



Aykut, 13  
Ankara



Judy, 13  
Nairobi



Thiago, 13  
Rio de Janeiro



Brandon, 11  
New York

# The Place of Children: Poverty and Promise



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*"...youth are a resource, in fact the most important and strategic resource a country can have. Youth are agents of social change; they take on a very active role in addressing the issues that affect them. We have examples of many youth led processes that are working and making a difference in society even with minimal resources. What is required is to provide these initiatives with an enabling environment that will facilitate their replication."*

Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka

Report of children living in poverty, prepared for UN Habitat, based on fieldwork in Ankara, Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, and New York through the Children, Youth and Environments Center at the University of Colorado. 2008.

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Many people contributed to this report. Although it is not possible to identify all of them here, we want to thank some of them by name. First and foremost, thanks are due to the four children who agreed to be featured: Aykut Boztas (Ankara), Judy Musyoka (Nairobi), Thiago Santiago (Rio de Janeiro), and Brandon Hearst (New York). This report would not have been possible without their willingness to share their stories and offer the rest of the world a glimpse into their daily lives. We also gratefully acknowledge the gracious hospitality and kind cooperation of their families who gave generously of their time and invited us into their homes.

Fieldwork was undertaken by Fahriye Hazer Sancar (Ankara), George Awuor (Nairobi), Illène Pevec (Rio de Janeiro), and Pamela Wridt (New York). In Rio de Janeiro, the work involved considerable risk, as it took place amidst the constant threat of violence that accompanies daily life in Rocinha, Thiago's neighborhood and a center of drug trade to Europe where guns are openly touted. In Nairobi, fieldwork took place when the usual lack of safety was made worse by a spell of gang violence and police actions that left a number of slum residents decapitated and made Mariguini, where Judy lives, inaccessible for outsiders for a while.

Photography was by Beysun Gokcin (Ankara), James Njuguna and Sylvia Njenga (Nairobi), Illène Pevec (Rio de Janeiro), and Scott Wynn (New York). The photos included here represent only a small number of those available. Plans are underway to publish additional photos as part of a web-based version of this report.

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# The Place of Children: Poverty and Promise

Children live and grow up *somewhere*. Where that “somewhere” is makes a difference. The qualities of place help define children’s access to life chances.

Place matters.

## Introduction

Children live and grow up *somewhere*.

Where that “somewhere” is makes a difference. The qualities of place help define children’s access to opportunities for play, health care, education, and other life chances. In short: Place matters.

This report focuses on the “place” of children, where place has two meanings. First, it refers to the physical environment where children live. This includes their home and the wider community where they live their daily lives. Second, it refers also to the place that children occupy in their families and the society that surrounds them. It relates to their ability to make their voices heard and to the roles that they (are allowed to) play.

More specifically, this report concerns itself with the place of children who live in poverty with two main goals: (1) to increase awareness of the challenges of urban poverty, as experienced every day by millions of children in cities around the world; and (2) to dispel the myth that these children are passive victims of their circumstances and, instead, to show them as active participants in efforts to improve their situation. Thus, this report points to the promise that children represent for a future free of poverty. This report presents a view of children who live in poverty, not as burdens but as resources.

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This perspective is important from a policy perspective because it helps identify approaches to address challenges associated with current demographic realities. There are more young people today than ever before. Almost half of the global population is under the age of 24; 1.2 billion people are younger than 15. Within developing regions, it is the least-developed countries that remain younger than the rest of the world: in 2005, the global median age was 28 years, but in 10 least-developed African countries, the median age was 16 or younger.<sup>1</sup>

Estimates suggest that 60 percent of the world's population will live in cities by 2030 and that as many as 60 percent of urban dwellers will be under the age of 18. Most urbanization will occur in cities in the low-income countries, where already 30 percent of the population lives below official poverty lines.<sup>2</sup> Many urban dwellers have limited or no access to basic services, employment, and adequate housing. The challenges arising from this urban growth exceed the capacity of most cities to meet even the most basic needs of large proportions of the urban population.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, investing in urban children and youth is not only a question of human rights and social justice. It is also about potential economic benefits and increasing citizen security, as young people are supported to become integrated members of society.<sup>4</sup>

Against this background, four essays provide insights into the daily experiences and environments of four children, living in four cities: Ankara (Turkey), Nairobi (Kenya), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), and New York (USA). We purposely decided not to focus on exceptional children and instead selected children who inspire positive action by succeeding to live regular everyday lives while facing uncommon hardships.<sup>5</sup> Each of these brief chapters uses a combination of narrative and photographs, based on fieldwork that in-

cluded interviews, neighborhood walks, and home visits (see note on methodology).<sup>6</sup> The picture that emerges illustrates considerable variation, but also gives evidence of similarities across places.

Next, this introduction outlines normative frameworks that have recently made a focus on children and youth into a higher priority for urban policy. These policies increasingly call for programs that support the exercise of agency by young people, enabling and empowering them to act as productive participants in the development of their communities. A commentary on issues of (mis)representation of children and youth in policy documents and media then leads to a summary of key findings that are brought into fuller view in the chapters that follow. The conclusion advocates including the voices of children and youth in policies and practices aimed at improving the well-being of young people living in cities.

### **New normative frameworks**

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the international community began to reconceptualize security more in terms of people, and less of states. Forefronting people engendered a slow and contested process to articulate and implement new normative policy frameworks around human rights. The World Summit for Children in 1990 was the first of a series of global conferences driven by a growing awareness of a single world that shared common problems requiring non-confrontational, cooperative approaches. It adopted a Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and a Plan of Action for implementing the Declaration, which followed the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) one year earlier. The CRC, since ratified by all but two countries, recognizes, *inter alia*, the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for development and the right to have their voices heard on all matters that affect

them. It stipulates non-negotiable standards and obligations and declares that states shall provide material assistance and support programmes.

The U.N. Habitat Agenda, adopted at the City Summit of Istanbul in 1996, maintains a concern with the well-being of children, but brings into focus the significance of the larger urban context, providing that:

*"Governments at all levels, including local authorities, should continue to identify and disseminate best practices, and should develop and apply shelter and human settlements development indicators, including those that reflect the rights and wellbeing of children."*<sup>7</sup>

It further states that:

*"...the wellbeing of children is a critical indicator of a healthy society."*<sup>8</sup>

In the wake of the Habitat Agenda, UNICEF established the Child-Friendly Cities secretariat, which stimulated work around the world to make cities more supportive of children's needs. These efforts led to the creation of a set of assessment criteria that have not, however, so far been systematically used in evaluation research.<sup>9</sup>

In 2001, the UN Secretary General reported in *"We the Children"* on progress made since the World Summit of 1990. His report also noted where there was still room for improvement, or "unfinished business."

In a follow-up to that summit, at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, held in 2002, children from 154 countries for the first time played an official role in a General Assembly session, serving as delegates from governments and NGOs and producing the statement, *"A World Fit for Us."*<sup>10</sup> This Special Session also resulted in a global agenda, *"A World Fit*

*for Children*,"<sup>11</sup> that laid out a plan to bridge the gap between "the great promises" and the "modest achievements" of the 1990s, which was assessed in a mid-decade review in December 2007. The Millennium Development Goals, approved by world leaders in 2002, specify various targets related specifically to children, including a reduction in child mortality and achievement of universal primary education, to be attained by 2015.

The emergence of these new normative frameworks, briefly reviewed here, put forth rights-based policy platforms that set the stage for an increasing emphasis on children living in poverty as a priority in development policies. This report advances this agenda by giving expression to the voices of children themselves. Through case studies based on field work in four cities, it presents an "inside view" of urban poverty through the eyes and words of four children.

### **Issues in (Re)Presentation**

Unless properly contextualized, singling out particular children can create stereotypical views that do not do justice to the diversity of children in the wider population.

This report focuses on four children, selected for the dual purposes of this project. This approach has unique strengths, providing insights into their everyday lives in ways that give a richer picture than possible with statistical indicators alone. However, important caveats must be borne in mind when using this more personal approach. Unless properly contextualized, singling out particular children can create stereotypical views that do not do justice to the diversity of children in the wider population. The following remarks are intended to counteract such simplistic perceptions.

To begin with, the situations of the children featured in this report are

meant to be *indicative*, rather than *representative*, of conditions faced by children living in poverty in cities around the world. As seen in the essays that follow, there are significant differences in these conditions, even among the four cities included here. The variation is far greater yet when including other cities. It would be a mistake to think of urban poverty in uniform terms.

By the same token, also within any given city, there exist a variety of situations. Not all children living in Nairobi slums experience the same conditions of urban poverty. Nor do all children in the *gece kundus* of Ankara share identical situations. Nor do they do so in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, or in the projects in New York City. The manifestation and experience of poverty varies from place to place.

In addition, national contexts of poverty differ significantly among countries. In terms of GDP per capita, the range in this report goes from a low of \$547 for Kenya up to a high of \$41,890 for the USA, with Brazil (\$4,271) and Turkey (\$5,030) falling in between. Ranking on the Human Development Index similarly spans a broad spectrum, with the USA placing 12<sup>th</sup> and Kenya 148<sup>th</sup>, while Brazil (70<sup>th</sup>) and Turkey (84<sup>th</sup>) occupy intermediate positions. The proportions of the population living in urban areas likewise vary greatly, from 21% in Kenya to 84% in Brazil. Significant differences also exist with respect to the urban growth rate, access to safe water, electrification, and indicators of health and educational attainment, among others (see Appendix A for summary country profiles).

Just as environments of poverty are not the same everywhere, so also are not all children alike. Not only are there many individual differences, but children also experience poverty differently according to age, gender, enti-

lements, and social support systems, among other factors.

Hence, the four children highlighted here are *not* representative of all children living in poverty in Turkey, Kenya, Brazil, and the USA. To avoid erroneous impressions in this regard, the titles of the case studies are simply the names of these four children, rather than the names of the cities or the countries where they live. They *do* live in specific communities to be sure, and the characteristics of these places *are* relevant. Indeed, they profoundly affect their lives. But, the pictures emerging from the narratives and the photographs are first of all about those lives, while in the process sketching some of the background against which those lives play out every day.

Variations notwithstanding, there are some commonalities as well. In this regard, the observations in this report are consistent with insights obtained elsewhere, suggesting that children the world over share certain fears and hopes for the future (see below).

This report purposely augments narrative presentation with visual documentation. A picture can be worth more than a 1000 words and can better convey a sense of the daily lives of Aykut, Judy, Thiago, and Brandon. However, photographs can also introduce bias, since they just show selected instants in these children's days. We can only glimpse mere moments, sliced from the weeks, months and years that make up their lives.

The table below demonstrates how the choice of images can easily be slanted and skewed to favor a particular intent. The photographs on the first row show Aykut, Judy, Thiago, and Brandon with happy faces. They smile and look directly into the camera. Their expressions exude confidence

and joy. They project positive energy.

### Issues in Presentation: Contrasting Views



In comparison, the second row of photographs shows these same children, captured on film with entirely different expressions. Their faces appear somber. Eyes cast downwards and averted, their looks suggest skepticism, weariness, and a sense of resignation.

The visual contrasts between the two sets of images are striking. They produce entirely different impressions of the same children. Yet, they *are* the same children, photographed at different times in different moods. In this report, we have steered away from portrayals of children as passive victims of poverty, showing them instead more positively as active participants in their future, without ignoring or belittling the adversities they face.<sup>13</sup>

Media representation of children living in poverty brings responsibility for creating a balance between truthfully showing the realities of poverty, while avoiding the suggestion that their future follows inevitably from their current situation.

Finally, media representation of children living in poverty involves a difficult ethical issue. It brings responsibility for creating a balance between truthfully showing the realities of poverty, on the one hand, while avoiding the suggestion that the future of these children follows inevitably from their current situation, on the other.

Research has well established that labeling, positive as well as negative, can strongly influence children's self-perceptions and development. Identifying children living in poverty with their circumstances would stamp them with poor prospects for success.

It is, therefore, important to use "people first" language. Accordingly, this report is careful not to speak of "poor children" but, instead, uses terms like "children living in poverty."

This poverty is multidimensional. It includes insufficient income, inadequate shelter, deficiencies in physical infrastructure and other forms of material deprivation, but it also includes lack of access to basic services such as health care, education, and transportation, limited safety nets, lack of legal protections, and voicelessness.<sup>14</sup>

Research has unequivocally demonstrated that poverty produces negative outcomes for children. It adversely affects access to nutritious food, medical care, education, play, jobs, and, more generally, their chances to lead healthy, productive and happy lives. Tremendous challenges remain after the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006).

Children living in poverty do not think of themselves as “poor children,” nor do they do see themselves as passive victims of poverty. These case studies attest to the active roles that they play in their families and their communities.

However, these facts are not to say that children living in poverty cannot also have positive daily experiences. Work carried out as part of the UNESCO-supported Growing Up in Cities Programme has found situations of “paradoxical poverty” in which children who face material poverty enjoy rich social networks in their community. Children living in poverty do not think of themselves as “poor

children.” Usually, they do not see themselves as helpless casualties of poverty either. Indeed, the case studies in this report attest to the active roles that these children can play in their families and their communities.

### **The Children in this Study**

The children featured in this study are remarkable because they manage to live ordinary lives under extraordinary circumstances.

While facing difficult challenges everyday, they go to school, play, and have friends. Although still young, they help their families

and volunteer in their communities. Their dreams and hopes for the future are not very different from those of more affluent peers.<sup>16</sup> See Appendix B for background summaries of the children profiled in this report.

The children featured in this study are remarkable because they manage to live ordinary lives under extraordinary circumstances.

In conversations with the field workers, Aykut, Judy, Thiago, and Brandon brought to the fore common themes woven throughout the stories of all four of them. Family plays a crucial role in their daily lives. Family, also and maybe especially in the lives of these

Family plays a crucial role in these children's daily lives. In addition, they have rich social networks.

children, takes on different forms. Their families vary in composition according to fluctuating circumstances, and may include an aunt or grandmother and may exclude fathers or siblings. Regardless of these variations, family members provide love and protection. They lead by example and serve as role models. Even while acknowledging they themselves may fall short, they hold up positive values which the children internalize.

Besides their families, all four of the children have rich social networks that include friends, neighbors and other adults in the community. This “social capital” fulfills a bonding function, but also creates bridges to resources and makes possible future improvements over their current circumstances.<sup>17</sup> These relationships make the children feel valued and, on a practical level, they enable them to negotiate the places where they live safely.

Safety is the main worry of these children.

Safety is the main worry of these children, as it is of so many others in similar situations. Violence is all around them, day and night.

They hear gun shots. They see fights and witness people getting hurt and killed. They know which places are dangerous and where not to go. They know the drug dealers, gang members and their territory. Yet, it is difficult to avoid danger. Aykut reports how he wrested a knife from a drug addict confronting him and his brother, and was helped by a nearby resident. As these children’s stories reveal, the risks of being harmed or worse are ever present. It is this concern for their safety and well-being, and that of those close to them, which stands out in their accounts. The centrality of this concern underscores the importance of strong actions to realize the intent of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010).

The children in this report chronicle many examples of environmental challenges.

The children in this report also chronicle many examples of environmental challenges. Judy steps over sewage on her way to school. Thiago watches rats, crossing

from house to house on powerlines illegally strung up in the alley where he lives. Brandon sees an infestation of roaches on the wall above the kitchen stove in his apartment. We hear about rain, flood water and vermin entering the places where these children live. They talk about the lack of space in their crowded homes and the lack of play space in the communities where they live. They tell of garbage in the streets and say they would like to live in a place that is clean.

Living in difficult environments, constantly surrounded by peril, these children do find a place and a time to play.

Yet, while living in difficult environments, constantly surrounded by peril, these children do find a place and a time to play. Aykut in Ankara and Thiago in Rio prefer soccer, while Brandon in New York enjoys

baseball, and Judy and her friends in Nairobi play a toss-and-pick-up game with little stones during recess at school. They also participate in cultural activities and sometimes perform publicly in their community, including reciting poetry, dancing, and playing music.

The daily orbits of these children give them a keen awareness of the superior living conditions of others, more prosperous than they are. Thiago has no computer, cannot afford required school books and does his homework on a tiny table in the entrance of his small home, knowing full well that his class mates

These children are aware that their lot does not depend on individual accomplishment alone, and they grasp that community-level change will require concerted action, organizational initiatives, and government support.

include children from some of Rio's most privileged families for whom resources are no concern. In Nairobi, Judy lives in a community where 25,000 people share two public latrines, abutting a walled community of more affluent residents who have their swanky cars washed and polished by Judy's friends just outside gates that mark an unmistakable barrier. Looking out from a crowded New York apartment infested by roaches, Brandon sees luxury condominiums with roof gardens. Aykut passes through some of Ankara's wealthiest areas when delivering groceries from the street markets where he works.

Yet, these children do not express resentment about the disparities they see, but accept them as a fact of life, at the same time realizing there are opportunities to improve their situation. They are aware of the importance of going to school and doing well academically to be successful in the world of work. Even though Judy may have nothing but a wooden stool on which to do her homework, she and the others look to education as the means to get the jobs to which they aspire and enabling them eventually to move to a better place to live. At the same time, they are aware that their lot does not depend on individual accomplishment alone. They know that community-level change will require concerted action, organizational initiatives, and government support.

## **Conclusion**

These children represent the potential of people living in poverty, whose empowerment offers the single best prospect for improving urban livability in today's world.

As we approach the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2009, these children are our best hope for the future. Their lives represent the potential of people living in poverty, whose empowerment offers what is the single best

prospect for improving urban livability in today's world. Their stories hold a message about poverty and prosperity – and the differences between them. They convey despair about wasted and lost lives. But they also show resilience, bring hope and raise expectations for the future of children everywhere. Indeed, in the words of Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of its Human Settlements Programme:

*"...youth are a resource, in fact the most important and strategic resource a country can have. Youth are agents of social change; they take on a very active role in addressing the issues that affect them. We have examples of many youth led processes that are working and making a difference in society even with minimal resources. What is required is to provide these initiatives with an enabling environment that will facilitate their replication".<sup>19</sup>*

Required, as well, is research to provide evidence-based guidance to the formulation of policies that create the enabling environments for initiatives aimed at eradicating child poverty. Studies, such as being conducted through the Young Lives project in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam, are encouraging.<sup>20</sup> We need quantitative and qualitative data on the conditions and effects of poverty, and the evaluation of poverty reduction strategies. We also need to listen to the voices of children themselves in efforts to improve children's well-being. This report seeks to mobilize support for such inclusionary practices.

## Endnotes

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1. See UN-HABITAT (2006).
2. Ruble et al. (2003, p. 1).
3. See UN-HABITAT (2003).
4. See Note 2.
5. Various books have used somewhat similar formats, but none of them based on the personal narratives of children living in poverty. *A Life Like Mine*, published by Dorling Kindersley in 2002 as a UNICEF production, focuses on concerns articulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Richly illustrated, it is organized around the four themes of survival, development, protection and participation. It differs from this report in several important ways. For example, it concerns itself with pre-selected issues in relation to children's wellbeing (e.g., vaccination), and each theme is illustrated with a few two-page vignettes of a particular child (18 children total) aimed at children aged 8 to 11. This age group is similar to that for *Children Around the World*, which is the title of no less than three different books, all seeking to make a juvenile audience aware of cultural diversity (e.g., clothing, recipes, music, games). The most recent of these books, by Donata Montanari (2001), targets 4 to 8 year old children. Earlier, *Children Just Like Me* by Anabel Kindersley (in association with UNICEF, 1995) became a very popular book that combines colorful photography with text, offering a celebration of cultural diversity and shared needs among children worldwide. *Our Time is Now*, produced through the International Youth Foundation, profiles 30 young people, mostly in their 20s, standing out for their unusual accomplishments, in contrast to this report which observes inspiration that stems from the everyday activities of a younger age group.
6. Work for this project was carried out by the Children, Youth and Environments Center at the University of Colorado under contract for UN Habitat. The sites were selected to show children living in urban poverty in a range of environments: Ankara, Turkey; Nairobi, Kenya; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and New York City, U.S.A. Researchers with familiar with the sites and proficient in the local language undertook fieldwork consisting of neighborhood walk-about, interviews, and photography. The children featured in this report were contacted through existing social networks, based on prior relationships of trust. Each child was interviewed more than once. Additional interviews were conducted with siblings, parents and other adults. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of questions around a shared core of points related to everyday life, the social context of "typical" daily activities, life history, concerns and fears, and expectations, hopes and aspirations. We also asked the children to draw a mental map of their community, showing the location of their home and school, and other places important to them.

These primary data were supplemented with information from secondary sources concerning the community's and the country's demographic profile, economic base, migratory patterns, political system, and level of human development (see Appendix A).

Photographic documentation included the children themselves and their family, neighbors and friends, as well as aspects of their environment, such as their home, street, school, and public places. Safety concerns limited the possibilities for photography in two of the sites. Although these sites could have been left out from this report for that reason, we decided that it would be inappropriate to exclude places too dangerous for perfect photography when those places are the everyday environments for the children living there.

7. Ibid.
8. UN Habitat Agenda: Goals and Principles, Commitments and the Global Plan of Action (1996).
9. See UNICEF (2004).
10. UNICEF (2002). Available at [http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/docs\\_new/documents/wffc-en.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/docs_new/documents/wffc-en.pdf).
11. Ibid.
12. Age criteria to define "children" and youth" in part overlap, but the focus in this report is specifically on children, referenced here as those under 18 years of age. There exist additional agreements and policy documents that concern themselves with youth, which are not included in this review.
13. See also Kirschke and Van Vliet- (2005).
14. For an excellent discussion of definitions, concepts and measurements of child poverty, see Minujin et al. (2006). See also Satterthwaite (2002).
15. See Chawla (2002). In contrast, it is possible to conceive of "paradoxical privilege" as situations in which children in affluent communities suffer from segmented relationships and social isolation.
16. The same observation emerged from a review of the drawings and answers of more than 1000 street children in response to the question "If I had the Chance..." (Asian Development Bank 2003).
17. Cf. Narayan (1999).
18. Van Vliet- (2002).
19. Commonwealth Youth Forum Opening ceremony: Statement by Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations. Entebbe, Uganda, 14 November 2007. Available at <http://hq.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=5454&catid=14&typeid=8&subMenuId=0>
20. For more on this project, see <http://www.younglives.org.uk/>.

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