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# Rhetoric, reality and resilience: overcoming obstacles to young people's participation in development

David Driskell, Kanchan Bannerjee and Louise Chawla

Kanchan Bannerjee and David Driskell co-directed the Growing Up in Cities project in Sathanagar. Kanchan Bannerjee, a sociologist, is currently managing trustee of Jyoshika, a Bangalore-based NGO which works with the government to promote educational opportunities for children in low-income areas. David Driskell, an urban planner, is now a partner in Baird & Driskell Community Planning in the San Francisco Bay Area, but returns regularly to India. Louise Chawla, a developmental and environmental psychologist, is the project's international coordinator and a professor in the honors programme at Kentucky State University. Parts of this article are taken from Bannerjee, K and D Driskell, (in press), "Tales from truth town: children's lives in a South Indian 'slum'" in Chawla, L (editor), *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*, Earthscan Publications, London.

Addresses:  
David Driskell, Baird & Driskell Community Planning, 129 Lake Avenue, Piedmont, CA 94611, USA. E-mail: driskell@pobox.com

Kanchan Bannerjee, 312 Chitrapur Apartments, 15 Cross, Malleswaram, Bangalore 560055, India. E-mail: mkbanner@satyam.net.in

Louise Chawla, Whitney Young College, Kentucky State University, Frankfort, KY 40601, USA. E-mail: chawla393@aol.com

**SUMMARY:** This paper describes the difficult relationships among those implementing an action research project with children in a low-income settlement in Bangalore (India), the distant and unresponsive bureaucracy of an international funding agency, and the authoritarian management of the NGO through whom its money was channelled. This case study highlights the difficulties that international agencies face in operationalizing the principles of grassroots participation that they officially endorse. The action research was one of several projects within the Growing up in Cities programme. It shows the difficult circumstances under which so many young people live, including six and seven-year-olds thrust into adult roles and lives cut short by disease and violence. But it also shows their astonishing resilience and energy, self-reliance and optimism. External agencies, from local governments and NGOs to international funders, need to work with children to understand what does (and what does not) work for them. This means recognizing that they are important actors in their own communities and that their insights, energy and creativity should be fostered and supported rather than ignored.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN HIS MILLENNIUM report *We the Peoples*, Kofi Annan describes a village of 1,000 inhabitants who represent the characteristics of our contemporary "global village" in exactly the same proportions.<sup>(1)</sup> Of the 1,000 residents, 780 live in low income areas and 390 are less than 20 years old. Of these young people, three-quarters live in the low-income neighbourhoods. To extend this comparison, imagine that half the residents are urban and the proportion living in urban areas is growing steadily. This article describes one such urban community – a self-built settlement called Sathanagar on the periphery of Bangalore, South India – from the eyes of the children who live there. It also recounts a partially realized attempt to create a model project for participatory community development for all ages, including the children. In their poverty and their place in the developing world, these children of Sathanagar represent an increasing proportion of the young people of our world's global village.

We refer to our work with the children of Sathanagar as a "partially realized attempt to create a model project" because the generous human and financial resources and supportive international network with which the project began turned out to be of little avail in the face of all-too-common hurdles to authentic and inclusive community participation. The

article begins by presenting briefly the principles that underlay the project, the project itself and the view of Sathyanagar that was shared by its children. It then relates how this initiative was thwarted by the distant and indifferent bureaucracy of a development agency and the authoritarian management of a non-governmental organization, with an emphasis on the lessons that can be learned from this experience in order to create alternative practices that will more effectively support genuine participation by children and other age groups. It is imperative to learn these lessons because the stories of Sathyanagar's young people speak not only of economic hardships and environmental hazards but also of energy, self-reliance and optimism, cultural traditions and pride, inventiveness and resilience. It is only by understanding and building upon this rich human and cultural capital that the dynamics of successful development can be fostered.

## II. CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

"PARTICIPATION" HAS BEEN widely advocated in the field of international development since the 1960s. By the 1970s, however, some observers had already noted that the term meant different things to different people.<sup>(2)</sup> To some, people's involvement in development processes represents a way of making them more receptive to the predetermined policies of authorities. To others (including the authors), it represents a form of individual and collective self-realization that engages people in significant decision-making that, ultimately, challenges existing structures of authority and involves genuine transfers of power.

What is new to this discussion is the increasing number of people who now advocate the inclusion of children in development decision-making, especially since the United Nations' adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.<sup>(3)</sup> According to the Convention, children have a right to a voice in decisions that affect their lives; and the guidelines for the implementation of the Convention specifically note that this right extends to decisions relating to their living environment.<sup>(4)</sup> Building on these principles, Agenda 21 from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also called the Earth Summit) and the Habitat Agenda from the 1996 Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (also called the Cities Summit) identify children and youth as major groups who need to be involved in the protection of the environment and the creation of sustainable settlements.

In the words of the preamble to the Habitat Agenda: "Special attention needs to be paid to participatory processes dealing with the shaping of cities, towns and neighbourhoods; this is in order to secure the living conditions of children and youth and to make use of their insight, creativity and thoughts on the environment."<sup>(5)</sup> The literature on children's participation recognizes that children are the best experts on many aspects of their life quality, and that they will most effectively learn how to play an active and responsible role in democratic society if they have opportunities to develop and apply their own ideas in supportive community settings.<sup>(6)</sup> In addition, it is often observed that cities that are more just and equitable for children are more liveable places for all ages.<sup>(7)</sup>

Based on these principles, *Growing Up in Cities*, a programme of participatory action research with children and youth that was originally

1. Annan, K (2000), *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*, United Nations, New York, Section II D, pages 52-54.

2. Pearse, A and M Stiefel (editors) (1979), *Enquiry into Participation*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva.

3. See, in particular, Article 12 and related provisions in Articles 13 through 15 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, *First Call for Children*, UNICEF, New York, pages 41-75.

4. Hodgkin, R and P Newell (1998), *Implementation Handbook on the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UNICEF, New York.

5. UNCHS (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements) (1997), *The Habitat Agenda*, UNCHS, Nairobi, paragraph 13.

6. Hart, R (1997), *Children's Participation*, Earthscan Publications, London.

7. Bartlett, S, R Hart, D Satterthwaite, X de la Barra and A Missair (1999), *Cities for Children*, Earthscan Publications, London.

8. "Growing Up in Cities" was first conceived by the urban planner Kevin Lynch in collaboration with UNESCO. See Lynch, K (editor) (1977), *Growing Up in Cities*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. For a review of the project revival in collaboration with the MOST Programme of UNESCO, see Chawla, L (editor) (in press), *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*, Earthscan Publications, London. An updated project description is available at [www.unesco.org/most/growing.htm](http://www.unesco.org/most/growing.htm).

**"This is the first time someone has asked me what I like and dislike" – Sumithra (girl) age 12**

initiated in the 1970s, was revived in 1995 and introduced in low-income communities around the world, including Sathyanaagar.<sup>(8)</sup> Supported by the MOST programme of UNESCO and a variety of international and national agencies, the project seeks to understand children's own perspectives on the places where they live, their concerns relating to the urban environment and their proposals for change. It then uses these insights as the foundation for actual improvements in the environment, as well as occasions for public education and more responsive policy-making relating to urban issues for children.

With these goals, Growing Up in Cities was introduced in Sathyanaagar in 1997. It was intended to be the first phase of a pilot project that would demonstrate how to incorporate all segments of the population, including children and youth as well as women and men, in a participatory process that would culminate in a community action plan for improving the local area. The plan would be designed to identify and coordinate actions that residents could implement themselves over the coming years as well as actions that could be taken by local authorities or supported by development aid agencies.

As they are currently allocated, development funds that are targeted to children and youth almost exclusively address goals that adults have predetermined to be in the best interests of children, such as education, vaccinations and pre-natal care. Essential as these goals are, they fail to accommodate the "participation clauses" of the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the related agreements of Agenda 21 and the Habitat Agenda, for they fail to acknowledge that children are also important actors in their communities, with insight, energy and creativity to contribute. Therefore, "Growing Up in Sathyanaagar" sought to demonstrate how young people could be integrated into a comprehensive process of community development.

### III. GROWING UP IN SATHYANAGAR

SATHYANAGAR WAS CHOSEN as a project site because, in many ways, it is representative of countless urban areas of poverty and official neglect in the South. It was believed, therefore, that the lessons learned there could be widely applied. As this article will relate, the experience in Sathyanaagar proved representative of the barriers that low-income communities face in more ways than were ever anticipated. At the same time, Sathyanaagar is typical in the paradoxical sense that it is special: it dramatizes the point that priorities for local development need to be defined according to the specific resources and problems of each community, which means that inclusive participation in development planning is essential. This section, therefore, presents the special combination of characteristics that formed the identity of Sathyanaagar in the eyes of its children.

The Growing Up in Cities project in Sathyanaagar worked with 38 children (18 girls and 20 boys) aged ten through 14. The children represented a cross-section of the community's linguistic and religious groups, as well as the option of attending a state-subsidized school or a non-formal school operated by a local NGO (non-governmental organization). Four children in the sample had dropped out of school to work full time. As at other project locations, the research phase with the children involved formal and informal observations, one-on-one interviews, children's drawings



A 12-year old girl from Sathanagar talks about what she likes and does not like about the area where she lives in an interview that was conducted as part of the Growing Up in Cities project. Photo: D. Driskell

of their local area, child-led walking tours and photographs taken by children. A community survey and mapping of the site were also carried out, as well as interviews with parents and local officials who were responsible for providing basic services to the community.<sup>(9)</sup>

Project work was largely undertaken by a team of young researchers in their twenties, trained and managed by the first two authors under the auspices of a non-governmental organization, the Centre for Environment Education (CEE). Students in environmental science at a local college were also invited to participate in the initial training activities, and several became actively involved in the research. The project also involved staff from two other NGOs: DEEDS (Development Education Society), which operates informal school and job training activities in Sathanagar and TIDE (Technology Informatics Design Endeavour), which carried out a community survey and preliminary mapping of the site as part of the project activities. The Norwegian aid agency, NORAD, provided funding for the project.

Because this article focuses on development policy, it will only briefly describe the research results.<sup>(10)</sup> In summary, the stories shared by Sathanagar's young people spoke of young people living under difficult circumstances: of six and seven-year-olds thrust into adult roles; of hours spent each day in household chores such as fetching potable water; of children exposed to open sewer drains in their daily play; of people's lives cut short by disease and violence; of social and political injustice. Yet they also spoke of young people with an astonishing degree of resilience. In many cases, the children of Sathanagar could be described as confident, connected and happy – words seldom used to describe young people in many other Growing Up in Cities sites that enjoyed much higher relative levels of well-being.

This paradox of children leading culturally and emotionally rich lives within the context of a poor and environmentally degraded place is not a naïve story about poor people content with their low station in life. Such

9. The project methods are detailed in Driskell, D (in press), *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth*, Earthscan Publications, London.

10. For an extensive report of the results of "Growing Up in Cities" in Sathanagar, see Bannerjee, K and D Driskell (in press), "Tales from truth town: children's lives in a South Indian 'slum'" in Chawla, see reference 8.

**"The gutters are dirty and there is no flow of sewage and so it stinks" – Murali Kumar (boy) age 11**

an interpretation would serve only the interests of those who wish to retain the inequities of the status quo. The larger context of these observations was official neglect, broken promises, wasted resources and squandered opportunities, which cast an unflattering light not only on inefficient, ineffective and sometimes inept or corrupt bureaucracies and politicians, but also on misguided development agencies and mismanaged non-governmental groups. The story of Sathanagar is about young people making their way in the world as best they could, in spite of the failure of the official adult world to meet their basic needs. In doing so, they were fortunate to live in a community that possessed a number of advantages, some apparent and some perhaps invisible to the eyes of its adults.

Sathanagar first took shape more than 30 years ago, when rural migrants from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu staked a claim to this land on the north-east periphery of Bangalore, organized themselves as a registered cooperative, and convinced a sympathetic politician to grant them tenure. They also organized a clear street pattern and divided the land into 60 by 40 foot and 30 by 40 foot parcels. Sathanagar thus began with two key advantages that are often not available to self-built settlements, namely, secure land tenure and an organized pattern of development.<sup>(11)</sup>

The children of Sathanagar also had the advantage of being part of a generally cohesive culture steeped in tradition, myth and ritual that gave them a strong sense of identity. They knew who they were and had a strong sense of belonging, due in part to their extended family networks, strong ties of kinship and a vibrant social and cultural context in which interaction with community members of all ages was an integral part of daily life. Religion, with its symbols and rituals, also played an important role in community life, as did diversity based upon language and place of origin. At the time of the project fieldwork in 1997, 90 per cent of the 3,200 inhabitants of Sathanagar were Hindu, with the remainder divided among Christians (7 per cent) and Muslims (3 per cent). Eighty-five per cent spoke Tamil, 10 per cent spoke Telegu and the remainder Urdu or Kannada. Although the children were aware of their different religious affiliations, languages and places of origin, they made little or no distinction in their play activities and their friendships.

Situated on the periphery of the booming city of Bangalore, Sathanagar had the appearance and feel of a village. At the time of the fieldwork, the primary approach was a dusty, pot-holed lane that turned off from the heavily traffic-laden, shop-lined Banaswadi main road. As one progressed along the lane, the chaotic atmosphere of the main road receded and a quieter, less intense atmosphere emerged. The street became the domain of pedestrians, bicycles and pushcarts, with only the occasional auto-rickshaw, car or small truck interrupting the flow of activities.

Whereas the settlement was originally made up of mud-built homes with thatched roofs, over time many of these structures had been replaced by cinder block construction with corrugated asbestos roofs. Some dwellings had added second storeys, showing ongoing, cumulative processes of home improvement. A number of small shops and small industries operated from the ground floor of homes or adjacent structures. The settlement's location next to a dry lake bed, a military establishment, a railway line, an industrial storage area, and an abandoned and overgrown tank (water reservoir) also meant that there was a range of nearby open spaces and natural areas.

11. Another "Growing Up in Cities" site demonstrated the contrasting effects of insecure tenure on children's lives. See Swart Kruger, J (in press), "Children in a South African squatter camp gain and lose a voice" in Chawla, see reference 8.

**"At home they scold me if I play. They say I am too grown-up for that. So I run off to my aunt's place... there she does not mind" – Ghousiya (girl) age 14.**



The self-built settlement of Sathyannagar has the appearance and feel of a village, although that is quickly changing as the Bangalore area continues its rapid expansion and ongoing urbanization. Photo: D. Driskell

Although the environment was degraded by water pollution and inadequate sanitation and drainage, it contained a variety of spaces where the children could gather to play or to participate in community activities. There was a clear sense of community boundaries and a strong feeling of safety within the settlement itself, so that children felt free to move about within it. A glade of trees and a small meadow in a ravine beside the abandoned railroad tracks, as well as the water and plants along the tank's edge, provided pockets of natural areas that were special places to many children, especially boys. Such a mosaic of accessible public and semi-public places has been identified as being critical to healthy child development.<sup>(12)</sup>

Although Sathyannagar may have been poor in financial capital, in the eyes of the project children it was rich in social and cultural capital. Despite many chores and school responsibilities, the children took advantage of every spare moment to play and they were rarely at a loss for friends or ideas. Despite their material lack of play equipment, they were found engaged in all manner of activities: playing tag, rolling an old tire with a stick, drawing in the dirt, exploring an adjacent area, playing *gilli dandu* (a popular game played with two sticks), or even building a makeshift "temple" complete with an idol and a ceremonial *pooja* (worship service). Two large flat open spaces on the periphery of the settlement were the site for Sunday afternoon cricket tournaments, pitting teams from Sathyannagar against teams from adjacent settlements. During the several-month process of conducting the research activities, not a single child in Sathyannagar was ever heard to utter the phrase, "I'm bored".

The children were keenly aware of the environmental problems and drawbacks of their local area yet, with few exceptions, their attitudes about the future were largely positive. Most children saw the community as having improved throughout their childhood years and on a path to further improvement. When they were asked where they would like to live when they grew up, nearly all of the children who were interviewed did not hesitate in answering "Sathyannagar."

**"There are hiding places here, to play hide-and-seek" – Raju (boy) age 10**

12. For a discussion of the importance of similar spaces in the Buenos Aires location of "Growing Up in Cities", see Cosco, N and R Moore (in press), "Our neighborhood is like that! Cultural richness and childhood identity in Boca-Barracas, Buenos Aires" in Chawla, see reference 8. See also "Neighbourhoods for children" in Bartlett, S et al. (1999), see reference 7.

**"I love playing cricket... On Sundays we have all the time to play... we have matches with other teams" – Elumalai (boy) age 13**

**"In the future, Sathanagar will have a tap beside each house, and tarred roads... It will be so good, they will write about us in the newspapers" – Gousiya (girl) age 14.**



Sathanagar is bounded by a dry lake bed, a military establishment, a railway line, an industrial storage area and an abandoned and overgrown tank, or water reservoir, providing a range of nearby open spaces and natural areas. Map: N. Kudva

#### IV. MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

GROWING UP IN Cities follows the premise that it is critical to understand community strengths from a child's point of view, as well as problems. Otherwise, well-intended development projects may destroy fragile but precious resources while addressing problems which may not be priorities for change from residents' own perspectives. As the preceding summary of project fieldwork reveals, Sathanagar emerged as a place with severe problems but with many resources to build upon as well.

This premise, and the corresponding need to incorporate children into development planning, was officially endorsed by NORAD, the Norwegian aid agency, and CEE, the NGO that managed the Growing Up in Cities process in Sathanagar. In retrospect, there were warning signs from the beginning that these organizations did not have the operating practices necessary to provide the support for grassroots participation that they had promised.

With the encouragement of NORAD-India and the programme coordinator at CEE (a woman who was based in Delhi at that time), the activities originally envisioned for Growing Up in Cities-Sathanagar and the accompanying budget were considerably expanded. This was due to a lack of interest in supporting research activities rather than tangible, measurable outcomes, as well as the desire to fund a small number of large projects rather than a large number of small projects. The final proposal submitted to NORAD-India outlined a year-long schedule of activities that would include participatory evaluation of the local area, a community-wide social survey, development of a geographic information system, preparation of a community action plan, and a variety of public information and education materials.

Previously, NORAD had supported the construction of a toilet complex in Sathanagar and a number of other CEE initiatives under the management of the same CEE programme coordinator who was assigned to oversee Growing Up in Cities. On the very first day of interviews with children at the site, several of the children pointed out that the toilet complex had been built on what had previously been their favourite play space. This information came as a surprise to several members of the

project team, since the CEE programme coordinator had previously stated that the toilet project had been undertaken with extensive community participation, including the participation of children. This and several other incidents made it clear that the claims and reality of previous participation efforts were two different things.

Other warning signs were apparent in the way in which the local project staff was being managed by the Delhi-based programme coordinator, especially the way in which unilateral decisions were made based on incomplete and often inaccurate information. Staff in the Bangalore office never seemed to be completely aware of who was supposed to be working on which project, or even the basic status of the office's various projects. In fact, statements by the programme coordinator indicated that the initial proposal for Growing Up in Cities had been significantly modified at the insistence of NORAD. Yet repeated requests by the local Growing Up in Cities directors to see a copy of the revised proposal and its staff plan, schedule and activities were left unanswered.

The unpredictable nature of programme management was exacerbated by the way in which many of the local staff were treated. Staff were repeatedly told that their efforts were inadequate or unacceptable. In several situations, staff members were threatened with having their jobs terminated, or even had letters sent home to their parents complaining about their performance. For the young, largely lower-income staff members and their families, these incidents were extremely upsetting. Rarely, if ever, were staff contributions and successes noted or rewarded.

As the months of project work progressed, the situation between the programme coordinator in Delhi and the local management team became increasingly strained. Misunderstandings grew despite lengthy letters to Delhi explaining what was happening locally in Bangalore and in relation to the international Growing Up in Cities efforts. These misunderstandings came to a head when the programme coordinator complained that she and CEE were not being properly acknowledged by the international project (despite repeated explanations that the "international project" was a grassroots network of individuals and organizations like CEE who were committed to children's participation, not a large central organization with resources at its disposal). She abruptly decided to halt all work on the project and to withdraw CEE support. All project files – including the results of the door-to-door community survey and mapping work – were to be locked in the CEE offices.

Although this decision was upsetting and frustrating, the responses from local staff members were rewarding in their own way. Although several of them relied on their income from CEE and did not want to jeopardize their employment, they had also developed a strong commitment to the project and to the young people of Sathyanagar. On their own initiative, they decided to continue working on the project in their own time, in the evenings and at weekends, and this allowed the completion of the activities which represented the research portion of the Growing Up in Cities programme. In addition, because the project had worked closely with a second NGO, DEEDS, it was possible to implement at least one response to the issues raised by Sathyanagar's young people, namely, the need for a quiet place to study as well as a place for job-training. In 1998, a study centre was constructed by DEEDS with the participation of Sathyanagar's young people and with funding provided by Norwegian children through the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's "Children's Hour" programme.

Unfortunately, the same quality of response was not forthcoming from either CEE's national offices or NORAD's offices in Delhi or Oslo. Despite faxes, phone calls and letters, both organizations only said that they would look into the matter. No subsequent correspondence was ever received.

Both NORAD and CEE have earned reputations as well-intentioned organizations with many good achievements to their credit. The point of this story is not to single them out for blame. The fact that even such well-reputed organizations failed to support this local participatory initiative illustrates the extent of the barriers to translating the rhetoric of participation into actual practice. When the practice of international development so glaringly failed to support this initiative, despite the quality of the organizations involved and the international connections of the pilot project, it raises significant questions about the possibility of success for genuine community-based planning. The fact that a single programme coordinator was able to undermine the efforts of an entire project team – with no recourse for addressing the issue at the local, national or international level – illustrates the obstacles faced by young people and disenfranchised communities when it comes to the realization of their rights, including their right to define their own development priorities. It also raises fundamental issues of NGO ethics and accountability. Who is responsible for ensuring that an NGO is actually working in a community's best interests? Without an effective institutional framework to promote ethics and accountability, there is a very real risk that NGOs can undermine legitimate community interests, leaving local residents without any established mechanism – such as an election – through which they can change the situation.

## V. LESSONS FOR PLANNERS AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

THE STORIES SHARED by Sathyanagar's young people speak to the realities of their lives and the place where they live, whereas the experience of working with them and with the various organizations and actors that affect their lives has shed light on some of the realities of the development process and the challenges of participation. Although the results of the Growing Up in Cities project in Sathyanagar are based on interactions with a small group of young people in a single place and time, they nevertheless provide insights and lessons that are worthy of consideration and application in other contexts.

Sathyanagar fits the pattern of "paradoxical poverty" that has been found in other low income areas that are poor in material terms but rich in other critical resources, in the eyes of their children.<sup>13</sup> The optimistic way in which the children of Sathyanagar presented their community left us searching for clues as to how they could be so apparently confident, self-aware and resilient in an environment that was so demanding and, at times, threatening. Table 1 presents a summary of what emerged as some of the key factors that supported young people's well-being in Sathyanagar.

Given Sathyanagar's social, cultural and environmental resources, it is tempting to think about what might have been achieved through the comprehensive process of community-based planning that had been proposed originally, which would have built upon existing strengths and

13. For discussions of "paradoxical poverty" in places that are poor in material resources yet rich in social, cultural or environmental resources, see reference 12, Cosco and Moore (in press); also McKendrick, J (1998), "Families and family environments in Manchester," *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society, 1995-1997*, pages 1-27.

addressed important needs. Reflections on what went wrong point to a number of lessons that may have value for others who are involved in planning and development processes. These lessons are applicable whether one is working at the local, regional, national or international levels, and whether within a governmental, non-governmental or multi-lateral setting.

**Promote participation that is inclusive and meaningful.** Local residents – especially women and children – need to be engaged in community development activities. They are the only real “experts” on their daily lives and local conditions. They should be treated as partners in the development process rather than as victims in need of help. Real solutions

**Table 1: Factors that contributed to children's well-being in Sathanagar**

- **Cultural Identity.** The local culture – steeped in tradition, myth and ritual – provided children with a strong sense of identity. They knew who they were and they had a strong sense of belonging as well as pride.
- **Social Networks.** Extended families and the close-knit (though sometimes fractious) community gave young people a sense of safety and the ability to move freely throughout the local area. It was also evident that parents were deeply concerned about their children's well being, and that by and large children felt that they were valued and important members of the community.
- **Responsibilities.** Young people's sense of being valued was strongly reinforced by the expectations and responsibilities placed upon them both at home and in the community at large.
- **Natural Diversity.** One of the surprises revealed by Sathanagar's young people was the rich diversity of natural areas available in their local area. These trees, ponds and grassy areas provided a much needed refuge and supported highly valued play experiences.
- **Location and Layout.** Sathanagar's location on the fringe of the metropolitan area provided access to natural settings as well as urban amenities and excitement – features that young people valued.
- **Basic Services and Facilities.** Although Sathanagar's residents face many hardships, there are several NGOs that are providing basic services and facilities to fill the void in government services, especially in education and job training.
- **Land Tenure.** The fact that residents had title to their land undoubtedly had a strong impact on the community's feelings of ownership, security and pride – feelings that had been passed on to young residents too.
- **A Culture of Democracy.** India is proud of its status as the world's largest democracy and, imperfect though the system may be, people in Sathanagar assumed that their relationship with government agencies and officials was not one of “Do we have a right to expect this?” but, rather, “How can we best access that which is rightfully ours?”

require that residents of all ages have a voice in the planning and decision-making process, and a real stake in the long-term development and sustainability of their community. Enabling this to happen requires more than a set of participatory methods. It requires an understanding and commitment to participatory principles from every level of the organizations involved, from funding agencies to project staff and residents themselves.

**Operate using participatory principles.** Organizations working to promote participatory forms of development must internalize participatory principles and methods in their own operations. Espousing participatory principles outside the organization and then operating in an authoritarian manner within the organization will undermine credibility and will eventually undermine the ability to undertake participatory programmes.

14. Chawla, L (in press), "Spots of time: different ways of being in nature in childhood" in Kahn, P H and S Kellert (editors), *Children and Nature*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

**Restructure the criteria and procedures used by funding agencies.** Although many funding agencies espouse participatory ideals in their programme brochures and publicize participatory practices in their project descriptions, the reality is that few if any funding agencies operate in a manner that actually supports local participation efforts. Most funding agencies limit the range of issues or types of projects for which their funds can be used; they want to know ahead of time what the project outcomes will be; they prefer to fund a few big projects rather than numerous small ones; they prioritize quantitative, project-oriented measures of success over qualitative and process-oriented measures; and they establish strict time-lines for the start and finish of each project. Funding agencies need to commit themselves to long-term investments and solutions; need to provide greater flexibility for local determination of funding priorities; need to support small projects; need to encourage project phasing; and need to value process outcomes as well as product outcomes.<sup>(14)</sup> The message that "the ends justify the means" – a message unintentionally yet strongly advocated by many funding agencies – needs to be removed from the funding equation.

**Provide local management and monitoring.** Participatory projects cannot be managed from a distance. When the process is valued as highly as other project outcomes, project management and communication must be daily and face-to-face.

**Cultivate talented, reliable staff.** International and national agencies need to cultivate talented, reliable staff at the local level, since it is here that the success or failure of participatory programmes will be determined. Local level managers and staff need to be considered and valued as the most important and influential people in the organization, with the remainder of the organizational resources available to support them in their ongoing work efforts. Ineffective staff and inappropriate management should not be tolerated as an unavoidable part of the system.

**Integrate research and action.** Throughout the initial fundraising phase of the project, potential funding agencies consistently indicated that they had no interest in funding "research projects". While safeguards need to be in place to ensure that research is linked to action, and that research results are put to good use, the almost complete lack of support for research-related activities was troubling and, perhaps, indicative of why so many development projects fail to achieve their objectives or, too often, result in more harm than good. Research and action are interdependent. Neither is viable without the other.

**Incorporate qualitative as well as quantitative measures of young people's well-being.** A statistical analysis of quantitative measures of the well-being of Sathyanagar's young people, by itself, would certainly not have yielded the same understanding of their lives as did the participatory exploration of their life quality. Factoring in qualitative measures leads to a much richer understanding of young people's lives and the issues they face, and reveals existing resources to be conserved as well as problems to be addressed. Importantly, it also leads to far different conclusions about what should be done to enhance community quality for children and youth.

**Encourage reflection and evaluation, and value success in all its forms.** Project monitoring and evaluation cannot be achieved through a single visit by an outside evaluator or even several visits over the course of a project. While an outside perspective can certainly be useful, most evaluation visits tend to be staged events put on by local staff for the

benefit of the visitor. Instead, reflection and evaluation must be a regular part of any participatory project and should be conducted in a manner that actively involves project staff as well as local residents. It requires that participants consider both the strengths and weaknesses of the process and its outcomes, recognizing and valuing success while always searching for better ways to do things the next time around.

**Integrate natural settings into the urban environment.** The story of Sathanagar reinforces what research on children's environments has repeatedly shown, namely, that access to natural settings has an irreplaceable value in children's lives.<sup>15</sup> Planners and decision makers need to understand the value that these settings have, and work to preserve them as part of the urban fabric.

**Develop partnerships and a broad-based support network.** A successful programme of participatory community development requires the active involvement of a range of groups and individuals, from local government agencies and elected officials to service organizations, community groups, technical professionals and individual residents. The Sathanagar project was able to move forward (although in a limited way) after its funds were cut off due to the support of local staff and DEEDS. The project's ability to move forward more fully would have been considerably enhanced if the network of support had been broadened at an earlier date to include government departments, other NGOs and a coalition of funding sources.

Although funding was pulled from the Sathanagar project and the community action plan was never developed and implemented, there were nevertheless a number of positive outcomes from the Growing Up

in Cities initiative. These include the new study centre; staff training and experience in participatory methods; a noticeable shift in staff attitudes towards greater respect for "slum" areas; and young people's pleasure and enthusiasm in thinking about the place where they live and articulating their ideas about it. The research in Sathanagar also gave insight into an area where much too little is known: the experience of poverty from children's perspectives.

Research on resilience in children at risk has demonstrated that resilient children do not possess unique qualities that set them apart from other children. Rather, in the midst of adversity, they have been able to secure important resources that foster healthy and competent human development.<sup>16</sup> These resources



A glade of trees and small meadow in a nearby hidden ravine provided uncommon access to nature for a settlement such as Sathanagar and was highly valued by children. Photo: S R Prakash

15. For further analyses of conflicts between funding agency practices and processes which actually support beneficiaries' self-determination, see: Nieuwenhuys, O (1997), "Spaces for the children of the urban poor," *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 9, No 1, pages 233-249; also Satterthwaite, D et al. (1996), *The Environment for Children*, Earthscan Publications, London, chapter 6.

16. Masten, A S and J D Coatsworth, (1998), "The development of competence in favourable and unfavourable environments," *American Psychologist*, Vol 53, No 2, pages 205-220.

include a close relationship with a parent figure who provides warmth and structure, a supportive extended family network, connections to pro-social organizations and adults beyond the family, effective schools, and opportunities to be sociable and to develop a sense of self-confidence, self-esteem and faith. At their best, children's environments function with redundancy: if a resource is lacking in one place, it can be found in another. In many ways, despite its very real socio-economic disadvantages, Sathanagar provided resources for resilience.

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, most of the world's children – like the children of Sathanagar – face socio-economic inequities that require that they demonstrate sturdy levels of resilience if they are to surmount the obstacles they face and become successful members of their societies. It is therefore critical to know what works for the children in each community in addition to knowing what does not. This type of understanding can only be gained through an inclusive and participatory evaluation that involves residents of all ages, children as well as adults, in identifying "resources for resilience" as well as issues for action. For these processes to work, development aid agencies, governments and NGOs must learn how to support genuine processes of participation that build on people's strengths, in reality as well as in rhetoric.