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Child Friendly City: The Global Perspective

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PAPER PRESENTATION BY

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Good morning and Selamat Pagi to all.

Firstly, thank you for inviting UNICEF to speak at this important forum towards making Petaling Jaya a Child-Friendly City.

UNICEF believes that cities are places where children's rights should be fulfilled.

You may think that child rights and cities are two entirely different entities – yet they are intertwined and inseparable.

Why is this so? Because within a few years, more than half of the world's child population will live in urban areas. By the year 2025, some 60 % of children in the developing world will live in cities and half will be poor.

It is heartening to note that local governments around the world are assuming more responsibility for providing social services, a function once performed by state governments. This means that cities need to equip themselves to serve a growing number of children, families, communities, and to help them find solutions to poverty.

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Inadequate living conditions are the most pervasive violation of children's rights worldwide, exacerbating the failure to realise many other rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child guides us to use the principles of non-discrimination and best interests to address the environments and needs of poor urban children.

Are cities built for children?

Life in a big city has many advantages, yet at the same time it exposes children to unexpected risks and dangers, especially those who live in poverty or are affected by discrimination.

Children have to deal with such problems as heavy traffic, polluted air and criminal environment on the streets. It is often difficult for children to find a safe place to play in close proximity to their homes.

In some cities around the world, children lack access to safe water and sanitation facilities; live on polluted or unserviced land and under constant threat of eviction; and are exposed to infections that spread rapidly in overcrowded environments.

There are cities where schools are poorly managed, not relevant to children's culture, experience and aspirations; or do not prepare them for employment. Therefore, children drop out of school and often become victims of exploitive child labour or are drawn into gangs, drug addiction, abuse and trafficking.

Urban life often erodes family structures, impoverishing the quality of adult care for children and jeopardising traditional safety nets.

Cities, however, are also places for opportunities, where children have greater access to basic amenities and specialised services. They are within the reach of mass media and can easily be informed and made aware. Physically and socially, citizens can meet easily and mobilise to claim their rights and promote solutions to shared problems.

Responsibility of governments

From the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we recognise that state and local governments must put children's interests first in their planning and policy-making.

Children's dependence, and their developmental state make them particularly vulnerable. They are more affected by the actions – or inactions – of government than any other group.

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Yet children have no vote and play no significant part in the conventional political process. Without special arrangements, they will have little influence on the huge impact government has on their lives.

Finally, I am sure that you have all realised how important it is to avoid the huge costs and consequences of neglecting children's rights, especially to society at large.

Child-Friendly City concept

The Convention on the Rights of the Child challenges cities to conceive of themselves, and the services, amenities and quality of life they provide, in a new way.

Through the UNICEF "Child-Friendly Cities" initiative, cities can work towards reducing the negative impact of urban environment on children's lives and use to the maximum extent possible the opportunities and advantages that the city offers, for children's development.

A Child Friendly City is a local system of governance committed to fulfilling children's rights. It is a city where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes and decisions.

Building a Child Friendly City is the process of implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, led by local government. The aim is to improve the lives of children now by recognising and realising their rights – and hence transform for the better communities today and for the future.

A good place to start is by understanding the scale and severity of the problems, to know how many slum dwellers there are, how this number is changing, or how critical conditions are for children living in urban areas.

A Child Friendly City does not just build playgrounds and schools – it has to become more child-friendly in all aspects of governance, environment and services.

Among other things, a Child Friendly City is actively engaged in fulfilling the right of every young citizen to express their opinions and influence decisions about their city ; participate in family, community and social life ; be protected from exploitation, violence and abuse ; live in an unpolluted environment ; and be an equal citizen of their city with access to every service, regardless of ethnic origin, religion, income, gender or disability

The most unique feature of a Child Friendly City, which makes it radically different from other social programmes and initiatives, is children's and young people's mandatory

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participation in decision-making processes on all matters affecting their interests. As Petaling Jaya moves towards becoming a Child-Friendly City, I am sure that you are embarking on a process of engaging actively with children and their real lives.

In a Child Friendly City, children and youth are not viewed as part of the problems, but as part of the solutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A global snapshot

This year, the Convention on the Rights of the Child turns 20. It is timely that Petaling Jaya, one of the most thriving cities in Malaysia, is striving to become a Child Friendly City.

In your quest to be a Child Friendly City, you stand alongside many big cities around the world that are also working towards this goal, including London, Paris, Munich, Buenos-Aires, Moscow and other cities in France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Brazil.

However, the Child Friendly City initiative describes a lengthy process to place children's needs and rights at the centre of urban policy and planning for sustainability. Many countries have developed national level efforts and organised ways to identify child friendly cities and communities according to locally agreed standards and methods – and these efforts will take time to see results.

Achieving Child Friendly City status is also not an end in itself, but an ongoing exercise to continually monitor and review the state of children and young people in the city. This initiative requires large-scale, systematic, high priority attention to the full range of issues for poor urban children.

Allow me to conclude by congratulating Petaling Jaya for recognising the role of local governments, and for taking the initiative to support the nation in implementing the CRC.

When a city is friendly to children, it is friendly to all.

END.