



## ***Children in Urban Poverty: Can They Get More than Small Change?***



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It's widely recognized now that the world is more than half urban – it has been three years since we reached that turning point. Less widely acknowledged is the catastrophic extent of urban poverty or its implications for hundreds of millions of children. We are used to thinking of urban children as being better off than rural children in every way – better fed, better educated, with better access to health care and a better chance of succeeding in life. For many children, this is true. But for growing numbers, the so called “urban advantage” is a myth.

### **How widespread is urban poverty?**

It all depends on how you measure it. Poverty is usually defined in monetary terms. If a poverty line is set too low, only a small proportion of people appear to be poor. Most national poverty lines are misleading, because the cost of living in different places is not taken into account. It can, of course, cost a lot more to live in an urban area (especially a successful city) and in a cash-based economy. Housing and water cost more, food has to be purchased, for many getting to and from work is expensive, in short, everything has its price. Even where urban poverty lines are set a little higher than rural poverty lines, as in India, they generally fail to take into account the high cost of non-food essentials, and especially of housing. Many urban families that are earning enough to place them well above the official income poverty line may in fact be struggling to get by. Yet they are not counted among the country's poor.

And it's not just about money. Keetie Roelen and Geranda Notten, in the August 2011 issue of *Child Poverty Insights*, point out that, in fact, the overlap between monetary poverty and other forms of deprivation may be quite limited. There has been growing recognition over recent decades of the multi-dimensional quality of poverty, and it is the cumulative effect of a range of deprivations that is most troubling. Neighborhood problems and access to basic services, for instance, have significant impacts even for those children whose parents have work. Poverty is not just about the capacity to afford a basic food basket; it is a matter of lack of access and exclusion in a range of areas, including basic civil and political rights, and this may be especially evident in cities.

Many urban dwellers remain effectively cut off from the benefits of citizenship. Because land ownership or renting formal housing are out of reach for so many households, they often live in unauthorized informal settlements, under bridges, along railway lines, on whatever land that is not already occupied, even though it may be hazardous or unfit for habitation. These settlements and their residents are often not recognized by the city or included in the country's census or other surveys. Children growing up here remain essentially invisible, not only uncounted but frequently unreached by any basic services. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the official population of the city was 800,000 last year. However, it is widely acknowledged that if all the people living in the settlements on the edges of the city are counted, the figure would be closer to 1.5 million.

The residents of these peripheral neighborhoods, mostly migrants from rural parts of the country, live in wretched housing. There are no proper roads, no provision for water or sanitation, no schools, no health services. Children who might have had access to health services back in the village might never even see the inside of a clinic in Bishkek.

When these invisible citizens are counted, and when the true cost of living and the multi-dimensional nature of poverty are factored into the equation, the numbers of people in urban poverty begin to go way up. UN Habitat estimates, for example, that one in six people in the world live in deprivation in urban slums and squatter settlements. Given the demographics of poor countries and communities, with their relatively high numbers of children, it is not unrealistic to estimate that one out of every four children in the world is living in urban poverty.

### If the numbers are so high, why is urban poverty considered so much less of a problem than rural poverty?

It's true that most figures show that three quarters of poverty is concentrated in rural areas. This is in part related to the unrealistically low poverty line issue and to the invisibility of many urban residents. But the tendency to rely on urban and rural averages is also very deceptive. Wealth tends to be concentrated in cities, along with many higher level services. In most countries, the most affluent, well-educated, healthy people are urban. So average figures, whether for income or mortality or malnutrition or school attendance, look better in urban areas. But this can mask the **extent of disparities within those same urban areas and the depth of the deprivation there**. Equity is an especially poignant concern in cities, where people as deprived as those in any rural area may live side by side with the most privileged, in many cases helping to make their privilege possible.

Even urban averages in some cases are beginning to show a different story as more and more of the world's deprived people take up residence in towns and cities. In many nations, the urban advantage in health and quality of life is increasingly becoming an urban penalty. As far back as the 1990s, the gap between urban and rural infant mortality rates began to disappear in Latin America. The same thing is happening now in sub-Saharan Africa, as rural rates improve and urban rates stagnate. The gap in school enrollment rates, traditionally much higher in urban areas, is also narrowing as rural rates climb, and in a handful of countries—Bangladesh, for instance—enrollment is now higher in rural than in urban areas.

This is by no means to minimize the scale or the depth of rural poverty. There is no question that this must remain a development priority. But it's not just a question of numbers. It shouldn't matter to us whether there are *more* deprived children in rural or in urban areas. They don't cancel each other out. The concern is to understand what poverty means in their lives, and to find the most effective ways of addressing it. The intent is not to downplay the realities of rural poverty but to stress that **urban deprivation and exclusion present some different and particular challenges**. The same standards used when analyzing rural poverty cannot always be applied in identifying those at risk in urban settings, nor are the same responses always appropriate.

### What are some of the particular challenges for girls and boys in urban poverty?

It depends of course on a number of factors, and perhaps the most significant is the quality of local governance. Where this is inclusive and accountable, children even in low income countries may enjoy the benefits that by rights should accompany urban living – the economies of scale and proximity that can make it far more affordable to provide a decent quality of life, the levels of investment and opportunity that can help to ensure that these benefits are available to all. But in the absence of good governance, children may grow up in the grimmest conditions which may entrench and perpetuate their poverty.

To start with, between thirty and sixty percent of urban dwellers in low income countries **live without the secure tenure** that can protect them from eviction. Although this does not necessarily mean they will be evicted, people in their millions are in fact evicted every year in cities around the world, even in such democratic countries as South Africa and India. This can create terrible upheaval and distress for children and their families; social networks are destroyed, jobs lost, possessions damaged or destroyed. Many children who are in school cannot finish the year and end up dropping out. Even just the threat of eviction can mean chronic anxiety and an unwillingness to make the kinds of investments in housing and neighborhood that can provide a better environment for children and help a family over time to work its way out of poverty. Insecure tenure permeates every aspect of life. Having no formal address often means no right to vote, no access to credit or insurance, no police protection. As in Bishkek, it can mean no schools or clinics, no provision for basic amenities like sanitation, running water, waste removal or emergency services.

The **sheer concentration of people in urban areas changes the way that many of these deprivations are experienced.** Toilets, ventilation, drainage, waste collection, open space for play, the availability of recreational facilities, for instance, all become more critical in the context of high density. There may be a latrine no more than 100 metres away for instance, but this does not take into account the long time spent waiting in line or the strain that is put on these facilities. Proximity does not mean access. There may be drains, but when they end up clogged by plastic bags filled with excrement, they do little good. Global figures for “improved” water and sanitation show that urban areas are comparatively well provided. But the same standards are applied everywhere, and do not come close to meeting the minimal requirements for health in a dense settlement and with shared toilets. There is copious documentation of the implications of overcrowding and a lack of provision for rates of diarrhoeal disease, other water and food borne illnesses, respiratory illness, worms, skin and eye conditions and malnutrition, and the burdens are by far highest for young children.

Urban children can be heavily **exposed to toxics and pollutants**, living in areas contaminated by industrial waste or close to heavy traffic. There is also the rapidly growing problem of **road traffic injuries**, with urban child pedestrians facing the highest risk. This is especially the case in poor settlements without sidewalks or safe crossing lights. Urban dwellers living in poor-quality housing and in settlements without proper infrastructure are also among the groups **most at risk from disasters and the direct and indirect impacts of climate change.** Here again, children are most vulnerable – to flooding, heat stroke, water-borne illness, injury and death.

Even the simple matter of play, so essential to children’s development, can be a problem in crowded urban settlements. Poor neighborhoods *can* be rich, stimulating environments for play, learning and social growth, and children in these communities may actually be better off in some ways than their more isolated peers in wealthier areas. But safety concerns and the lack of appropriate space can also mean that children are **confined to small overcrowded homes with little opportunity for exploration or physical activity.** When small children are constantly underfoot, tempers can fray easily and the potential for harsh treatment goes up. Difficult living conditions also inevitably mean some level of neglect for young children. A lack of sanitation, long distances to water points, unsafe cooking equipment and lighting in crowded rooms, dilapidated housing, an absence of safe play space often occur in clusters; overburdened, exhausted caregivers can be forced to leave children unsupervised, to cut corners and make compromises.

Many poor urban communities are characterized by a strong social fabric, an essential support for children’s well-being. But the degree of transience, crowding, insecurity and poor conditions in many settings can mean high levels of stress, undermining social capital and resulting in lower levels of reciprocity and **higher rates of crime and violence.** This is seen by many as an equity issue – clear connections have been drawn between deprivation and exclusion and the frustrations and anger that can contribute to violence. The impacts for children are powerful. Insecurity at neighborhood level restricts their mobility and can erode their right to associate with others and take part in the lives of their communities. It can lead to depression and anxiety. It also spawns violence. The most powerful predictor of violent behavior is exposure to violence, whether as an observer or a victim. Children and young people in violent communities are more likely to have problems with aggression and self-control along with lower levels of achievement in school and higher dropout rates.

### **If things are so bad, why do so many people migrate to cities?**

It’s true that many migrants may just exchange one set of problems for another and still end up having trouble feeding their children. But still, the world is becoming urban at a rapid rate. By 2030 it is anticipated that sixty percent of the global population will live in towns and cities. To take a larger view – although urban migration is often viewed as a problem, and many countries have policies to restrict it, the fact is that the scale of economic growth in any country is closely tied to the rate of increase in the level of urbanization. Urbanization is a response to the fact that most new jobs and investments are in industries and services concentrated in urban areas. Migration plays a critical role in the strategies of individuals and households to adapt to changing realities – they go where the opportunities are.

The rate of movement is especially high for children and young people, who often move to urban areas on their own. **In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, there is a much higher proportion of adolescents in urban areas than in rural areas.** A survey of 10 sub-Saharan countries found that a quarter of urban girls between 10 and 14 lived without either parent. Research has demonstrated that the great majority of these young migrants are not trafficked or running away. They are purposeful migrants, seeking the economic opportunities and social mobility that only towns and cities can offer. They

don't want to spend their lives bent over a hoe, subject to the scrutiny of their elders. Cities exercise enormous appeal, despite the risks – and there are many. The economic gains, after all, can be hard won. Most urban dwellers work in the informal sector with no job security; work can be irregular and poorly paid, and informal workers can be vulnerable to harassment by the police. Many individuals find it necessary to hold down two or three jobs to get by. They have to be resourceful, determined, willing to accept exploitation in many cases. This can be especially true for girls, who may be extremely vulnerable. Working as domestic servants, for example, can leave them at high risk of mistreatment. Transactional sex can in some cases be a critical survival strategy, and it is no accident that HIV rates for girls are much higher than for boys in many countries, and that these are mostly urban girls. The cost of mobility can be high indeed. But in the estimation of the millions who make this move, the gamble is worth taking.

### What can be done to improve the situation for urban children in poverty?

It is crucial that policymakers understand that poverty reduction approaches developed to tackle rural poverty will not necessarily work in urban settings, as the nature of urban poverty is different from that of rural poverty. In order to address child urban poverty in an effective manner, policymakers need to have a good understanding of the scale and nature of the issue. For that, accurate data and analyses of the dynamics, trends and conditions of children in urban poverty are critical. It is thus imperative to address the gaps in data collection, research, and monitoring. Governments and national and international organizations involved in data collection should **add missing questions to their surveys** (Censuses, DHS, MICS, etc.) and build on existing mechanisms to encourage intra-urban disaggregation of data. Community-led “enumerations” and monitoring should be supported to expand the information base while also expanding learning and organization and to increase accountability.

Understanding also what poverty means in urban children's lives, governments can more easily find ways to help their households and communities to protect their health, support their right to development, and ensure that they have the tools to cope productively with the world they live in. There are numerous effective measures to improve the health, well-being and life-opportunities of urban girls and boys in poverty, targeted at the specific deprivations they experience. Birth registration drives, improved maternal and child health care, non-formal alternatives to education, reproductive health services, vocational training, can all be extremely effective.

But it is unlikely that any intervention targeted at children and young people will have as great an impact as a **focus on building the relationship between local government and the urban poor**. Creating the decent living environments, supportive social fabric and responsive services that underpin the rights of urban children and adolescents means a **concern with policy and advocacy** at the highest level, of course, but these have to be translated into local realities. In most urban settings, local government controls most of the realities that define poverty. Local power structures, land owning patterns, political interests, bureaucratic decisions and regulations can all stand in the way of poverty reduction. Decisions about land tenure, building regulations, roads, open space, police protection, voter rolls, access to schools and health care systems – these are all controlled by local government departments and agencies. The levels of provision that are fundamental to health – decent water and sanitation, drainage and waste removal, depend on the decisions of local government. Infrastructure and services in areas where the urban poor live and work have a direct impact in their income-earning opportunities and their productivity. A lack of tenure and inadequate living conditions underpin and exacerbate the violation of many other basic rights for children, but for changes to go to scale, coordination with effective, accountable local structures is essential.

Community-driven responses, in partnership with local government, appear to have the greatest chance of effecting lasting change. There are many examples of constructive local actions by urban poor organizations and federations; inevitably these become more effective and better able to go to scale as local governments begin to see these groups as part of the solution rather than the problem, recognizing them and building on their work. The Asian Coalition for Community Action Program is an excellent example and has managed to initiate a process of city-wide upgrading in 150 cities in Asia, in partnership with government. The concerns of children and young people clearly need to be a conscious focus within such efforts, which should draw on the experience and input of both caregivers and boys and girls of different ages.

### Some general resources:

- Bhatpat, Meera (2009) Poverty lines and the lives of the poor: Underestimation of urban poverty – the case of India, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series, Working Paper 20,

- Van den Poel, E, O O'Donnell, E van Doorslaer (2007) Are urban children really healthier? Evidence from 47 developing countries, *Social Science and Medicine* 65: 1986-2003
- Stephens, Carolyn (2011) Revisiting urban health and social inequalities: the devil is in the detail and the solution is in all of us, *Environment and Urbanization* 23: 29-40
- Montgomery, Mark (2009) Urban poverty and health in developing countries, *Population Bulletin* 64(2), Population Reference Bureau
- Tacoli, Cecilia and Richard Mabala (2010) Exploring mobility and migration in the context of rural—urban linkages: why gender and generation matter, *Environment and Urbanization* 22: 389-395,
- Carolyn Moser (2004) Urban violence and insecurity: an introductory roadmap, *Environment and Urbanization* 16(2) 3-17
- Satterthwaite, David (2010) *Citizen Action for Urban Poverty Reduction in Low- and Middle- income Nations*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Bartlett, S (2005). Good governance: making age part of the equation- an introduction, *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 1-17

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