

# **Integrating Children's Rights into Municipal Action: A Review of Progress and Lessons Learned**

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## **Comment on This Article**

### **Abstract**

*This paper reviews case studies and examples of activities undertaken by local governments and their partners on behalf of children and young people. These examples are drawn primarily from the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Secretariat (CFCS) database. The activities considered include not only the implementation of initiatives for children, but the level of attention to children and youth in such routine local government procedures as planning, regulatory processes, budgeting, data collection and capacity building. The review concludes that there has been significant innovation and commitment to making cities better places for children on the part of many local governments, especially in such areas as child and youth participation. However, these examples also suggest that there is generally more interest in showcase projects than in broader changes in awareness and inclusion; more interest in the development of projects than in the nuts and bolts of sustaining them; and very little attention to monitoring and evaluation, or to child impact assessment.*

**Keywords:** **Children, youth, urban, local government, Child Friendly Cities**

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## Introduction

This review looks at a range of activities undertaken by local governments and their partners to make the concerns of children and youth an integral part of policy and practice.<sup>1</sup> It draws primarily on a database compiled by UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Secretariat (CFCS), but also on links from this database, on material collected by Save the Children Sweden, and on various documents and accounts that are not part of the CFC database, but would be at home there.<sup>2</sup> It can by no means, however, be considered a comprehensive review. Many positive examples remain undocumented, and much of what is documented undoubtedly remains uncollected by international agencies. What we have here is a relatively small body of material. However, it can be considered a reasonable overview of the kinds of efforts being made by municipalities worldwide that have chosen to give attention to the issue of children's rights—both in areas that have received quite good attention, and those where much remains much to be learned.

In reading over the interesting and often impressive innovations that have been made in various places, it is easy to begin to assume that attention to young people on the part of local governments is a flourishing phenomenon. But the fact is that these promising advances are more the exception than the rule. It is far more likely that children, if they are considered at all, are seen only as the recipients of particular targeted services in such areas as education, health and social protection—not as citizens with a range of requirements which need to be considered in all phases and sectors of local planning and action. Most often, the “trickle-down” effect is assumed to be sufficient for children's needs; that is to say, if communities at large are considered to benefit from some effort, then it is often taken for granted that children, too, will benefit.

For instance, in the [International Union of Local Authorities \(IULA\) website](#), cited on the CFCS database, only one reference to children can be found—a link that refers the reader back again to UNICEF. Yet this same IULA website has a substantial and impressive database on the issues around women and local governance. Another interesting example is a 48-page document entitled “Planning for London's Growth,” produced by the Greater London Authority in 2002. A word search of this document produces only two references to children, both of them pointing out that many London children speak English as a second language. Although London has an impressive range of services for children, and has prepared a notable Children and Young People's Strategy, it does not appear that a deep awareness of children has percolated into the planning department.

It is also worth noting in advance how few of the documented accounts of municipal initiatives undertaken with children in mind include a truly reflective and self-critical component, or an effort to monitor success over time. Most often they are simply snapshots of systems or projects with little attempt to consider how well they have worked and what might be learned from them. It would be interesting to know, for example, not only what kind of training has been made available to local officials, but how they have used it; not only what kinds of plans have been developed with regard to children, but whether they have been implemented; not only what measures are taken to give children a voice, but whether their opinions are valued

and acted upon. Attempts to chase down this kind of information were mostly unproductive. Websites were often not updated, and email messages either bounced back or remained unanswered. When there was a response, it was often to explain that the initiative had not proceeded as planned.

This review is organized into the following categories:

- legal and regulatory frameworks;
- institutional structures, processes and partnerships;
- plans of action;
- data collection and information management;
- budgets;
- training and capacity building;
- raising public awareness;
- participation of children and youth;
- implementation; and
- monitoring and learning from experience.

These sections overlap in many ways, and there are numerous cross-references.

### **Legal and Regulatory Frameworks**

When countries sign the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it is expected that legislation at all levels will be brought into compliance with the provisions of the Convention. This should include municipal ordinances and regulatory codes that affect the built environment and service provision. However, I have found no examples of such modifications, useful as they would be to cities seeking to give practical attention to children's requirements. Changes to regulatory codes would not make exciting reading, and so perhaps this is not an area of activity that a "child-friendly city" would be likely to document and disseminate. It is also quite possible that this is simply something that has not been widely addressed.

What is available are statements of commitment from various cities that have undertaken an effort to address children's rights. These generally tend to be more about vision than about the regulatory nuts and bolts of implementation. The Kawasaki City Ordinance on the Rights of the Child, for instance, is quite general, and does not spell out in specific terms what different provisions from the CRC mean in the context of Kawasaki. However, it does require that a Plan of Action for children be developed; that a committee be established to examine how children's rights are guaranteed in local policies and practices; that new structures be developed that enable children to make complaints and seek for protection; and that community planning be undertaken to improve educational environments and to guarantee the safety of children's spontaneous activities.

### **Institutional Structures, Processes and Partnerships for Ensuring Attention to Children**

In order to increase the visibility of children in all areas of government, and to ensure effective, coordinated responses throughout a municipality, attention must be given to the structures and processes of local government. There are various

models that can involve a range of functions from advocacy and oversight, to coordination, to the discussion and creation of policy. In some cases the relevant bodies exist solely within government; in other cases they include civil society, generally through the representation of NGOs.

Examples of a special advocate or ombudsman for children are fairly common. In Waitekere in New Zealand, the Children's Advocate is a member of the local council whose role is to speak out on the needs of younger residents; another council member works in partnership with external agencies on behalf of children. Within Honduran municipalities, the "Municipal Defender of Children" is a voluntary post; in 2001, the additional position of Municipal Commissioner was established, a person elected by the local council and responsible for monitoring human rights more generally. Advocates for children can also operate within a smaller sphere: in Porsgrunn, Norway, for instance, so-called "contact teachers," who receive twice-a-year training sessions, act as a link between students and local government.

In Johannesburg, a Child Policy Coordinating Team, made up of the heads of all key departments within local government, ensures the development of an integrated approach to children's issues. Calcutta takes this model further by coordinating municipal departments with state government departments and a range of other organizations and agencies. Their City-Level Programme of Action (CLPOA), a joint effort to coordinate all programs that respond to poor children, is managed by a body which includes representatives from the Municipal Corporation, the departments of the State Government, UNICEF, the British Council, the Indian Medical Association, the Chamber of Commerce and a large number of NGOs. This group works to coordinate all efforts in favor of poor children in a systematic way. The program mobilizes resources from government departments as well as international agencies and the private sector.

The Children's Commission in Derry, Northern Ireland is similarly an interagency partnership, but also involves children, young people and parents, along with providers of services, planners and policy makers from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. As a result of campaigning by this Commission, the City Council has recently undertaken to "child proof" all its policies, and is creating a Code of Conduct for the city.

Some child rights committees assume a policy development and decision-making role, rather than simply functioning as advocacy or monitoring bodies. In Brazil, the Child and Adolescent Rights Councils debate and create public policy in areas pertaining to young people, as well as overseeing implementation. These councils, at national, state and municipal levels, are made up of representatives from civic groups and government who are legally required to share control. Ronald Ahnen has provided a helpful evaluation of four municipal level councils (Salvador, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro and Recife) (Ahnen 2001), showing the extent to which their success depends on local political realities. These four councils range from being relatively ineffective to being central players on the local policy scene. In Salvador, the council has played a marginal role, sponsoring events like seminars, lectures and training sessions. At the other extreme is Porto Alegre, where the council is a

strong political force in the city, exerting extensive control over funds and policy. Ahnen argues that the most important variable is the attitude of the mayor towards these councils, and he observes that left-leaning mayors are more supportive than those from the right. However, the experience in both Recife and Porto Alegre demonstrates that councils can make good use of past successes to influence public policy even in the face of resistance from the mayor's office—for instance, after a change in administration. He points out that a cohesive, well-organized NGO network (as opposed to NGOs whose relationship is determined by competition for limited funds) can make all the difference in the capacity of the civil sector council representatives to play a strong role, and ensure that the council does not become just a rubber stamp for the mayor's office. In Porto Alegre, despite support from the mayor, the council insisted on establishing its independence—a considerable advantage in being able to deal effectively with both opposition and ruling parties, and to weather changes in administration.

In a similar vein, a description of a successful initiative in Barra Mansa, Brazil (described in the participation section below) makes the point that building up strong grassroots support is an important way to ensure survival through changes in elected representatives (Guerra 2002). Endorsements should be strategically sought across political parties. Other reports also point to the threat to initiatives undertaken for children inherent in a change of administration. Commentary on the Philippines' child-friendly initiatives points out that, while a number of innovative strategies have been introduced in terms of systematizing a process and an institutional structure to support it, the potential upsets that accompany local elections every three years remain a problem. In the Dominican Republic, where it was realized that political changes could undermine the child-friendly efforts undertaken by previous administrations, it was decided that the initiative should be approved by the town council through a legally binding resolution that would institutionalize it regardless of the party in power. An evaluation from Bello, Colombia, points also to the ways that attention can be deflected from routine activities during election periods. They see not only policy changes that may follow an election, but also changes in support personnel within the local authority as significant constraints in achieving objectives.

Many cities have now established youth councils as structures which provide for the direct involvement of young people, to a greater or lesser degree, in local government processes. These will be discussed in the section on participation below.

### **Plans of Action**

Municipal plans of action for children, designed to translate commitment into specific activities, are often adaptations of national plans of action—as in Honduras where mayors of all 293 municipalities have committed themselves to adapting a national plan to local realities. In the Philippines, a set of eight tools developed at the national level helps local governments prepare their plans for children by working their way systematically through the various stages of the planning process. National goals set for 2025 are the basis for long-term goals at the local level. These are theoretically synchronized with broader local development plans

prepared by city governments, focused on the next three to ten years (although CFCS comments that the linkages are sometimes unclear, which can result in conflict.) Over the short term, annual plans for children prepared at city level combine all the sectoral plans that relate to child issues. The development of these plans is supported by local working groups of people with different professional backgrounds. Children's sector representatives are responsible for ensuring that children and their priorities are represented in the planning process. Progress is monitored over the year, and these plans are reviewed and updated at the end of the year. (See the section on Monitoring below.)

Calcutta develops annual workplans at a joint city and zonal level, focused on providing sanitation for all children, basic services and protection to street children, eradicating child labor and making schools "joyful learning centers." Lucknow and Mirzapur, also in India, have also formulated child-friendly plans of action in collaboration with state government.

In New Zealand, as of 2003, all local authorities are required to develop long-term council plans with regard to children through community consultation. A leader has been Christchurch, and its experience has been a model for other cities in New Zealand and elsewhere. (See below in the Data Collection section for a description of their process of consultation.) Here children also participate in the development of Neighborhood Improvement Plans, which become obligatory to follow in redesigning the local physical environment to suit the needs of the community. (Despite this kind of attention, Christchurch City Council notes that unsafe streets and public spaces are a growing problem.)

In Frankston, Australia, the development of a Community Safety Plan in 2000 included the establishment of a Youth Safety Management Team, a youth-specific audit of places in the city, and the development, among other things, of a proposal for dealing with the concerns of children using a skate ramp in the city. This effort was an outgrowth of the international Growing Up in Cities (GUIC) program that has stimulated the participatory research of children and young people into their own environments in cities around the world. The young people's recommendations were included in Frankston's final plan, and instead of being treated as a separate category, their concerns were integrated as part of the overall plan—a reflection, in part, of the young people's concern about having places and activities within mainstream community life rather than separated from it (Chawla and Malone 2002).

In London, the Children and Young People's Strategy, published in draft form in 2003, was the product of extensive consultations that included hundreds of children as well as a wide range of organizations and agencies. A valuable component of this effort was the publication of a detailed children's version of the plan which included a glossary or "jargon buster."

### **Data Collection and Information Management**

The systematic collection of data as a basis for assessing the situation of local residents and their level of provision is a problem for many municipalities. A large

proportion of the neediest children in many cities live in illegal settlements which are unrecognized and hence unmapped by the city's formal systems, and thus remain "invisible." Even where poor areas are recognized, data is seldom disaggregated geographically to reflect the depth of the poverty in some districts.

Children can also remain invisible because data are not disaggregated by age. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, for instance, an unusually thorough mapping was undertaken of all "slum" neighborhoods. However, although households were counted, household members were not, and there is no record of the actual number of girls and boys in each of these slums. In other words, the mapping revealed how many schools there were, but not how many children were not *in* school; it showed how many water sources there were, but not how many children (and others) they served. If children's needs are to be addressed, it is important to know how many children there are and where they are. This holds true, of course, for other dimensions of discrimination as well, such as ethnicity or ability.

*Establishing a single system:* Bello, Colombia, tracks statistics from various institutions within the city related to a range of indicators for children, but it sees the lack of a single information system as the principal obstacle in meeting its objectives in providing for children. This is a common problem. In Ecuador an effort has been made at a national level to institute such a system within municipalities to strengthen local government capacity to develop policies based on accurate, up-to-date information. The System of Local Information (SIL), designed to assess the living conditions of children and adolescents at the community level, is overseen locally by an inter-institutional group, nominated by local government, which ensures civic and institutional participation in the collection, analysis and dissemination of information. Success has varied, depending on local resources and technical know-how; in some municipalities, more training is necessary, and local turnover often means the need for retraining. Achievements include the establishment of databases that are responsive to local realities as well as allowing for comparison between cities; the stimulation of critical reflection on existing policies at the municipal level; and the capacity to promote involvement on the part of both institutions and communities, which is key to realizing the objectives of the initiative.

*Drawing on existing information:* Although a systematic, comprehensive system is ideal, it may not always be feasible, and it is important to get maximum mileage from data that already exist. A fine example is an overview of the situation of excluded children in Lima, Peru, undertaken by two consultants, which pulls together available statistics, local studies, interviews with people working in a range of programs as well as focus groups of children and women, and current knowledge on the effects of different conditions on children (Cecilia Bravo 2001). The resulting overview could contribute significantly to well-targeted policies and a plan of action. Such efforts to pull together existing information in a coherent, analytical way are a relatively low-cost approach with potentially high returns.

Some cities have combined the compilation of existing research with new efforts. Johannesburg's collection of baseline information had four major components: a

map of social exclusion compiled from existing research; a situation analysis based on participatory community surveys; a desk review of all existing legislation and policies as they pertained to children; and a mapping out of who does what in the city with regard to children (resulting in a comprehensive, city-wide directory of service providers for children.)

Many data collection efforts are undertaken in the interests of a particular initiative, as in Calcutta where an effort to provide quality education for all children began with a city-wide survey by 50 NGOs in collaboration with local government. Each ward was surveyed by an NGO already working in that area, using a standard format. The survey involved household interviews, visits to schools, detailed maps and a computerized database. The results were brought together in a report on all schools in the city which included the location and number of children attending and not attending school. Another effort, in Nairobi, also focused on schools—in this case aiming more narrowly to assess environmental conditions within Nairobi's schools and their effects on students.

*Surveying the perspective of children and youth:* A number of examples involve specific attempts to get the perspective of young people as part of the data collection effort. A survey instrument entitled "The Child's Report Card" was developed, for instance, as part of the Malaysian "Ideas for Action" sourcebook (see the section below on raising awareness)—not to be confused with the TUGI "Good Governance Report Card" on children (described in the monitoring section below.) The Malaysian survey instrument, appropriate for use by even young children with support, provides an opportunity for children to assess household conditions, local environmental health and safety hazards, public transportation, local facilities and services. It could have been more effectively designed—many questions are not worded to elicit the most useful information, and many fairly obvious questions are missing. (In an effort to find out about safety hazards in the home, for instance, children are asked whether they "feel safe" at home, rather than whether anyone has ever been injured in the house, and how.) However, the concept is excellent, and it could easily be adapted to local conditions anywhere.

A similar effort was undertaken in Edinburgh in 2004 by MORI Scotland and the City of Edinburgh Council's Youth Services; 5,728 young people between 11 and 21 filled out a questionnaire that was distributed within schools, shopping centers, youth organizations and over the web. The questionnaire focused on such issues as housing and neighborhood conditions, safety, health and well being, transportation, facilities and opportunities for young people, and treatment by adults. As with an earlier survey in 2001, the data collected was expected to inform policy decisions and to shape Edinburgh's youth services strategy. It is not clear in the description of this survey whether or not questions were selected with input from young people—an important factor in ensuring that all relevant concerns are being targeted.

Attempts by local authorities to gather information through surveys can be frustrated by low returns. In the city of Galway, Ireland, for instance, questionnaires sent out to community and youth organizations and schools had a

response rate of only 13.5 percent. Even well-intentioned efforts to collect information need to be undertaken with an informed understanding of design and implementation.

*Involving local communities:* Although information systems are usually the province of statistical experts, and while there should be an emphasis on accuracy and precision, experience in a number of municipalities in Ceara, Brazil (see the "raising awareness" section below) has made it clear that this is not the absolute priority. More important for change, according to those involved in the Ceara initiative, is local involvement in data collection, and the resulting sense of local ownership. There is always some trade-off, they point out, between statistical accuracy and community participation.

*Qualitative information:* Christchurch, New Zealand, highlights the need not only for participatory information collection processes, but also for the collection of qualitative information to supplement statistics. An intensive process of consultation undertaken by the local city council demonstrates the value of qualitative work. Through surveys, focus groups (primarily with children and youth), and interviews (with service providers, community agency members, and members of the City Council), researchers worked closely with children, young people, parents, and people working with children in various capacities to collect information. Consultation centered on six topics: health and safety, physical environment, recreation/entertainment, education/training, employment and family. Information was disaggregated by age, sex and location to develop an overview of local issues for children and young people. The process revealed a number of specific concerns on which it became possible to focus. An interesting aspect of Christchurch's process is their recognition of the dynamic social, economic and cultural context of young people's lives, and the consequent need for the process of information collection and consultation to be open, continuous, flexible, leading to the continuous adjustment of policies and programs.

Another interesting approach to qualitative assessment involved the use of young people as researchers and analysts in the Imagine Chicago project. Interviews took place not only across generational lines, but across neighborhoods and ethnic groups. This was a case of data collection serving not only to gather information on the quality of life in a city, but to create positive connections and a shift in mindsets on the part of both the young researchers and the adults they engaged in conversation.

*Selecting indicators:* In any information system, the indicators chosen as relevant will determine the scope of the information collected. Indicators of children's well-being most often revolve around health and education services (e.g., number of children fully immunized, percentage of children enrolled in school, etc.). They do not as often include indicators on environmental quality. Yet when children themselves are questioned about the quality of their lives, they most often point to physical conditions. When children in Quezon City, the Philippines were questioned about problems, they pointed to the absence of trees, to school maintenance and repair, to the stink and danger of garbage at dump sites, and to the need for

paving roads, covering open ditches and installing streetlights (Racelis and Aguirre 2002).<sup>3</sup> The same was true in Johannesburg when children in four neighborhoods were questioned about their concerns (Kruger and Chawla 2002).<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, a very innovative set of indicators are those that have been developed in Christchurch to measure children's freedom with regard to the physical environment (referred to as "licenses")—for instance, their license to play in the streets, their license to come home from school alone or to bicycle on certain roads. This research was disaggregated by sex, age and location to assess the influence of traffic volume on children's lives.

*Child impact assessments:* Child impact assessments are a somewhat different issue from more general information collection for assessing the situation of children. They are critical to any attempt to consider in advance the potential outcomes for children of activities that are to be undertaken within a given location—and especially critical in those fields that are not routinely associated with children. The construction of a new highway, for instance, is not generally an issue that is considered in terms of its impacts for children. Yet it could have a range of effects on their lives—destroying a neighborhood; cutting children off from places where they play or from walking routes to school; creating noise levels that interfere with attention; or increase pollution to levels unsafe for young children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recommends that such impact assessments be undertaken for any new legislation, regulation, policies, administrative changes, and proposed budgets.

There is little material on the actual use of child impact assessments, however.<sup>5</sup> Louise Sylwander, Sweden's former Ombudsman for children, concludes that even in Sweden, with its high level of child-awareness, work relating to the development of child impact assessments is at an early stage, and that there is a need for greater knowledge about them. She has developed a model for child impact analysis (Sylwander 2001), but she acknowledges that changing overall attitudes and approaches is more important than applying individual tools or methods.

## **Budgets**

Budgetary allocations are the primary means for translating children's rights into practical action. However, there is relatively little documented attention to the practical issue of getting higher levels of funding earmarked for investments that most benefit children, and how authorities can best be persuaded to make this a priority.

One of the more effective approaches for ensuring greater budgetary allocations for children has been participatory budgeting, which tends to increase significantly the proportion of local resources that goes towards basic social services. When local citizens have a role in determining spending priorities, conditions that relate to children's well-being tend to improve. Participatory budgeting, first developed in Porto Alegre, Brazil, is most common in that country. At this point there are Participatory Budget Councils in more than 160 Brazilian cities, and the practice has spread to other countries. According to UNICEF, which has been supporting the

development of participatory budgeting in Ecuador, four conditions must be met within a municipality to make participatory budgeting feasible:

- political will from local government
- probity and transparency within local government
- receptiveness to change
- readiness to meet challenges and to handle negative reactions to the process.

In a number of South American cities, the concept of participatory budgeting has been taken a step further with part of the municipality's budget being allocated for the use of the local children's council. An example will be discussed in more detail in the section on children's participation below.

Participatory budgeting increases attention to children indirectly by placing a greater emphasis on the basic services that so fundamentally affect children. An alternative model is the establishment of a special children's fund—as in Johannesburg, where this was proposed as a device for involving the private sector in contributing to programs for children that required greater financial backing. This fund was envisioned as being managed by a team selected by the mayor, which would be accountable to the funders. Such a fund may be a practical way of making up for shortfalls in a poorly resourced city, but it also has overtones of identifying children as a marginal group whose requirements are not expected to be met in the course of routine budgetary allocations.

A critical budget issue concerns the way that spending is allocated not only in terms of services provided, but also in terms of who gets these services. Racelis and Aguirre point out in their assessment of the CFC initiatives in the Philippines that uneven coverage results when patronage politics play a role in resource allocation, or when weak information systems result in inadequate knowledge about the needs in certain parts of a city.<sup>6</sup>

Interesting work has been done in South Africa by the NGO Idasa on budgets as a tool for translating children's rights into action, but according to their staff, their research and evaluation has yet to be taken to a municipal level.

### **Capacity Building**

Addressing children's rights calls in many cases for specific knowledge and a new set of skills on the part of local officials. Relatively little information is available on strategies and experiences for tackling training and capacity building in this area, however.

The most comprehensive training system that has been documented is in the Dominican Republic, where, by 2001, 35 municipalities were participating in UNICEF's child-friendly municipality initiative. At that point there were three decentralized training centers in the country, coordinated with local universities, where 120 facilitators were being trained to handle training activities at a municipal level. Two diploma-granting training packages had been developed, one for

facilitators, and one for candidates for municipal public office. A series of training manuals were being developed, along with a regularly published journal to reinforce their content.<sup>7</sup>

In the Philippines, a manual entitled "What Barangay Officials Can Do to Set up a Child Friendly Locality" describes the actions that each of several relevant agencies need to take to ensure that the 24 CFC goals are met. It includes an assessment instrument for rating the child-friendliness of an area and the effectiveness of its institutions. Greater attention to physical living conditions would definitely have made this an even more useful document.

Waitekere, New Zealand, is noted in the CFC database as having a "Good Practice Guide" to support city council staff in understanding and implementing the country's "First Call for Children" policy, in which Waitekere has been a leader since 1993. An attempt to access this guide, however, revealed that it had not been actually been developed yet. What Waitekere *does* have is a guide for city council staff on community safety measures, which integrates children's concerns into a broader effort. Also in New Zealand, Christchurch has compiled a "toolbox" for municipal employees in all departments, stressing the concept of children as stakeholders, and the importance of getting their views in such areas as road design, traffic safety issues, open space and park design, neighborhood plans and transport services. The toolbox provides guidelines for staff unaccustomed to working with children, and lists available resources within Christchurch.

In Christchurch, training and capacity building has not been limited to government employees and those who work with children. It is also provided for children who want to become involved in board meetings and organizations—an excellent innovation that could well be adapted elsewhere. Most often young people who have expressed an interest will be trained by the group itself, but they can also get free advice and training from local organizations that specialize in providing such support.

A training initiative in Emthanjeni Municipality in South Africa's Northern Cape Province (Swart, Kruger and Mabuzo 2003) attempted to give some municipal officials, along with other adults, a better awareness of children's environmental rights, and at the same time build their capacity to work cooperatively with children and young people. Initial workshops for adults were immediately followed by workshops for children, where the adults were able to put their new skills into practice and at the same time gain a sense of the perceptions and experiences of local children with regard to their neighborhood surroundings. The intention was to follow this up by implementing children's recommendations—but when the report was written, this phase had not yet been undertaken.

### **Raising Awareness**

Experiences from many cities suggest that the individual program or project, successful as it might be, is insufficient to change the general experience of children in a given city. What is needed is a deeper and broader change in local attitudes towards children and youth that begins to work like yeast throughout a

city, raising awareness so that it becomes a matter of business as usual to think in terms of the rights of younger citizens.

An impressive example of such awareness-raising comes from the state of Ceara in Brazil, where, initiated and supported by a UNICEF program, almost 200 municipalities brought about significant changes for children on a number of fronts over a relatively brief period—including a 35 percent overall decrease in infant mortality over five years, a 50 percent decrease in child malnutrition, and significant improvements in child care services, school libraries and clean water in schools. These changes were initiated through UNICEF's "Municipal Seal of Approval" competition, which mobilized mayors to improve service delivery and initiate greater public accountability for addressing children's rights. Even in the absence of a monetary reward, the opportunity to demonstrate their efforts and success appeared to be enough to inspire local authorities to take part. The high level of publicity surrounding the effort, and the greater public awareness that resulted from it, were major components of the success of this initiative.

This initiative highlights the importance of publicity. A local authority may be doing excellent work in attending to children's needs, but if their efforts and commitment are not widely broadcast, they are unlikely to contribute to the kind of social awareness that is fundamental to reaching a real "tipping point." Ideally this kind of publicity would begin to have the effect of raising awareness more generally, and not just in the sectors traditionally associated with children.

A number of cities have their own websites, which are a fine way to communicate local efforts both to local residents and more widely. Christchurch's website is a good example: not only does it serve as a source of basic information for residents on a host of issues, it also works as a way to promote transparency, get feedback from citizens and publicize efforts more widely. Not all cities have these technological resources, however, and in most cases the most needy citizens are those least likely to have access to them.

### **The Participation of Children and Young People**

Of all the steps that can be taken by municipalities, initiatives involving the participation of children in local governance are by far the most heavily documented—perhaps because they appear to be the most obvious expression of attention to children's rights. These initiatives, however, run the gamut from genuine partnership to far more tokenistic gestures. Although the focus is generally some mix of the educational and the political, there tends to be more emphasis on the individual-level developmental and educational benefits for children than on the practical value of their contribution to local processes.

Some initiatives are almost purely educational in intent. The annual Children's Parliament on the Environment in London is an example. Local school groups identify issues which they research; two speakers elected from each school then present their findings at the parliament. Issues researched have included waste and recycling, recreation, and the quality of the riverside environment. Although some reports include recommendations, there is no indication of any mechanism by which

these recommendations will be taken forward. The intent appears to be primarily that of raising young people's awareness.

By contrast, other initiatives have the specific intent of informing local policy. An example, mentioned above, is the study commissioned by Greater Johannesburg as part of a larger effort to assess conditions for children in the city (Swart Kruger and Chawla 2002). This four-site study involved 10-14 year olds in identifying and ranking the key concerns in their neighborhoods. Most of the concerns identified by these young people involved their safety as pedestrians and as users of public transport, unsafe and insufficient play and recreation space, littering and fear of harassment in public space (in part because of the presence of numerous liquor outlets and bars.) This project was especially valuable in its effort to give recognition to the perceptions of both boys and girls, who identified and ranked their concerns separately prior to discussing them together. Although the intention was to make practical use of these recommendations, in fact there was never any follow up.<sup>8</sup>

Another case in which young people's input was solicited by local authorities took place in Braybrook, a working class suburb of Melbourne, Australia, and involved a design for redevelopment of youth-specific space within a local park. Although this project was a success in terms of the involvement of the young people, the dynamics of their relationship with the local council made real concrete change more difficult to achieve. Four reasons were offered for this, along with recommendations for changing this relationship:

- 1) Because the youth group and their advisors were volunteering their services, they were taken less seriously than consultants charging high fees. Their access to high-ranking officials was limited and they were not informed of changes in meeting times and places. Expectations should be clearly articulated and a role which could hold policy makers accountable should be negotiated.
- 2) The project was located within Community Services, a local office with little political power. Wherever possible, such projects should be identified with council groups that are more influential.
- 3) Projects that are youth-specific are seen as less important, allowing council members to be supportive without being committed (especially around election time). Wherever possible, youth needs should be embedded in community needs, giving the related projects a higher status.
- 4) Presentations alone have limited scope for change. Those involved need to infiltrate management groups and committees that are responsible for decision-making and following through on recommendations.

Perhaps the most common expression of children's involvement is through youth councils. These are far more common in high-income countries, as might be expected. In France, they exist in over 400 municipalities. They are extremely diverse in their activities, which range from awareness campaigns to the development of recommendations for recreational measures. The common intent, however, is to provide a vehicle for young people's active involvement in

neighborhood issues and for dialogue with elected officials, for both educational and political impact.

In Sweden, Louise Sylwander, as Ombudsman, prepared an evaluation of the opportunities for children to influence local government, and the real influence exerted by children as a result. Although most municipalities in Sweden reported having some form of participation for children and young people, only a minority (20 percent) were addressing this in any systematic and on-going way. In most cases, youth councils were the form of participation described, and for the most part, any influence exerted by children was only on the school sector—although there were a few cases where the involvement of the youth councils influenced traffic and housing planning. A survey of young people around Sweden (1997) found that only 3 percent of them felt they actually had an opportunity to influence local decision-making. Given the level of commitment to children's rights in Sweden as compared to most countries, this is a rather depressing statistic.

Two documented initiatives in the CFCS database have involved making municipal funds available for children to allocate—but they are carried out quite differently and are based on some different assumptions. In Porsgrunn, Norway, where a sum has been made available each year since 1992 (US\$25,000 in 1998), children generate spending priorities at a full day meeting at city hall, with assistance from the mayor and other local officials. The final decisions are expected to reflect the children's priorities. This focus on "immediate actions" is based on the principle that children have short attention spans and that the delays associated with bureaucratic action should be avoided. In Barra Mansa, Brazil, by contrast, it is assumed that children can learn to work within bureaucratic constraints. The Children's Participatory Budget Council is an standing committee of elected children with its own budget. They allocate funds to address concerns that are identified by local children in neighborhood meetings and then assessed and prioritized by the children's council after site visits (Guerra 2002).<sup>9</sup> This council is responsible for not only selecting projects, but following them through implementation, dealing with the complexities and frustrations of bureaucracy.

An example from Rajasthan, India is especially interesting in the way it has evolved over time. The Bal Sansad Children's Parliament consists of 15 to 20 members elected by the 1700 or so children in the area. Training courses are provided for those with little experience of the political process, and the parliament meets monthly. The parliament has been effective in bringing together children from different villages to discuss and deal with common concerns. A primary concern has been schooling—both persuading families of the benefits of attendance, and dealing with school quality and safety issues. Over time, the focus of the parliament has grown to cover all aspects of village life—not just those that are presumed to be relevant for children—and the elected children now take active roles in various local adult bodies. Michael Wyness, who has described and considered Bal Sansad along with three other cases of political inclusion, notes that a fundamental objective of these children's councils has been to challenge stereotypes about young people and to change local adults' perceptions of their capacities (Wyness 2001). In this regard, these youth councils have the potential to be real catalysts for the changing

awareness that must underlie more fundamental changes in attention to young people.

Some examples of children's and youth's involvement have a more ad-hoc quality than the youth councils. One example of a one-shot, results-oriented use of children's time was the involvement of middle-class children in Calcutta in searching out and identifying domestic child workers in the high-rise apartments where they reside. This was part of a larger city-wide survey (described in the information section) to identify all children in the city not attending school. This project clearly made use of the fact that children often have knowledge and access that would be less available to adults. Another impressive example comes from San Francisco where the Department of Children, Youth and their Families (DCYF) engaged young people in evaluating the community-based organizations funded by the department. Their findings and recommendations were distributed to organizations and government departments throughout the area. The young people selected the criterion of "trust" as a fundamental indicator of a successful youth serving organization. This was a characteristic that had never been considered by the department, and was just one example of the ways they felt this youth evaluation had led to the improvement of local services (Sabo 2003).

Almost no attention is given in the material reviewed to participatory efforts involving parents and other caregivers on behalf of their young children—an important aspect with regard to achieving children's rights in any locality, given that most children are too young to be included in formal participatory processes. One exception is the material on Derry, Northern Ireland where parents initiated the Children's Commission by raising their concerns about the low status of children within the city, and where parents have been involved in improving local opportunities for play. One of the projects parents have undertaken in collaboration with children has been the preparation of a children's guide to the city, entitled "The City as a Playground." If the needs and concerns of children of all ages are to be adequately represented within local governance processes, far more attention must be given to encouraging, supporting and documenting this kind of active involvement on the part of parents.

## **Implementation**

There are numerous examples of projects and programs undertaken to improve the lives of urban children, but relatively few of them involve mainstreaming children's concerns into broader efforts to deal with the urban environment. I will focus on this kind of project here, since experience tends to suggest that such efforts are most likely over time to make cities and neighborhoods friendlier places for children.

*Attention to public space with children's needs in mind:* Hanoi, Vietnam's District 4, a canal and riverside area, is home to many migrant workers and low-income people who live in slums along polluted canals. As part of a larger renovation effort, and with the support of Save the Children Sweden, the local government paid attention to the physical surroundings of children in the area. Government staff received training in children's rights (which continues today). A group of children,

elected by their peers, developed a proposal for a clean, safe environment. Their plan involved clean-ups of both domestic space and public space, the latter focusing on improvements to polluted canals, dirty streets and unsafe playgrounds. Attention was given to garbage collection—including used needles on the streets, tree planting and awareness about public urination. The local government decided that on Sundays certain streets should be closed to traffic for use by children for play.

In Rotterdam in the Netherlands, a child-focused measure was used to reclaim public squares which were becoming plagued by vandalism. Shipping containers (*duimdrops*) were refurbished to hold toys and play equipment, which were made available for free to children for use only in the square. A caretaker is available to children and monitors unwanted behavior in the square. There is also a terraced space where children can draw or play games on tables. Around each *duimdrop* square there is an active collective, including representatives from the police, local schools and organizations, which deals with maintenance and any safety problems. Funds are provided to the *duimdrop* foundation by the city council, sub-councils and some housing associations. In an effort to promote positive behavior, children are given the opportunity to earn *duimen* by doing chores like cleaning the square and maintaining toys; with the *duimen* they can borrow the more expensive toys like roller blades. They can also contribute to decisions about rules and activities in the square by joining the children's council, members of which are also paid in *duimen*.

The account of this initiative is interesting for two reasons: it explicitly views attention to children's needs as a solution to a larger environmental problem; and it is critically reflective about the shortcomings of the project, thereby making it possible to learn from mistakes. It points out, for instance, that neither the *duimen* payments nor the children's councils have proved as successful as hoped. "Tension squares" do not immediately become pleasant places just through the placement of a container—initial enthusiasm can drop, and frequent consultation is required with police, local schools and other partners. Police support is indispensable at times. The placement of a *duimdrop* is just a first step towards solving more difficult problems. However, according to the police, reductions in petty crime and vandalism have been quickly evident in these areas, and the surrounding neighborhood tends to be improved as vandalism drops. These squares have all become safer and more heavily used places—a major advantage for children and everyone else as well.

Another approach has been a Buenos Aires, Argentina municipal initiative to create "safe street corridors" for children to walk back and forth to school, promoting both their safety and their independence. Storeowners, neighbors, and schools are enrolled as volunteers to pay attention to children as they walk to school and pass their premises. Children are asked to use specific streets where merchants, neighbors, and police personnel watch out for them. In case of problems, children can look for shelter in any participating stores that have a visible sign in the window. From those places, they can call their parents or police if necessary. By March 2004, there were eight safe corridors used by 28,000 students walking to 59 city schools every day (Moore and Cosco 2004).

Other initiatives to respond to children's safety and mobility in the public sphere involve attention to roads and traffic. The departments or agencies dealing with these are usually focused on construction and repair of roads, and the most effective ways to move traffic efficiently. But safety issues are also a concern, and of all age groups of pedestrians and cyclists, children tend to have the highest risk of injury. The city of Essen in Germany responded to this fact by mapping and evaluating all accidents involving children. This was a joint effort by the local traffic office, the road construction department, the police and the children's office. This resulted in better information for children as well as for police and the local council about the more dangerous spots, as well as in measures to reduce danger through structural changes or changes in speed limits. In some streets, for instance, the speed limit was reduced to as low as 10 km per hour.

*Water and sanitation:* This is an interesting area of response to children because of the disproportionate effects that inadequate provision of water and sanitation has for children, and because this is not an area immediately identified as a children's issue. In fact, standards for adequate water provision often fail to reflect the real needs of young children and of their caregivers. The CFC database includes brief accounts of five projects in Africa, all supported by UNICEF, which specifically involved improvements to water and sanitation undertaken with a child rights perspective. These projects took place in Nairobi, Kenya; Harare, Zimbabwe; Nouakchott, Mauritania; Port Harcourt, Nigeria; and on the island of Santiago in Cape Verde.

The objectives and scope of the projects varied from improving water availability in just one community, to a far broader focus on improved provision as a means of building capacity both at government and community levels. The degree of local government involvement varied in these projects as well. In Port Harcourt, the municipality took a lead role in all phases; in Nairobi, Cape Verde and Nouakchott, the municipality worked in close partnership with other groups; in Harare, local government took more of a background role in supporting the implementing NGOs. In every case, the project was undertaken with a view to improving the quality of children's lives, and with a recognition of the multiple costs to children of living in unsanitary environments. In each case, community members were closely involved in identifying problems and setting priorities. In most cases, women were recognized as having a primary role in assessment—an appropriate strategy, since women deal most closely with the realities of poor water provision and its consequences for young children. In Harare and Port Harcourt there was a purposeful attempt to involve children and adolescents as well: in Harare, they were involved in mapping communities and documenting the daily activities of women and children as a part of problem identification; in Port Harcourt, they took part in training sessions and all phases of the project, which involved the construction and maintenance of wells and concrete drains, waste management and monitoring of the environment. A follow-up to these projects would ideally look into their impacts over time for children, possibly as compared to areas where improved provision has not involved the identification of problems by local caregivers. It would also be interesting to determine whether or not a child-rights focused

approach to provision in selected communities has affected subsequent efforts on the part of these municipalities.

### **Monitoring and Learning from Experience**

There are very few examples of on-going attention to the outcomes of projects and initiatives undertaken for children, and of modifications and improvements that happen in response. It is hard to know to what extent this is simply a matter of what gets documented, but there definitely appears to be a much greater interest in establishing interesting programs than in finding ways to keep them relevant and viable.

One exception comes from the Philippines, where a system has been set up among designated child-friendly cities not only to assess the situation for children but to monitor progress on an annual basis at both community and city levels. At the local level, data collected by trained workers and volunteers are fed into a community-managed "knowledge center." A city-wide network of these centers feeds into a central center, which prepares an annual "State of the City's Children Report." Indicators focus primarily on basic services for children, as well as safe drinking water and sanitation.

This system appears to be well thought out, but an independent evaluation, supported by UNICEF (Racelis and Aguirre 2002), points out what a distance there can be between a good system on paper and its practical implementation. According to this evaluation, there is a serious dearth of information at the local *barangay* level. Even in more organized *barangays*, officials tend not to keep up the data after the first round of information gathering—possibly because of lack of training or encouragement. In many cases there is no available baseline information, especially among the poorest groups, where it is most needed, and where data exist, they are seldom disaggregated by age or gender. In most cases there were simply no existing data sets to tap into, and researchers had to interview key informants to piece together a reasonably accurate evaluation of the success of the initiative and the current situation for children. This team stresses the importance of community views in monitoring achievement.

An alternative approach in monitoring is embodied in the Urban Governance Initiative's (TUGI) issue-based report card series which evaluates the *processes* by which local government operates, rather than the outcomes. Each of 16 report cards focuses on performance in a particular area from the perspectives of participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability and strategic vision. Four appropriate indicators are locally selected for each area (examples are offered), and then scored by local administrators, members of civil society, the private sector and relevant institutions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Some Lessons**

These examples reveal significant progress and innovation in some areas, and not much activity in others. In general it appears that greater attention is given to the more colorful and pressworthy initiatives (such as children's councils) than to the

kind of administrative routines that are part of a long-term commitment (such as regulatory change or child impact assessments); in the same way, more effort seems to be expended on planning and initiating than on following through. These trends could, however, be an artifact of documentation.

The examples reviewed here yield a number of useful lessons—many of them providing confirmation of principles we already know well; but some of them describing creative innovations that should be considered and applied to many more situations.

### ***The political context***

- To be sustainable, efforts for children should not be associated with a particular political party, but should be legally institutionalized to insulate them from political swings. It also helps for child rights councils to establish their political independence.
- Greater permanence should be given to the posts of officials who are essential to the execution of critical programs that affect children.
- NGOs are critical in working towards more active attention to children on the part of local government, and especially in providing continuity in the face of changes in administration. To play an effective role in influencing local government, though, local NGOs should ideally have a high level of collaboration and cohesion. Strong grassroots support can also help ensure that good initiatives will survive over time.

### ***Information***

- The lack of a systematic information system can be a most significant obstacle to meeting children's needs. Still, even when such a system is lacking, compiling and coordinating any existing data can be a practical starting point.
- Coordinating the efforts of organizations already working in different settlements can be a productive way to get city-wide information.
- Local involvement in data collection and the resulting sense of local ownership can contribute to longer-term change.
- Information gathering and situation assessment needs to be an ongoing process, not simply a one-time snapshot, in order to reflect the dynamic quality of the lives of children and youth.
- Attention should be given to the perceptions and experience of both boys and girls, and both younger and older children, in attempts to assess local realities and their impacts for young people.
- More attention should be given to documenting and analyzing processes in order to learn from their outcomes.

### ***Budget allocations***

- The experience with participatory budgeting in South America, with the higher allocation of resources that this ends up giving to a range of basic social services, suggests that transparency and accountability may be more effective in ensuring attention to children's basic needs than special funds devoted to children.

- Special funds for children, however, may have the advantage of mobilizing private sector resources.

### ***Participation***

- The rhetoric of participation is far more common than the genuine inclusion of the views of children in city development processes.
- Assumptions about what children are capable of often constrain even the most committed efforts to involve them.
- Although participatory projects are valuable in terms of their effects for children's learning and development, it is also clear that young people's experience and their stage in life can make them genuinely valuable resources to any local authority.
- Although children's councils can have at times a token quality, with enough space to maneuver and enough respect for the capacities of young people, they can become a significant local force.
- In the context of participatory work, too little attention is given to the inclusion of the views of parents about the concerns of their young children.

### ***A focus on the physical environment***

- Although the most common responses to children's rights involve attention to specifically child-oriented services, when asked, young people will most frequently identify problems within their physical surroundings as concerns they would like to see addressed.
- The physical layout and image of the city can have important impacts on social development, and working together on improving the local environment results in stronger communities.

### ***Keys to success for deeper change***

- Specific projects and programs are not necessarily the most effective way to achieve results for children. Often they reach only a small proportion of the needy, or their impact is only short-term.
- Even the best ideas are seldom magic bullets. They require persistence, commitment, and the willingness to learn from experience—from mistakes as well as successes.
- Changing the mindset of everyone is what underlies sustainable change for children, and this depends on continuous sustained efforts.
- This different mindset is heavily dependent on efforts to raise social awareness, both of the issues confronting children, and of successes achieved in addressing problems. Publicity, documentation and communication may appear to be "extras," but in fact are fundamental in achieving real social change.

### **Endnotes**

1. This overview was undertaken on the request of Save the Children Sweden, and funded by Sida, the Swedish international development agency.
2. Most of these examples can be accessed at [www.childfriendlycities.org](http://www.childfriendlycities.org). Examples from other sources and published documents have been fully referenced.

3. See also the follow up case study by **Angela Desiree M. Aguirre** in this issue of CYE.
4. See also the follow-up case study by **Je'anna Clements** in this issue of CYE.
5. For an example of an assessment, see the report by **Bob Yates** in this issue of CYE.
6. This paper is reprinted in this issue. Aguirre's follow up study, also in this issue, has pointed to the generous allocations for children in Quezon City (20 percent of the total budget), and to the aggressive tax collection campaign that has made it possible to give greater attention to children and marginal populations. At this point, 95 percent of what is spent on local children comes from local government, rather than from national government, NGOs or outside funders.
7. There was no response to attempts to access their training materials.
8. This is documented in the paper by **Clements** in this issue of CYE.
9. This example is followed up in this issue in the **paper by Marta Barcelo**; a number of examples of children's participatory budgeting councils are described in **Yves Cabannes' paper**.
10. An attempt to follow this up ([www.tugi.org/reportcards](http://www.tugi.org/reportcards)) proved to be a dead end.

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