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The missing population at the 2006 World Urban Forum

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ABSTRACT This comment discusses the lack of attention given to children at the June 2006 World Urban Forum in Vancouver. Although progress was made in terms of the recognition given to youth at this Forum, only two out of 162 events focused on the concerns of children under the age of 15 – a group that constitutes almost one-third of the world's population. This failure is not unique to this Forum, but reflects a broader failure to integrate attention to the priorities and involvement of children within development practice. The paper explains why this failure is significant, not only for children themselves but also for the successful implementation of the Forum's more general concern with "urban sustainability".

KEYWORDS children / environmental rights / urban sustainability

Between the World Urban Forum in Barcelona in 2004 and the World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 2006, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (Habitat) made great strides in recognizing the vital role of youth in sustainable urban development. Like women and indigenous people – other once neglected groups – youth were visible in many Forum sessions and invoked in many speeches. As some of the youth delegates observed, this is not the same as having their insights and interests mainstreamed into development processes, yet signifies, nevertheless, that the importance of these groups is formally acknowledged.

For people concerned with the Forum's theme of urban sustainability, one major group was still conspicuously overlooked – children. The lack of a serious dialogue on how to improve children's lives in cities is indicative of a larger – and more critical – lack of focus on children in development practice. If agencies such as UN-Habitat were to give genuine attention to the priorities and participation of both children and youth in local planning and development, then these priorities would be naturally reflected in international conferences such as the World Urban Forums and in the representation of young people in conference sessions – not as parallel events, but as an integrated cross-cutting focus on the many issues that affect young people's lives.

According to our review of the conference programme, the interests of children were the main focus of only two networking sessions out of a total of 162: one organized by the Children, Youth and Environments Center of the University of Colorado, and another by the Growing Up in Cities initiative of UNESCO. All other sessions related to young people

focused on youth, not children. Perhaps the organizers assumed that by giving attention to youth and to women, the needs of children would be covered. Maybe this is why at least five other proposals for networking sessions related to children, which we know were submitted by international organizations that advocate on children's behalf, were all rejected. Perhaps, because children can't vote, their presence in cities is easy for politicians to ignore, and Forum organizers were simply following policy makers' examples. Since there was no high level discussion of children and their needs at the Forum, we can only guess at the reasons why attempts to give more attention to children failed.

It is true that the United Nations' category of "youth" as young people aged between 15 and 24 overlaps by three years with the organization's official definition of "children" as all people under the age of 18. However, this still leaves a large population unaccounted for, as those under the age of 15 still constitute about 1.9 billion, or 29 per cent of the world's population.⁽¹⁾ In low- and middle-income nations, excluding China, this proportion rises to 35 per cent.⁽²⁾ Nor is it realistic or appropriate to expect that youth will speak for children. Youth are busy defining themselves as no longer children and finding their places in the adult world, and this is the rightful focus of their energy and attention.

It is also true that the lives of mothers and children are tied to each other, and that many efforts to improve urban conditions for women are likely to benefit children as well. There can be trade-offs, however. For example, efforts to integrate women into cash economies can disadvantage children unless high-quality child care is part of the plan, and unless girl children are enabled to continue their education rather than taking on the responsibilities of maintaining the home and minding younger children. Ways to help women fulfill their role as mothers are also likely to be overlooked unless children and their needs receive direct attention.

The theme of the 2006 World Urban Forum was "Sustainable Cities – Turning Ideas into Action". Neglecting the interests of children not only hurts children but also severely handicaps efforts to realize the idea of sustainable cities. Children can rightly be called the "keystone species" in the search for sustainability. As a Forum publication says: "*Urban sustainability is about the future and quality of life in our communities – for us and for our grandchildren's children.*"⁽³⁾ Sustainable development conserves resources for the future, and societies reach the future through their children. Children are not a special interest group. For 18 formative years, every person on the planet is a child, and the care and opportunities that they receive during this period largely determine their chances of living a healthy and productive life and contributing to society for the rest of their lives.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to survival and development (article 6), and when governments weigh plans, children's best interests should be a primary consideration (article 3).⁽⁴⁾ Examining the implications of these principles for urban development, UNICEF and Save the Children have identified "environmental rights of children" that are critical for their survival and development.⁽⁵⁾ These rights include an adequate standard of living and a secure place to live that affords privacy and protection from injury and violence, as well as access to nutrition, safe drinking water, sanitation, health care, education and places to play and be part of the life and culture of their society. When children work, they must be protected from

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hazardous conditions and enabled to pursue their education. Although the realization of these rights requires national and international cooperation and commitment, the provision of these conditions happens at the local level, and at this level, there is a great deal that even the most cash-strapped city governments can do.⁽⁶⁾ For this reason, the importance of provisions for children is written into Agenda 21 and the Habitat Agenda.⁽⁷⁾ If the organizers of the 2006 Forum had heeded these documents, or UN-Habitat's own Policy Dialogue on Youth, Children and Urban Governance, they would have given issues related to children more attention.⁽⁸⁾

Attention to children highlights the urgency of improving conditions for all city dwellers as rapidly as possible – and not just for the 100 million slum dwellers whose lives Millennium Development Goal 7 seeks to better by the target date of 2020. Unless there are more effective policies in place, by this date, an estimated 1.4 billion people are projected to live in slums.⁽⁹⁾ Children's brains, bodies, basic skills and sense of trust in themselves, other people and the future are being assembled now, with lasting consequences for the rest of their lives. The lines of the Chilean poet Gabriella Mistral ring true:

"Many of the things we need
can wait. The child cannot.
Right now is the time
his bones are being formed, his
blood is being made, and
his senses are being developed.
To him we cannot answer
'Tomorrow'."⁽¹⁰⁾

Children are not a special interest group, but they do require special attention in urban planning and development for a number of reasons – and by extension in international conferences dedicated to this field of practice:

- They are more vulnerable to risks in their environment than adults. Young children have less developed immune systems and as a result, most illnesses and deaths due to unsanitary living conditions occur in children under the age of five. Toxins and pollutants more seriously affect children because their bodies are growing rapidly, their organs are being formed and they absorb a higher quantity of these substances relative to their body weight. They are at higher risk of injury because of their drive to play and explore, and their more limited ability to understand and avoid danger.
- Children are especially affected by traffic. They are poor judges of traffic dangers and because of their size, they are less visible to drivers. Being closer to the ground, they are more exposed to particulates and gases from car emissions. When cars burn leaded gas, high levels of lead exposure can impair irreversibly children's nervous systems. In many cities, cars and trucks have taken over the streets that were children's traditional play spaces, bikeways and arenas to observe and join in the activities of their society. This is one of the causes of children's decreasing mobility and increasing obesity around the world. Therefore, children are one of the groups that has the most to gain from safe, non-polluting transport systems.

- Children's cognitive and social development is closely tied to the quality of their surroundings. Safe, stimulating opportunities for play are fundamental to their quality of life, but also have long-term implications for competence, identity and learning. Yet play is seldom considered a priority or even a factor in the development of community space.
- In the past, development plans have tended to view children as passive recipients of adult protection – if they have considered children at all. But children are insightful and resourceful agents in their own spheres of life, from a very young age. Giving them a voice in matters that affect them, as the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires (article 12), contributes to their sense of competence and self-worth, as well as enriching their communities with their creativity. By engaging in the evaluation and improvement of their local living environment, children learn democratic skills and values and prepare for active citizenship as adults.
- If the goals and practice of sustainable development are to be carried on from generation to generation, then children are the vital link. This means that they need an education for environmental awareness, opportunities to encounter nature, and examples of sustainable practice in their neighbourhoods. Experience also shows that the most effective way to lower birth rates and achieve a balance between natural resources and human needs is to educate girls.

To increase attention to children's issues in urban development, some basic changes in practice are required. These areas of practice include:

- **Resource allocations:** Making children's concerns a more significant factor does not mean that spending must be targeted primarily at interventions that affect only children, such as education and recreation. It does mean giving precedence to interventions that have particular importance for children's development, including housing, sanitation and community space, and ensuring that these resources are spent in ways that take children's concerns into account.
- **Standards:** Development interventions should be based on standards that reflect an understanding of the implications for children. Children's concerns should be a basic component of planning – not something addressed as an afterthought, if they are addressed at all.
- **Cooperation between sectors and disciplines:** Just as urban planning and policy making needs to consider children, development agencies and NGOs need to understand how local living conditions affect this age group. Too often, organizations that work for children's social development fail to understand how their well-being is related to the physical quality of their communities.
- **Consultation and participation:** Information from children regarding their own lives is essential for a genuine understanding of their concerns, and involving them in action to address local concerns has long-term benefits for communities as well as young participants. The issues and solutions that young people identify may be quite different from what adults consider to be most relevant in a given situation, even when adults are acting in what they feel are the best interests of children. Identifying and responding to the interests of young children requires consultation with mothers, although the ability of even very young children to share meaningful information

about their local environment should not be underestimated. Young people with disabilities can also play an important role in defining local issues that affect them, and in implementing solutions.

This work should be guided by the understanding that investments in children are not a diversion from attention to other components of sustainable development. They are a particularly effective use of resources that will yield the longest-term returns. If the preceding recommendations are made standard practice, then issues that concern children should be naturally integrated into speeches and sessions at future forums on urban development; also, NGOs that advocate for children should be encouraged to present their work; and many examples of projects that improve children's lives and include children's participation should be on display in conference exhibit halls.

Children do not need to be present at conferences for their interests to be recognized. However, when representatives of children's groups are given a voice, they almost invariably impress their audience with their competence. If children themselves are included, then some thought must be given to how to do this authentically. The first Habitat Forum in Vancouver in 1976 (the civil society conference organized alongside the official UN Conference on Human Settlements) offered one model. Besides a large lecture on planning for children in cities, it included a children's conference, and gave young representatives opportunities to address the larger conference. Only children from high-income countries were present, but nevertheless, the session demonstrated that even children as young as eight can share serious insights and recommendations for improving their cities. (In local consultations, even younger children can have useful input.)

The youth presence at the 2006 Forum offered different models of inclusion, some more effective than others. Although youth were highly visible, they were largely segregated in special sessions only attended by youth representatives and youth workers and advocates. Another limitation on youth effectiveness was that many of those who came represented leadership programmes that stressed empowerment in individualist ways rather than the democratic representation of local communities. Rather than staging parallel child and youth events, a better strategy would be for the United Nations to offer guidelines for all NGOs and government agencies to find ways of building child and youth participation into their local practices, and then to bring some of these young people to national and global conferences as a regular part of institutional capacity building. There was at least one excellent example of this approach at the 2006 Forum. In a UNICEF session on "Youth, Urban Safety and Post-Conflict Settings", youth from Palestine and Jamaica were included as an integral part of the work, based on the reality of their everyday participation in local community development. They spoke confidently about their involvement, with no sense of needing to be given a separate voice. Those who work with younger children know that they are capable of similar contributions.

When children are given focused attention and when they speak for themselves, it is apparent that the conditions that they need for healthy development are also the conditions of sustainable cities. Because people in all sectors of society pass through childhood and have children, a commitment to the well-being of children has the potential to unify

societies around the goal of sustainability. When UN agencies, member nations, development agencies and city governments put children front and centre of their thinking, they will seize their own best chance to achieve the urban sustainability that they profess to seek.

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