's rights. The extent of the responsibilities of local government varies from country to country, and national policies are of course critical as well.² But in a very real sense, all poverty reduction plays out at the local level, and this includes the actions that most affect the lives of urban children.

This brief considers the role that local government plays in urban areas, the resources that support or constrain this role, and the critical involvement of civil society and local communities in the process, most importantly in the context of poverty. It also discusses the active contribution of children and young people to this process. Their participation is more generally discussed as a separate programming commitment. However, we make the case here that children's involvement, when responsibly conceived and conducted, is an integral component of local governance, helping to ensure that their priorities receive attention.

2. URBAN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: RESPONSIBILITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

Proper attention to the underpinnings of urban poverty and exclusion, and to the means of effectively addressing them, requires an understanding of two issues in particular – on the one hand, the distribution of power, authority and resources among different levels of government. On the other hand, there is the issue of the quality of local governance: the responsiveness, accountability and transparency of local government and also the quality of its engagement and partnership with other actors, specifically in the context of urban poverty, with civil society and with the urban poor themselves.³

In the lead-up to the Sustainable Development Goals, the post-2015 agenda and the New Urban Agenda, far more attention began to be directed to the role of local government in meeting the goals of inclusive and sustainable development. Prior to this, top-down processes had dominated attention within earlier discourse,

both in academic and development worlds.^{4,5} This shift was followed by processes of decentralisation in most countries. Responsibility on a number of fronts was transferred from the central level to local and regional governments, bringing government action closer to the residents it served.^{6,7} Municipalisation – or the transfer of ownership from the private sector or other levels of government to local public ownership – is also a factor here, often with respect to primary education for instance. At this point, some of the responsibilities that generally fall within the remit of local government include the following:⁸

- The management of land use and access to land, both for residential and other purposes, including the establishment and enforcement of relevant rules and regulations
- Housing interventions, including decisions about who benefits from them
- Public investments in infrastructure (such as water, sanitation, electricity, road access, storm drains) and funding for its maintenance, as well as decisions about the extent of this infrastructure and who benefits from it
- A range of public services, including education and health services, transport, policing and protection, child and family services, the local justice system
- Public resource generation and management.⁹

Even when local governments are not officially assigned these functions, they are left to deal with the consequences of unmet needs, whether social, economic or those related to the health of both residents and the environment.

However, while these statutory responsibilities are generally assigned to local governments under decentralisation policies, they are often not accompanied by the resources that allow these tasks to be adequately performed. There is also an enormous range among local governments in terms of their capacity, commitment and priorities.^{10,11} Certainly concerns related to corruption and to a lack of transparency and accountability can be significant roadblocks everywhere. But these concerns are complicated in the global South by resource constraints, as documented with regard to health systems.¹² Every town and city can be located in these terms on the matrix below (which would ideally include more intermediate categories). The ‘resources’ column here implies also the authority allocated to these governments by the national level.

While certain key responsibilities are generally devolved to local governments, they are often not accompanied by the resources that allow these tasks to be adequately performed.

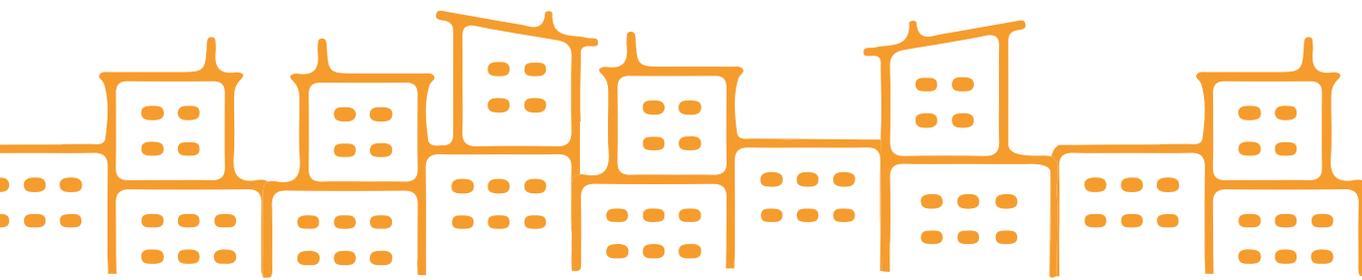


Table 1. What determines the capacity of local government to deliver for children?

| | | Resources | |
|-----------------------|--|---|--|
| | | From democratic & accountable local government structures working within formal institutions and the law | to undemocratic, unaccountable & often clientelist local government exercising power and working mostly through informal/illegal channels |
| Quality of Governance | From relatively well-resourced local government institutions able to ensure provision of infrastructure and services, land management | + | + |
| | to poorly resourced local institutions unable to provide these without private, NGO or community help | + | + |

Source: Hardoy, JE, Mitlin, D and Satterthwaite, D (2001) Environmental problems in an urbanizing world: finding solutions for cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Earthscan Publications, London.

In high-income nations, the web of local institutions that serve, support and protect children (and parents) is taken for granted. Coverage for some services may be sub-standard, and some groups are poorly served or excluded, but the great majority of the urban population is served. There are huge differentials, however, between high and low-income nations in the revenue per person controlled by local authorities (varying by factors of 100 or more), and even more in their capital investment capacity per person.^{9,13} In Africa for instance, most local authorities have minimal capacity because the very low incomes of their residents, along with the political costs of enforcing revenue collection, make it impossible to collect much revenue locally. Instead, local authorities rely on grants and transfers from national governments, which may also be quite limited, especially if a city government is not of the same party as the national government. In most African cities, annual budgets are less than US\$100 per person, and in many cases, less than US\$10.^{9,14,15}

Given the constraints, it is not surprising that many local governments fail to meet their responsibilities for the many informal residents and settlements within their jurisdictions. The failure of government to provide in efficient, equitable, transparent ways is a function of political will as well as a matter of capacity. Either way, it is related to the selective neglect of the poorest and most marginalised, and to the limited voice of people who are not empowered or supported to hold their governments accountable. This is where the quality of governance comes in.

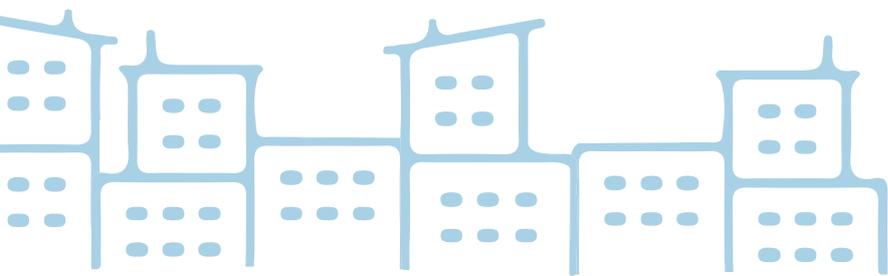
3. INCLUDING OTHER PLAYERS IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Even in the absence of adequate local resources or redistributive policies on the part of central government, many local governments have had a significant role in lifting people out of poverty. Examples include local regulations that do not discriminate against the informal solutions of the poor, equitable land-management systems, or a focus on service provision for excluded residents. This rarely happens, however, in the absence of constructive partnerships. A focus on governance broadens the scope to include the roles of other key actors – the private sector, but also civil society, along with grassroots movements and citizen groups. Including these key actors is particularly important in the context of urban realities, with the sheer extent of informality in all its manifestations, and the far greater complexity of the governance landscape.

The capacity of local government to support and supplement collective action and decision-making on the part of poor residents is especially critical in the context of scarce resources. Innovative possibilities may abound with the support of countless urban organisations and NGOs, and the value of their efforts cannot be dismissed. But it is also true that few solutions to the needs of the urban poor can go to scale without the involvement of local authorities. The situation offers considerable scope for mutual understanding and collaboration. Despite the serious challenges associated with poverty in urban areas, there are also considerable opportunities to capitalise on efficiencies of scale and proximity, on urban concentrations of resources, and on the proven creativity and resourcefulness of the poor when they have the space to explore what works for them and the backing to build on this.

The growing literature on co-production¹⁶ in the global South documents the different ideological responses to this kind of partnership. On the one hand, it can be seen as supporting the orientation of neoliberalism, passing on to citizens the responsibilities that should by rights be taken up by the state. On the other hand, it is clear that well-designed co-production processes can foster the capacity to organise, negotiate and collaborate around meeting needs that would otherwise be handily ignored by overstretched or unwilling local governments.¹⁷ The scale of the challenge in the development sector requires joint action and the pooling of resources and capacity. This kind of community involvement can also play a significant role in supporting transparency and accountability.¹⁸

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There are copious examples in the literature of situations where this kind of co-production – supporting and building on the self-help strategies of the poor – has been a route to addressing the material needs of those in low-income settlements and taking their solutions to scale.¹⁹ An often-cited and now-classic example is the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) scheme in Karachi, Pakistan, where sanitation pipes, paid for and installed by residents in unserved communities, were connected by the municipality to the main sewer network and waste treatment plants.²⁰ This relationship can be arduous, contentious and frustrating, requiring commitment and endless negotiation, especially since key supportive government staff change positions regularly. But it can also have a synergistic effect on both sides, permitting local authorities to meet their obligations where this might not otherwise have been possible, and giving low-income communities the potential to realise their right to the city²¹ and leverage their solutions. Appadurai's work on the 'capacity to aspire' highlights the way these non-elite political relations can catalyse the empowerment of low-income women and transform their engagement with development opportunities.²²

Some of the best documented work of this kind of collective practice and co-production in the larger governance literature has been that on the organisations and federations belonging to Slum/Shack Dwellers International, now active in over 30 countries across Asia, Africa and more recently Latin America. These federations, working in almost 400 cities, and affecting millions of urban residents, are made up of locally based women-led savings schemes that come together, first across settlements, then across cities, to negotiate with their local governments. Together they have upgraded homes and settlements and negotiated for improved water and sanitation provision, generally using models they have first developed and tested as precedents. Many have completed city-wide surveys of informal settlements and their residents, creating the basis for dialogue with local governments over planning for upgrading and resettlement where necessary. One of their most meaningful accomplishments has been the extent to which they have been able to negotiate secure tenure, the bedrock on which so much else depends. The benefits of their gains tend to be cumulative and mutually reinforcing – it is impossible to point to separate 'projects' that communicate the power of the whole.^{23,24}

Also noteworthy in similar ways is the collaborative work of various other networks. The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights has funded hundreds of upgrading initiatives.²⁵ Informal workers represented by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), have negotiated better solutions to the precariousness of informal employment in cities throughout the global South (see Box 1).²⁶

Genuine partnerships can take very different forms. Another valuable avenue is participatory budgeting (PB), which involves setting aside a percentage of the city budget so that local

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residents can meet to vote on its allocation in keeping with their priorities in different communities. In effect, it is a tool for urban residents to claim some practical control over their living conditions and over the way their cities are run, with implications for transparency and accountability. Initially developed in Porto Alegre in Brazil, there are now, conservatively, over 5,000 examples globally of PB with many distinct variations, all of which enlarge the space available for collective action on the ground in support of social justice and participatory democracy.²⁷ A related mechanism is the establishment of local or community funds, a form of decentralised finance that can allow communities the space to identify and debate their needs, and determine the most appropriate, effective use of available resources, as has been so well demonstrated in Thailand²⁸ and Kenya.²⁹ Such funds can also allow funders to establish some basic guidelines for use without becoming involved in the actual delivery of funds and services.

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4. THE RELEVANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE FOR CHILDREN

Some of the functions or responsibilities of local government, such as education and healthcare, have very immediate implications for children. But it is fair to say that all of these functions concern children to some degree, whether through their effect on their households, their communities or their more general environments. Children and young people make up around a third of the urban population.³⁰ They are far more than a ‘special interest’ group. Yet often their requirements and rights have little impact on more general policies, plans and decisions, even in situations where the importance of inclusiveness is accepted. Once the traditionally child-focused areas are addressed, it is often assumed that children’s needs will automatically be covered when the needs of households and communities are considered.

To some extent this is true. Well-supported neighbourhoods and households can provide most of what children need. But the hypothetical ‘universal citizen’ that is often the target of planning may have little in common with boys and girls of different ages, more or less marginalised, who may experience the world in very particular ways. Their priorities, developmental needs and rights as citizens can be effectively sidelined even by progressive governments. There can be an unwitting bias in this regard even in cities that have made gender equality a part of the equation, and that recognise the importance of consulting with the urban poor. Many municipalities consider themselves ‘child friendly,’ and while there are truly excellent examples,³¹ too often this means quite superficial showcase projects

with little attention to the structural realities that can continue to shape children's poverty and exclusion.³²

There are numerous examples of ways that even well-intentioned schemes can fail to consider the implications for children, to the ultimate loss of all. If small children continue to defaecate on the ground after public toilets are built because of long lines or their fear of large latrine openings, the public health gain is lost. If microcredit schemes mean young children are missing a meal each day so mothers can make their payments, or that older boys and girls are having to leave school, the long-term economic gains may be offset by both short- and longer-term effects for children. If relocation schemes in the aftermath of eviction fail to take account of school schedules, children may fail to finish the year, and many end up dropping out. The massive global problem of eviction has many profound impacts on children, but they are seldom considered as part of the equation for those making decisions.

Another good example is the failure to consider children in the planning and management of public and common space. Even in cities, or parts of cities, where the local government takes children seriously, this often means simply ensuring that a playground is available somewhere, or that there are some recreational facilities. What it should mean, rather, is that public space more generally is safe, accessible, enjoyable and useful for people of all ages – whether they are adolescent girls or small children or the elderly. This goes well beyond the provision of age-appropriate recreational facilities. Common space free of waste and protected from traffic, with sidewalks, streetlights, local playing fields, meeting areas, well-lit areas for study, means much more than state-of-the-art recreational facilities several miles away. For small children, a playground even a five-minute walk away is not nearly as useful as safe, welcoming common space throughout a local neighbourhood, where caregivers can supervise as they work, and where children can run around and play with friends. For older children and adolescents, it should be practical and safe to walk to school, meet up with friends, run errands and use local amenities and facilities. Nor should they feel the sense of humiliation that can be so common for older children when their local environment is waste strewn and foul smelling. This kind of supportive space can involve unexpected considerations.

A much-needed upgrading programme in an informal settlement, for instance, might include improved local lanes and streets, with surfacing and drainage so traffic can move more rapidly and emergency services or waste removal can reach the neighbourhood. But the very features that impeded traffic in the first place may also have made the unimproved lanes safe places for children to play. If this is not foreseen and responded to in the course of upgrading, the improvements may end up sabotaging the quality of children's social lives and restricting them to their overcrowded homes. An excellent response to this particular problem was solved by an organised local community in the informal settlement of Kibera, Nairobi. Mothers were closely involved in the design of local upgrading and reblocking (a process that ensures all

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buildings have adequate access to streets and basic services). This meant that well-placed streets for traffic did not interfere with a carefully planned network of paved walking paths and small squares connecting houses, making it safe for small children to play outdoors close to home under the watchful eyes of neighbours.³³

This kind of response extends to the provision of services. The informal workers' network WIEGO also demonstrates how organised grassroots groups, with the support of local government, were able to address their children's needs along with their own (see Box 1).

WASTEPICKER COOPERATIVES COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO PROVIDE CHILDCARE³⁴

In the absence of adequate, affordable childcare services, informal women workers in towns and cities all over the global South struggle to earn a living while also caring for their young children. Too often they have to take their children with them while they sell their goods in hot crowded marketplaces and along roadsides, or work recycling waste for long hours. Women who work at home have a somewhat easier time, but it can be a challenge to get their work done and protect children from harm. Around the world, tens of millions of small children are also left unattended all day, or in the care of barely older children, while their mothers work in factories or care for the children of more affluent residents.

In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, women wastepickers organised in the early 2000s to address this issue. Members of the Association of Collectors of Paper, Cardboard and Recyclable Material (Asmare) (a wastepicker cooperative that recycles 500 tonnes of materials each month) networked with seven other wastepicker cooperatives to increase their bargaining power with local government on various concerns, including childcare. With support from two NGOs and local government, and with donations from

a foundation and a local business, the cooperatives and the local sanitation department built a space next door to the recycling centre, where women could leave their children while they worked.

At this time of decentralisation in Brazil, municipalities were being given more responsibility for early-childhood services, and were able to integrate this community childcare centre into the larger system. The Carlos Prates Centre continues still to serve 80 young children in four age-groups, from babies to five-year-olds. Of the available space, 70% is reserved for the wastepickers' children. The 27 trained staff provide high-quality care for these children, including those with special needs.

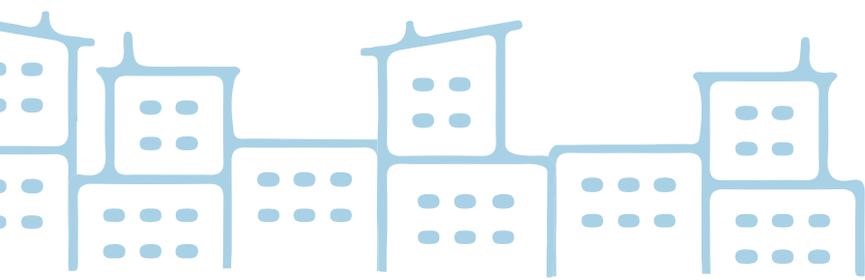
Because the wastepickers have to collect recyclables from offices early in the day or once businesses are closed, the centre is open from 7.00am to 10.00pm: the only childcare establishment in the city that is open for these long hours. Only by virtue of this purposeful collaboration, initiated by the organised wastepickers, was this responsive and effective model developed, fostering the healthy development of these children while enabling mothers to eliminate the stress of childcare from their daily work routine.

What is really critical here is a general shift in thinking about children and young people as citizens with their own particular needs, rights and capacity to contribute. As with good governance more generally, this is ideally accompanied by genuine consultation and involvement on the part of those affected, whether this means older children or the caregivers of younger ones. The active involvement of children and youth has been copiously documented as a unique programming phenomenon in its own right, but it is not generally included in discussions of governance. We include it here because the objective of this participation is ultimately no different from that of the grassroots activism of adults – that is, to bring the undisputed expertise of local people to a better analysis of local conditions and to provide them an active part in the planning and decision-making that affects everyday life. Children and young people bring a particular perspective to responsive planning, one that is valuable in realising an important reality – neighbourhoods that work better for children tend in the end to work better for everyone.

There are other practical reasons too for keeping an account of child and youth participation integrated in this paper about governance instead of addressing it separately. Too often, the involvement of children and young people is undertaken as an end in itself rather than being anchored in a practical commitment to realising change, based in part on their contribution.³⁵ Objectives are often geared more towards the educational value of participation. But educating children in the values and skills of citizenship is more likely to be effective if their involvement has a practical impact. When they feel their contributions are not taken seriously, it can also result in cynicism rather than enhanced citizenship.³⁶

When children’s participation is integrated in sustained ways into municipal planning projects³⁷ or anchored within existing grassroots efforts in communities, this can help ensure that it is taken more seriously both by government and the community. Children need allies on the ground, and until adults within a community have an awareness of themselves as rights bearers, it can be hard to value and support the input of its children and young people. The empowerment of adults also makes it more likely that an effort can be sustained, even as a particular group of children ages out of it. Especially heartening are examples of the involvement of young people contextualised within the activism of their families and communities (see Box 2).

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BUILDING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENTHUSIASM FOR FILM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

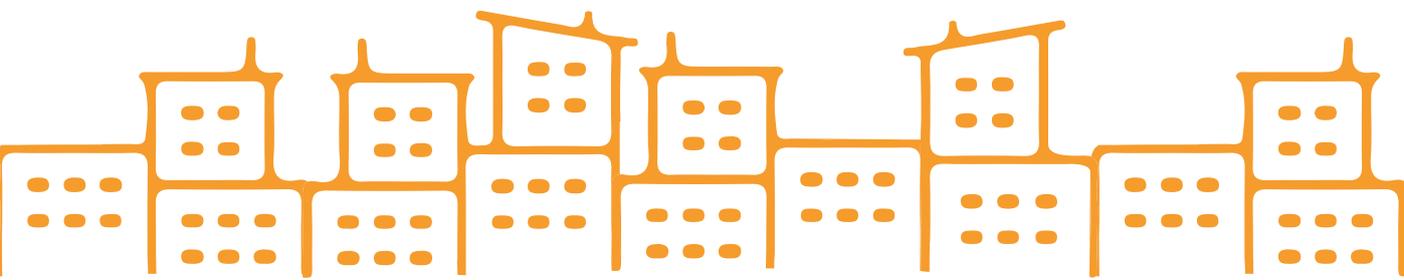
Know Your City TV is a youth network that has grown out of Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI). Self-described as an international collective of youth living in slums, learning by doing and making media for social impact, these young people capitalise on the information-sharing potential of the social media that come so naturally to them, thereby building on the efforts of their organised and networked communities.

One short film, for instance, poignantly portrays the victims of a looming forced eviction in Nigeria, pointing out how little they look like the stereotypes of criminality and vagrancy that are used to justify these events.³⁸ 'They gave us 72 hours to pack our lives off to somewhere else,' explains the young narrator, as the camera focuses on people holding eviction notices. 'Only there is nowhere else. This is the only home I have ever known.' They film one resident after another holding up their eviction notices – fathers carrying young children, old people, medical professionals dressed for work, groups of young people, all facing the need to find another place to live within three days with no formal support for relocation.

Another film documents the process of informal settlement enumeration, by means of which these young people's

communities collect the household data necessary for negotiating with authorities for upgrading and services.³⁹ They film the teams as they go from house to house, explaining the purpose, and gathering what becomes the most comprehensive data source available on the community. When the process goes citywide, it supports not only the networked communities' capacity to understand their presence in the city, and their potential to have a citywide political voice, but also the local authorities' understanding of this significant proportion of their city's residents, who more often remain undocumented and invisible.

What is notable here is that there is no hard and fast line between the children and the adults involved. Teenagers help with the enumeration, but they are working along with adults. The people and the issues they film affect everyone. Through this medium they have, in effect, found their own way of becoming engaged citizens, creating a tool that can be used with other urban poor groups for negotiating with the authorities and for educating a wider public. The takeaway message here is not the value of using cameras with children and young people. It is that integrating the involvement of young people into broader community processes, no matter what the entry point, is a vital contribution to urban governance.



Participatory budgeting also has its child participants, starting years ago in Brazil with the well-documented Barra Mansa case. A committee of young people was elected from the city's neighbourhoods by their peers. They debated and voted on the most effective ways to use the budget they had been allocated, then developed the projects, taking them through the complex and often slow bureaucratic processes of city governance.⁴⁰ Examples have proliferated and a global review conducted by Plan International points, among others, to a Bangladeshi example. In the process of a more general community meeting, participants aged 10 to 16 raised concerns about child marriage, recreation, early childhood education and sexual harassment of girls. The union government at sub-district level allocated about US\$13,000 to address the children's priorities, although there were no guidelines for how this would be spent.⁴¹ The gender dimension of many of these initiatives is especially interesting. Young girls usually take the lead, and are the most empowered.⁴² This is undoubtedly one of the great benefits of these early participatory processes.

There are other partners beyond planners that also could benefit from the practical inclusion of young people in their discussions and decisions – including the police, representatives from health departments, school boards, child protection units, and even partners from the private sector and the media, all of whom could benefit from assistance in considering the impacts of their actions for this large constituency.

While children are potentially a valuable part of the governance equation, a note of caution is in order here. Activities in partnership with children can certainly help to ensure more inclusive outcomes. These responses are also potentially empowering and in the long run will generate stronger leaders and citizens. However, it is important to accept that governance *with* children cannot replace governance *for* children. Participatory projects are not a substitute for basic provision or protection. It is also simplistic to assume that giving young people a voice will easily result in serious local attention to age-sensitive policies and practices, or that it will have an impact on fundamental features of governance such as budgets, regulatory frameworks or training and monitoring. Even when formally constituted councils for young people are set up at local levels, there is no guarantee that they will effectively capture the involvement or energy of young people, or that their deliberations will be taken seriously by local government. Such initiatives may also result in obscuring the needs of much younger children. Mothers and other caregivers need to be involved as well in discussing what would make particular settlements safer, healthier and more supportive places for their small children.

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5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The very primary role of local government on so many fronts that affect urban children, along with the synergistic potential of the partnership between local governments and the urban poor, points to a very specific practical urban role for child-focused agencies, and indeed for other NGOs as well – that of brokering, supporting and leveraging this partnership, making it possible to go well beyond the potential of more traditional programme delivery. This role is evident in various of the examples provided above – for instance in the Orangi Pilot Project’s role in coordinating community action with government provision. The grassroots networks represented by SDI are also facilitated by support NGOs in every member country.

Many NGOs, whether they are international or national, and most importantly those working at the local level, have long acknowledged the need to coordinate with government in order to go to scale, and have been committed to encouraging the inclusion and participation of the poorest, so this is not a new role. The emphasis here, however, is on the relationship between urban poor organisations and local government – and on the NGO capacity to promote, facilitate and strengthen this relationship while drawing on its own particular expertise. For NGOs, a supportive focus on this relationship has the potential to bring coherence to a complex arena for action. In this model, terms like ‘partnership’ and ‘participation’ take on a different meaning, and imply the capacity of people on the ground to collaborate in defining their concerns and identifying their solutions. This is development seen more in terms of collaborative problem solving than as service or knowledge delivery, and NGOs can play a critical role in this regard.

From this perspective, rather than offering parallel or alternative services, NGOs can become a resource for local authorities, helping them to define and sharpen their position with regard to urban poor communities and children, and fostering these relationships within different sectoral domains. It means innovating solutions in partnership that are responsive to locally assessed and articulated needs and that can then be taken to scale. It means providing technical support where needed, or acting as an intermediary with higher levels of government, funders or international agencies. A most significant role, with regard to child-focused NGOs, is simply making visible the implications for children of these co-production efforts – as noted above, even well-intentioned development initiatives can have unintended, unwanted consequences for children. It especially means ensuring that the most marginalised, invisible children are included when needs and impacts are being considered, even when they and their families are not considered to be authorised residents.

The specifics of the NGO role could vary considerably based on such considerations as the commitment of local politicians, the commitment and capacity of local government departments and agencies, and the level of organisation present in communities of the poor.

- An important first step for any NGO involved in such a role would be to assess the capacity and limitations of local government. A helpful partner in this endeavour could well be United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), a global network of cities and local, regional and metropolitan governments

and their associations.

- Where local governments and community-based organisations are experienced in various types of co-production, an NGO role might mean supporting existing efforts, and perhaps introducing a clearer emphasis on children and young people. For example, in the hundreds of cities where PB is an accepted component of local governance, support might go to the introduction and implementation of PB for children as part of the more general system. Yves Cabannes elaborates on the various forms these children's committees have taken in four separate case studies.⁴³ He outlines the processes involved, which resulted in direct material improvements (such as mending broken school windows or building parks) but also in the creation of municipal indicators on child well-being and the development of skills in dealing with children on the part of municipal staff – not to mention the considerable skills developed in children and young people as they negotiated the realities of local bureaucracy and politics to achieve their ends.
- Where local government is in theory willing to accept an active role for children, NGOs can help to ensure that their voices are really heard. NGOs can support children to learn how best to articulate their concerns and communicate clearly, facilitate meetings and update partners on progress. Local government departments may also need regular reminders about their commitments to children's groups. Such initiatives may be politically appealing, but they can easily be eclipsed in the context of day-to-day priorities, leaving children demoralised by their failure to be taken seriously. This can have the effect, as noted above, of generating cynicism rather than active citizenship. Here, as in other areas, government needs to be transparent and accountable to its constituents.
- Where local communities are engaged in data collection on their own situations in order to negotiate with local governments, as is the case with many hundreds of cities supported by Slum/Shack Dwellers International, an outside NGO role might involve supporting communities to include the collection and analysis of more detailed child-specific data, including in such areas as school attendance, health status, childcare needs and play opportunities.⁴⁴
- In cities that are implementing large national development programmes, such as India's far-reaching slum redevelopment schemes, the NGO role might involve working with local government agencies and recipient communities to identify and discuss how children will be affected, and to ensure their concerns are being taken into consideration from the start.⁴⁵
- Even in the absence of such large schemes, many local government departments (or national departments with local offices) could use NGO support to understand the impacts on children of government actions. While staff working in education, health and social services may already have this understanding, those in areas like water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), housing, transport, policing and so on are far less likely to be sensitive to the implications for children of their work. One role for NGOs might be supplying training for these government workers or organising briefings for newly elected politicians and helping to identify potential supporters in the political sphere.
- The more traditionally child-focused departments within local government may have only scanty awareness of the particular situation of children in

unserved urban settlements. Rather than simply providing a parallel system of services in parts of the city where they are lacking, NGOs could work to coordinate and collaborate with these departments, enhancing their capacity to acknowledge and deliver on their responsibilities in all neighbourhoods.

- Where local governments give little attention to social justice, and where community organisations lack experience and connections, this NGO role might mean a more fundamental effort to foster the requisite partnerships, perhaps identifying pro-poor actors within local government and promising community groups, and starting with small pilot projects that could be built on as the foundation for more far-reaching partnerships.

The focus here has been on local-level action. The intention, however, is not to imply that the role of NGOs should be limited to engagement at the local level. On the contrary, action at national levels to promote and strengthen these relationships is also critical, as is advocacy at policy level to support more child-friendly action at the local level. Evictions, for instance, have a profound impact on children, yet are seldom taken up at the policy level to support children's rights in this regard. Both the urban poor and local authorities are also well represented nationally and globally by networks and federations that represent their interests. A partner that can represent the child dimension and its implications on all fronts is a critical part of the inclusive urban development equation.



6. CONCLUSION

National governments still tend to attract more attention in the global discourse. But local government, the layer closest to people, usually plays a far more significant role in terms of the day-to-day realities of children, families and communities in poverty and the capacity to bring about change.

Yet local governments often lack the resources to meet their statutory responsibilities, and poor communities in unserved informal settlements, along with migrants and displaced people, are

most likely to be excluded. In the context of these realities, local authorities have abundant reason to tap into the energy and resourcefulness of local residents in poverty and to build on their solutions. The unsupported urban poor, at the same time, regardless of their knowledge or commitment, seldom have the capacity or resources to build successfully on their own solutions or, crucially, to take them to scale. For this, a partnership with local government is critical. This extends without question to the many decisions and actions that affect the lives

of their children. Effective local urban governance, especially in the absence of sufficient resources, requires this kind of co-production. While it can be messy and frustrating to implement, there is no doubt that it expands the capacity for achieving transparent and inclusive results. This also applies to participation of children and young people themselves, which can be elevated from short-lived projects to an integrated, sustained and meaningful presence within the processes of both municipal action and the work of organised communities.

Within the complexity of the urban scene, the most effective practical role for child-focused NGOs, or for other NGOs that recognise the importance of including children's needs, is one that involves in some way supporting this fundamental partnership. Whether the objectives involve children's health, their education, their housing, the basic services they rely on, their protection or their participation, the framework of this relationship provides a basis that helps to ensure the suitability of programming, its capacity to go to scale and the likelihood that it will be sustained.

Endnotes

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