GUEST EDITORIAL

Children, Youth and Sustainable Cities

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> To everyone in the world,
> Because people throw rubbish away, animals suffer. As we let deter-
> gents into rivers, fish and other animals can't live in them. If we
> stopped doing this, there would be more places for us to enjoy
> ourselves and more room for us to live. Our lives would improve.
> Once I found a fish with crooked bones among the fish I caught and
> this made me realise that the river was polluted. I want the world to
> become a nice place to live in for animals and living things and people.
> (Satoshi, age 11, Hiroshima, Japan)[1]

Pollution, Population and Poverty

What would 'a nice place to live' be like for a child? Satoshi, like other children
all around the world, is growing up in a rapidly deteriorating urban environment.
World-wide, the impact of urbanisation, industrialisation, consumption, popu-
lation growth, poverty, environmental degradation, crime and war, and the
constant dumping of toxic waste into the atmosphere, waterways and soil, is
changing the opportunity for children like Satoshi to participate fully and freely
in urban life.

Alongside environmental degradation, during the past 50 years population
numbers and consumption have been increasing at an alarming rate. The United
Nations Conference on Human Settlements (UNCHS) (1996) states that one in
every four people is presently living in a town or city. With the world's largest
cities (megacities) growing by 1 million people per week it is estimated that by
the year 2025 cities will need to accommodate 4 billion people—many of these
will be children (Satterthwaite, 1996; UNCHS, 1996). On average one-third of
the population in developed nations are children, while in developing nations the
proportion of children can be as high as 60% (Dallape, 1996). The future is
unavoidably urban—cities are the only way most governments could ever
attempt to provide the resources to cater for this population growth. But rapid
urban growth creates huge imbalances between the available resources and the
needs of the population. If cities do not develop in sustainable ways, the impact
of this growth on their infrastructure will be the continuance of large-scale
poverty and urban slums.

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Alongside environmental destruction is the increasing impoverishment of the world's poor. It is now thought that six out of 10 of our future children will grow up in cities, in poverty, at risk (Satterthwaite *et al.*, 1996). Industrial pollutants and urban waste are highly selective of their victims—they always attack the poorest and most socially and educationally disempowered members of our community (Bullard, 1999). It is the poor who live in the shadows of the factories and rubbish dumps where degraded land is cheapest and it is the children playing in the streets who are most exposed to these environmental hazards. Around 300 million children in cities world-wide are living in absolute poverty (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 1996)—they are at daily risk of physical harm.

Children, Youth and the Environment

Children across the globe, whether in industrialised or developing cities, find they are living in overcrowded, unsafe and polluted environments which provide little opportunity for learning, play and recreation. Dominant discourses abound with discussions of the forces of economic rationalism and globalisation in late modernity. We are living in what many have called a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). Because children are the most vulnerable to environmental and social degradation, in terms of both their likelihood of personal harm and the constraints these place on their capacity to reach their fullest potential, they are at greatest risk. Urban children, in particular, find they are trapped in landscapes of despair and social neglect. Family breakdown, poverty, neighbourhood conflicts, vandalism, bullying in schools and police brutality, compounded with restricted access to local resources, all contribute to make many cities a hostile and threatening place for children and youth. A consequence of this 'urban risk' is people's retreat to 'home environments', with many parents often prescribing and circumscribing young people's access to the environment. Spontaneous unregulated play in neighbourhood spaces, particularly in affluent areas of cities, is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. Children are encouraged to participate only in regulated play environments in their homes, friend's houses and commercial facilities (McKendrick *et al*., 2000). This type of regulatory practice may help to 'protect' children from becoming victims of environmental hazards but has long-term consequences for their social and emotional growth. Research over the years has repeatedly illustrated that discovering how to negotiate the social and environmental context of a neighbourhood is important for developing children's independence and identity through environmental and social competence. In poorer neighbourhoods children can often still be seen playing on the streets. While this means they have more opportunity for spatial mobility and freedom, the consequences and risks to their health and safety because of the dangers of traffic, hazardous waste and physical abuse are of great concern. The message is clear: when neighbourhoods are not supportive of children's needs then children are limited in their use or are forced to take risks.

Emanating from adolescents' visibility in public space there has been a growing global trend towards the concept of 'zero tolerance'. Current research has vividly documented how many young people are being positioned as

'intruders' in and 'illegitimate users' of public spaces (see White, 1994; Connolly & Ennew, 1996; Valentine, 1996; McDonald, 1997; Malone & Hasluck, 1998; Percy-Smith, 1998). A variety of regulatory policies and policing activities, such as surveillance, curfews, move-on and anti-congregation laws, have been introduced in cities around the world with the specific aim of restricting young people's access to public space. These policing regimes serve to restrict opportunities for youth to develop appropriate spatial behaviours through modelling and integration, and reinforce disconnection and isolation from the community. It is evident that the quality of the environment children grow up in determines the quality of their lives. Therefore, discussions around improving children's quality of life should be inextricably linked to emerging discourses of sustainable development.

Children and Sustainable Development

The principles of sustainable development clearly demand that the simultaneous achievement of environmental, social and economic goals should meet the needs of the present generation without compromising those of future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Children have a special interest in these goals—they are the future contributors, decision makers and citizens of the world. The goals of sustainability argue that local and national governments should maintain the integrity of the social, economic and environment fabric of their global and local environment through processes which are participatory and equitable. The principles of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) reinforce the responsibility of the state parties when it challenges them to uphold the child's right to live in a safe, clean and healthy environment and to engage in free play, leisure and recreation in the environment. According to the CRC, a child's well-being and quality of life are the ultimate indicators of a healthy environment, good governance and sustainable development (UNICEF, 1992; UNICEF, 1997). If the goals of sustainability are not achieved then it will affect children more profoundly then other members of the global community. There is clearly a convergence and in many ways a symbiotic relationship between the principles of sustainable development and children's rights.

The connection between children's rights and sustainable development has been formally articulated in a number of global declarations and documents emerging from intergovernmental summits and meetings. Some of the most significant documents for stimulating discussions on children and sustainable development include the Plan for Action (UNICEF, 1990) that resulted from the World Summit for Children and the Rio Declaration and the action plan of Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992), both endorsed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Principle 21 of the Rio Declaration clearly reinforces the role of youth in sustainable development:

> Principle 21. The creativity, ideals and courage of the youth of the world should be mobilised to forge a global partnership in order to achieve sustainable development and ensure a better future for all. (United Nations, 1992)

So too does the introduction and the entire content of chapter 25:

> Chapter 25.1. Youth comprise nearly 30 percent of the world's population. The involvement of today's youth in environment and development decision-making and in the implementation of pro- grammes is critical to the long term success of Agenda 21. (United Nations, 1992)

More recently, an emerging focus on urban environments has given rise to the development of the Habitat II Agenda and, with children in mind, the *Children's Rights and Habitat* report (UNICEF, 1997). Presented by UNICEF at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements at Istanbul in 1996 the *Children's Rights and Habitat Declaration* contained within the report draws attention to the important *role* children have in sustainable development:

> Children have a special interest in the creation of sustainable human settlements that will support long and fulfilling lives for themselves and future generations. They require opportunities to participate and contribute to a sustainable urban future. (UNICEF, 1997, p. 28)

At the local level, the goals of sustainable development and children's rights are expressed through Local Agenda 21, the action plan for local governments, communities and all stakeholders to promote and implement sustainable devel- opment, and UNICEF's Child-friendly Cities initiative, a programme of action encouraging mayors and community organisations to involve children in partner- ships in environmental decision making.

These documents devote special attention to the needs of children, environ- mental care and participatory action. Children are acknowledged as having both the greatest stake in long-term environmental stability and the capacity to act as protagonists in achieving that stability (Bartlett *et al.*, 1999). These global initiatives provide a framework for supporting policy development; the test for local governments is to put them into action, keeping in mind that the relation- ship between sustainable development and children's lives is not just about adult roles as stewards and their capacity to act on behalf of the child—it is also about recognising the capacity for children and youth to be *authentic participants* in planning, development and implementation processes. Democratic behaviour is learnt through experience, so children must be given a voice in their communi- ties so they will be able to, now and in the future, participate fully in civil society (UNICEF, 1997). Local governments have a role to ensure that the principles of Local Agenda 21 and the spirit of the CRC are the impetus to create appropriate mechanisms for children's participation in building a sustainable and equitable urban future.

Exploring Possibilities

The papers collated for this special issue of *Local Environment*—'Children, Youth and Sustainable Cities'—represent only a small proportion of the research projects on this theme currently under way around the world. The field of research into children's environments is multi-disciplinary, with scholars and

practitioners originating from the areas of geography, environmental psychology, environmental education, law, planning, architecture and local government. Drawing from the UNESCO–MOST (Management of Social Transformations) Growing Up in Cities project, which had its origins in the 1970s and was revisited in the mid-1990s with the prospect of exploring the impact of the changing policy and environmental climate on children's lives, and other internationally significant research, the four articles and two Viewpoints reveal input from a broad base of disciplines and a selection of countries.

The first article, by Louise Chawla, the International Co-ordinator of the UNESCO–MOST sponsored Growing Up In Cities project, provides a useful framework for the other papers that follow. With regard to what is probably the largest multi-disciplinary multi-site research project of this type ever conducted with children, Chawla illustrates how this eight-city global participatory project is a model for the authentic participation of children in environmental decision making. Modelled on using a variety of child-focused social and physical research methods and integrating the CRC, Habitat II and Local Agenda 21 within city councils' processes, the central focus of the project has been to construct participatory forums for children and youth. Chawla proposes a set of local environment quality indicators derived from the children's input—a valuable tool for evaluating our efforts to construct child-friendly and sustainable cities, both in a global and in a local context.

Focusing on the local through a detailed case-study of children's independent access (or lack of access) to their local environments in Christchurch, New Zealand, Paul Tranter and Eric Pawson frame the discussions in their article around what a child-friendly and sustainable city might look like. They argue it requires more than a change in the physical form of neighbourhoods to create child-friendly and sustainable cities; it demands a shift in social values away from individualism towards greater community responsibility. They believe a child-friendly city would not only benefit the children but the whole community socially, educationally and economically.

The next two articles map out geographies of power and resistance as they are often played out in urban neighbourhoods when young people independently transgress into the realm of public space. Barry Percy-Smith and Hugh Matthews frame their discussion, on youth culture and the role of streets as important venues for socialisation, around the topical issue of bullying. According to Percy-Smith and Matthews, young people learn very quickly where the 'no-go areas' are in their neighbourhoods and bullying can have a significant impact on the quality of young people's environmental experience. Building on empirical evidence from a research project they provide the reader with insights into acts of bullying and the tragic consequences it can have on young people's capacity to feel safe and secure. They allude to actions to overcome issues of bullying through local strategies and processes of co-operative social learning and the need for further research into 'whole community approaches' to alleviating the problem, specifically in neighbourhoods where there are disproportionately high levels of social disadvantage and limited social capital.

Feeling safe and secure is a significant factor in conflicts over space use in shopping centres and malls around the world. Demonstrating positive ways to

redevelop centres and malls using a strategy based on principles of inclusion and community participation is central to the article by Rob White and Adam Sutton. Describing broad trends concerning the role of shopping centres and malls as social spaces and the subsequent issues surrounding competing views on consumption, legitimate user status, policing and regulatory practices, White and Sutton conclude that concerns for security and community safety often result in the exclusion of particular groups from these spaces. Young people specifically have been identified as a threat to the social order and management of these large centres through their insistence of 'hanging out' there. The recommendations that they provide as a consequence of their consultancy with a local city council on the redevelopment of a mall in Melbourne, Australia, are aimed at promoting and celebrating diversity and difference while also providing safety and security for all community members. The paper is a significant contribution to the debate over how to create sociable places in this new era of shopping malls taking the place of village centres.

The Viewpoints are two short reports on recent research projects that have been dealing specifically with children in city environments. The first is by Sandrine Depeau. Depeau employs a cross-cultural theme in her report, which compares the differences in young people's urban identities in two cities: Paris, France, and Frankston, Australia. She illustrates in her cross-locality analysis the important role that local environments have for young people to experiment in the meanings of sociability and identity construction. By using autonomy and risk factors as a schema for analysis she introduces us to the unique life cycles of children in their micro-environments and argues that to make meaning of sustainable development there is a need to focus on the local as well as the global.

The second viewpoint is the story of a group of children who, through a spontaneous act of pulling down a fence that surrounded the courtyard of their apartment building, changed their landscape in ways that had a monumental impact on their lives and the lives of their families. We are constantly bombarded with stories of the difficult lives that children endure growing up in degraded and hazardous inner-city environments—this story begins by telling a similar tale. But what is different about the children at Oak Park, California, is that with the support of the researcher and author of this article, Ilaria Salvadori, they become active change agents in constructing a better world for themselves. It is a story to share and remind ourselves that children are not just victims of the environments we construct for them but can, when given the opportunity and the tools, be designers and leaders in environmental transformation.

Child-friendly Cities

The papers presented in this special edition, together with recent research and publications emerging from the multi-disciplinary research field into children's environments, reveal that children and youth have nearly the same wishes no matter where they grow up in the world:

- they want clean water and enough food to eat;

- they want to be healthy and to have the space to learn, develop and play;
- they want friends and family who love and care for them;
- they want to participate in community life and be valued;
- they want to collaborate with adults to make the world a better place for all;
- they want peace and safety from threats of violence;
- they want access to a clean environment where they can connect with nature;
- they want to be listened to and their views taken seriously.

Ideally, towns and cities should be places where children and youth can socialise, observe and learn about how society functions and how they can contribute to the cultural fabric of their community. They should also be places where they find refuge, discover nature and find tolerant and caring adults who will support them. Positive examples of children's authentic participation and social mobilisation in creating better cities around the world are beginning to emerge. It is important that these stories are shared and used as models of good practice in emerging local sustainability discourses. If having rich local environmental experiences and feeling safe and secure, connected and valued are universal indicators of quality of life, then what better place to start than to evaluate sustainable cities through the lives and eyes of its children? A child-friendly city is after all a people-friendly city.

> I like to smell flowers. When I smell flowers, I feel easy. I'd like to be a bee to fly around the world and smell all the flowers. I like to touch the tree trunk and the water in the river. When I feel the water in the river, I can feel the freshness of the water. I imagine a school of fish swimming in the water. I'd like to touch those fish. When I smell bad things in the air, I feel uneasy. I don't like to live in such an atmosphere. I want to clean the dirty water and make the air fresh. I feel inside I'd like to bring freshness to all my friends of various nationalities around the world. (Truong van Thuan, age 13, Vietnam)

Note

[1] The words from Satoshi and Truong are taken from a book compiled by Lannis Temple for UNICEF (Temple, 1992).

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