This chapter examines some of the phenomena shaping the lives of children in urban areas, from their reasons for moving to the city and their experience of migration to the challenges of getting by in the face of economic shocks, violence and disasters.

Migrant children

It has long seemed as if cities had a magical power to draw people in with bright lights and the promise of advancement. Images of people moving from rural to urban areas endure in the collective imagination, and migration continues to play an important role in many regions. Rural-to-urban migration is pronounced in West Africa, for instance, and international migration remains a major factor in Europe, Asia and North America.

Historically, access to resources in urban areas has not been equitable. Every place has its own pattern of vulnerability, stemming from accumulated and current political and social prejudices. New arrivals may be pushed to the margins of urban society; this may be a deliberate response intended to deter future migration. Migrants, especially those without documents, may be denied public services, social protection and even emergency health care. Institutionalized exclusion can take the form of registration requirements for migrant workers — an ostensible means of proffering services that, in practice, often serves the opposite purpose. Rather than making such essentials as schooling available to migrant families, these requirements often have the effect of denying such services to those not registered, especially where the process or cost of registration is prohibitive.

Most child migrants move with their families, accompanying parents or caregivers seeking employment or opportunity. Almost a tenth of China’s child population, or 27.3 million children, took part in internal migration with their parents in 2008. A significant number of children and young people, however, move within countries on their own. A recent analysis of census and household data from 12 countries found that one in five migrant children aged 12–14 and half of those aged 15–17 had moved without a parent.
Children and young people frequently follow established patterns of migration. In West Africa and South Asia, where rates of independent child migration are particularly high, most child migrants leave home between the ages of 13 and 17. Many of these children grow up in impoverished rural areas where it is common to travel to seek work in order to supplement family income, whether for part of each year, during lean periods or for longer durations. At least 4 million children are thought to migrate seasonally, whether by themselves or with their families, in India alone.

Like adults, children migrate in response to a combination of push and pull factors. For many, migration is an attempt to secure a better life, whether in terms of economic or educational opportunities, or simply to escape poverty. Others relocate because of family circumstances, such as the loss of a parent, or to escape conflict or natural disasters and the upheaval and food shortages that accompany them. An unstable or difficult family environment often plays a role. Children may be forced to leave owing to neglect or abuse from their caregivers. And in some cases, leaving is a way of marking out a separate identity – effectively declaring independence.

Be it forced or voluntary, with adult caregivers or alone, migration entails risks that require age-appropriate measures to protect the children involved.

Once in the city, children who moved to help their families can find that participation in the urban economy weakens the bonds between them and their parents. Indeed, the act of leaving home may even be seen as an abandonment of family duties and thus may cause conflict with parents. And all too often, young people who arrive in urban centres with hopes of educational advancement find it unattainable because of work commitments, as separate studies in Bangladesh and Ghana have confirmed.

The quality of schooling also can be a cause for concern. In Turkey as elsewhere, schools in poor quarters and on the urban periphery, where most migrants settle, struggle with overcrowding and a lack of resources. To this is added the challenge of accommodating an influx of students from diverse cultures who speak different languages.
A WORLD APART
The isolation of Roma children
by Eugen Crai, Country Director, Roma Education Fund, Romania

In 2005, governments in Central and Eastern Europe proclaimed the Roma Decade of Inclusion and committed themselves to “eliminating discrimination and closing the unacceptable gaps between Roma [people] and the rest of society.” With the clock running down to the Decade’s conclusion in 2015, this effort to right historical inequalities in such key areas as education, gender and health has brought modest results. Roma children continue to have substantially lower vaccination coverage, with appalling consequences. When Bulgaria experienced an outbreak of measles in 2009, 90 per cent of all cases occurred among the ethnic Roma community.

Poverty affects Roma communities in both urban and rural Romania; the poorest are clustered mainly in mid-size towns and larger villages. What sets the situation in urban settings apart, here as in the wider region, is the separation of Roma from the rest of the municipal population, with the Roma population living in de facto ‘ghettos’. The problem of ‘ghettoization’ is a clear physical manifestation of exclusion. Its roots date back to the mid-1800s, when laws were passed freeing Roma from centuries of slavery. Without any policies to promote and ease integration, freed Roma settled at the margins of urban areas – essentially, on no man’s land. Through my work I have seen that Roma communities continue to be excluded from the development plans of cities that have expanded and encircled their neighbourhoods. Roma communities remain isolated – many are not connected to public utilities. The absence of permanent housing, combined with a lack of birth or identity documents, can significantly limit access to health care, education and employment. Evictions frequently occur without warning, reinforcing this segregation.

What is life like for a child in a Bucharest ghetto? Consider the case of Laurentiu, a 16-year-old in the Ferentari district, known for its large Roma population, its derelict buildings, its poverty and large numbers of children out of school. After Laurentiu’s father died, his mother abandoned him, and he was placed in a state institution. He now lives with his 70-year-old grandmother and his five brothers in an apartment that has been disconnected from water and gas because the family struggled to pay the bills. Growing up in a damp space, without gas to cook food or water to wash, just a few blocks away from the glossy commercial boulevards of Bucharest – this is the brutal reality of two neighbouring worlds.

Urban poverty is especially difficult for children, who have little control over their surroundings or level of affluence. Many find it impossible to attend school, and those who do attend struggle to do well with limited support. Roma children in Romania have much lower enrolment rates at all levels of education, starting with preschool; many are unnecessarily placed in special education. In 2005, only 46 per cent of the Roma population aged 12 and above had spent more than four years in school (compared with 83 per cent of the general population), and of those only 13 per cent acquired at least some secondary education (63 per cent among the general population).

The lucky ones find non-governmental organizations that provide counselling, tutoring, homework help and a space in which children can discuss problems, gain confidence and improve their marks, often in preparation for the crucial 8th grade final exam, a stepping stone to high school or vocational studies. The Roma Education Fund is one organization working to make a difference in the lives of some 5,000 Roma children and youth in Romania. But there are so many more like Laurentiu. So much remains to be done.

Eugen Crai is the country director of the Roma Education Fund in Bucharest, Romania. He holds a master’s degree in law from McGill University, Canada, and specializes in human rights law and anti-discrimination legislation, as well as minority rights advocacy and education policy. His professional career centres on Roma communities – over the past 14 years he has worked on the first European Union Phare Project for the Improvement of the Roma Situation in Romania and has also served as education officer and social policy specialist at UNICEF Romania.
Children who migrate unaccompanied by adults are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and trafficking. Without support and protection networks, they may have particular difficulty coping emotionally. Similar predations may await children who, or who move with, refugees or internally displaced persons fleeing conflict or environmental distress.

More than half the world’s registered refugees live in urban areas. Some have official status, but many more lack the legal right to urban residence and may therefore be excluded from assistance. Women and children among these urban refugees and asylum seekers are at risk of harassment, exploitation, human trafficking and gender-based violence. Refugee and asylum-seeking children and adolescents, particularly those unaccompanied by adults, are especially vulnerable during the resettlement phase. Children born to migrant parents may end up stateless and unable to enjoy the rights of citizenship. Internally displaced persons may find themselves without economic resources and may be seen as competing with the urban poor for social services. For host communities, national governments and the international community, providing effective assistance is particularly challenging in such scenarios.

Children are affected by migration to cities even when they do not move. Many are left behind in rural areas in the care of a parent, relatives or community members. Such was the case with 55 million children in China in 2008. Being left behind can cause physical, educational and psychosocial distress. The damage is not inevitable, however. A 1998 study of primary school children of Filipino migrants suggests that, with sufficient care from the extended family, migration on the part of parents need not prove detrimental to child development, particularly when childcare training, counselling and other forms of support are provided.
All children are vulnerable in emergencies, but certain realities place those living in poor urban areas at special risk.

First, epidemics spread fastest in crowded places lacking health services and sanitation facilities. Second, violence by armed groups, gangs, crime syndicates, rebels or government forces spawns instability and insecurity. This can be felt most acutely by children and women, who are also at risk of gender-based violence. Third, conflict or natural disasters in rural areas can lead to a massive influx of internally displaced persons into urban areas, with large numbers seeking refuge not in camps but in host communities where the infrastructure and services are already weak. This puts both host families and displaced people under extreme strain and leaves them more vulnerable to epidemics or urban violence. And fourth, pre-existing deprivations such as inadequate shelter and limited access to clean water, sanitation, education and health care mean that delivery systems must be created before humanitarian aid can reach people.

When emergencies occur in marginalized urban areas, national and international agencies face threats to children’s health, safety and well-being. But innovative responses tried in Port-au-Prince, Haiti; Nairobi, Kenya; and Manila, Philippines, have proved successful and could be applied elsewhere.

Information on slum communities is often inadequate, outdated or nonexistent, making it difficult to locate the most vulnerable and those in greatest need. But solutions are at hand. In Nairobi, impoverished communities identify at-risk families and pass this information on to humanitarian agencies so they can pinpoint those most likely to need emergency assistance.

In Nairobi and Manila, cash-transfer delivery systems have helped recipients regain a measure of food security and restart their livelihoods. Community committees identified the most vulnerable, agencies verified this information, and then SIM cards were distributed, allowing beneficiaries to get cash via mobile phones.

Also in Manila, an early warning surveillance system introduced in May 2010 entails training health workers to report the incidence of disease by sending text messages to computer hubs.

It can be more difficult to identify beneficiaries in cities where rich and poor live shoulder-to-shoulder than in those where the poor live in large and distinct settlements. Some groups – undocumented immigrants, for example – may prefer not to be identified for fear this will bring on politically motivated violence, arrest or expulsion. Blanket targeting can overcome these constraints but it is only appropriate immediately after crisis has struck, when the whole affected population needs assistance. Community drop-in centres providing information, services and protection can also prove helpful.

Scant water and sanitation infrastructure is a major challenge in poor urban settings – even more so when disaster pushes large numbers of people into these areas. The results of such a surge in users can include the contamination of drinking water. Sanitary toilet systems consisting of commodores that can be emptied at designated waste disposal points are being introduced in the slums of Nairobi. Another innovation, the ‘peepoo’ bag, is biodegradable and can be used as compost in gardens, so it does not add to the pressures on local sewage infrastructure. In Manila, raised toilets have been built to withstand flooding. The key to success in each of these cases has been community involvement in the design and implementation of initiatives.

In Port-au-Prince after the 2010 earthquake and elsewhere, ‘child-friendly spaces’ were established to address children’s psychological and social needs – and to help protect children from the increased risk of violence, abuse and exploitation that accompanies emergencies. A particular emphasis was placed on serving the survivors of gender-based violence.

Source: UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes.
Economic shocks

The effects of the economic crisis unleashed in the financial capitals of high-income countries in 2007 continue to be felt around the world in high unemployment, deteriorating work conditions, dwindling real incomes, and food and fuel prices that are high and difficult to predict.

Globally, there were 30 million more unemployed people in late 2010 than before the crisis broke, and the number continued to grow in 2011.22 The burden is disproportionately borne by workers aged 15–24, whose unemployment rate rose from 11.8 per cent in 2007 to 12.6 per cent in 2010.23 Studies of previous economic downturns suggest that this generation of young people could end up detached and disillusioned, with long-term repercussions for their personal and collective well-being.24

Unemployment figures for urban youth are hard to obtain, but those that are available paint a worrying picture. Young people in Sierra Leone’s urban areas are more likely to be unemployed than either rural youth or urban adults.25 In low-income countries, the statistical evidence on youth unemployment tends to be weak, partly because a significant proportion of young people work outside the formal sector. There are indications, however, that the crisis has swelled the ranks of the ‘working poor’ – a category in which young people are overrepresented26 – and slowed progress in poverty reduction, education and health care.27

In extreme cases, persistent unemployment can contribute to civil unrest. Urban areas tend to be the focus of such turmoil, as the high concentrations of people make it easier to reach critical mass. Potential or actual civil disturbance is a concern in many cities of West Africa, where the movement of young people from rural areas to cities has reached extremely high levels28 and job growth has been insufficient to absorb the influx.29

In North Africa and the Middle East, young people frustrated by a lack of economic opportunity accounted for a significant proportion of demonstrators in the wave of protests that spread across the region in the spring of 2011, following the self-immolation of a young graduate in Tunisia in December 2010.
The Philippines is one of the 12 countries in the world most vulnerable to disasters and climate change. From 1980 to 2009, some 33,000 people died and another 109 million were affected by natural calamities. The nation’s vulnerability stems largely from the 60 per cent of its 1,500 municipalities and 120 cities located along coastal shores. Many of them, like Metropolitan Manila with its population of 11 million, include areas below sea level. Disasters loom large over the country’s future as the weather becomes increasingly severe and unpredictable.

Early on 26 September 2009, Tropical Storm Ketsana, locally named Ondoy, struck Manila and resulted in the worst floods in 50 years. It was followed a week later by Typhoon Parma, known locally as Pepeng. Especially affected were an estimated 220,000 families in the poorest urban neighbourhoods whose flimsy shelters had stood along waterways and in low-lying areas. Such families are accustomed to dealing with typhoons. Early warnings find them hoisting their household items up to the rafters and taking children to stay with relatives or friends on higher ground. Ondoy, however, took everyone by surprise.

A post-disaster needs assessment concluded that Ondoy and Pepeng directly affected some 9.3 million people. Nearly 1,000 deaths were registered. The number of children or women who died or were injured is not known because data were not disaggregated by age or gender. However, a special field team searching for missing or unaccompanied children in Manila and its surrounding areas recorded 47 child deaths and 257 children aged 6–18 who were separated from their families, missing or in need of other assistance. Several children had drowned. Others succumbed to hunger, diarrhoea, dengue and respiratory diseases.

Young people showed resilience and creativity. As long as their cell phones remained intact, SMS networks could track the locations of stranded neighbours and guide rescuers there. Fashioning makeshift boats out of whatever floated, including a refrigerator with no door, they ferried people to safety. They helped clear mounds of mud and hauled away accumulated debris, some of which they sold as scrap. Many had to drop out of school in order to work to support their families.

Disruptions of household earnings in an already poor population seriously affected the health and well-being of children. Hard-pressed even before the flood, parents were forced to cut down on servings of food and stretch what little they had over several meals. Better-off women shared their food with the less fortunate and offered to look after children while mothers searched for work, money or relief goods. Mothers told heartbreaking tales of their children clinging hysterically to them for months afterwards if they attempted to leave the house.

Women showed strong leadership, especially in the recovery and reconstruction phases. By avidly helping others, organizing community responses, finding ways of earning, and demanding that local officials improve disaster management programmes, they gradually brought the populace back to the familiar routines of pre-Ondoy life. Together with the men, they protested or resisted attempts to relocate them to distant sites, arguing that with few earning opportunities there, their children would starve.

In 2011, new legislation was passed to prepare for future calamities related to climate change. Disaster management programmes were strengthened. So, when Typhoon Falcon brought comparable flooding to the metropolitan region, Marikina City ordered evacuations and marshalled rescue and relief assistance in good time. Muntinlupa City reaped the benefits of its ban on plastic bags. Its clear waterways facilitated drainage.

The full benefit of these efforts will materialize too late for the children lost to or traumatized by Ondoy. But improved community data on who and where the children are, coupled with training of local officials and community members in more efficient relief distribution and rebuilding based on community strengths, offer hope to the next generation.

by Mary Racelis
Research Scientist, Institute of Philippine Culture, and Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, Philippines.
Unemployment in the region is particularly high among better-educated, mostly urban, young people. The supply of skilled jobs has simply not matched demand for them. The opposite is true of the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), where unemployment is highest among the least educated.\(^{30}\)

The poor are also especially vulnerable to rising food and fuel prices because they already spend 50–80 per cent of their money on food, leaving little for medicines, education, transport or cooking fuel. These families can ill afford to pay more, yet their purchasing power is further eroded by declining incomes, reduced public spending and shrinking remittances from family members working overseas.\(^{31}\) Governments have an obligation to protect the poorest and most vulnerable children from the adverse effects of economic crises.

### Violence and crime

Crime and violence affect hundreds of millions of children in urban areas. Some are targets and others participate in or witness such acts as assault, mugging, communal conflict and murder.

In addition to the obvious direct harm they cause, crime and violence can undermine children’s faith in adults and the social order. Chronic exposure can impede children’s development and has been related to poor academic performance and higher school dropout rates, anxiety, depression, aggression and problems with self-control.\(^{32}\)

---

**Armed conflict and children in urban areas**

Since Graça Machel’s landmark *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* report was published in 1996, the international community has focused increasingly on this subject of grave concern. Millions of children have been killed, injured, orphaned or separated from their families. Millions more have been deprived of schooling in Iraq, Pakistan and other countries embroiled in armed conflict. Often, the deprivation has been worst in cities. In Tajikistan, for example, researchers have found that primary school enrolment rates remained lower in urban areas than in the countryside for years after the 1992–1998 conflict.

Although armed conflict is distinct from the quotidian violence of gangs and organized criminal activity, the two increasingly overlap. To secure resources, armed groups may become involved with criminal trafficking networks, as is the case with the drug trade in Colombia and Afghanistan and trafficking in rare minerals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Urban gangs, most often composed of young men, can morph into militias, as was the case with the West Side Boys, who were tactically employed by combatants in Sierra Leone’s civil war of 1991–2002.

While armed conflict is not exclusive to urban areas, it is clear that an attack on a densely populated city neighbourhood — whether by government forces, rebel militias or terrorists — maximizes casualties, including among children. In some cases, civilians are deliberately targeted in order to create a greater political impact — as with explosive devices detonated in busy urban areas such as markets. In other cases, combatants claim that broader war aims justify the costs of civilian death or injury. All assaults on civilians, however, and especially those on children, are violations of international human rights law.
People all over the world hear stories, watch movies and see postcards of New York City. They recognize our skyline – the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty or the Brooklyn Bridge – on sight. But New York City is not just about the big lights, the big buildings. There are the streets, and then there are the people who walk them, and when you live here you learn that New York is just like any city, filled with people who struggle to make ends meet.

In the neighbourhoods where we are growing up, we see the rougher side of this famous city. Poverty is part of life in our overcrowded and under-resourced communities. Peer pressure influences kids to drop out of school, and many end up in jail or dead. The face of poverty might change from one place to the next, but how poverty is felt is the same. It connects us with young people from other cities.

We live in different parts of the city, but we have had the common experience of sharing in street libraries. These are outdoor libraries, set up on blankets by volunteers who bring books and arts to our neighbourhoods. The libraries are places of peace where young people and children can work together and support each other. They are important because violence is a major part of our lives. We have had to run away from family barbecues when shootouts began, and we have teachers who have stopped even trying to break up fights in class because they’re so common.

Gangs are one of the worst problems facing our communities. Gangs affect the entire neighbourhood, causing outbursts of violence and retaliation in our parks and influencing every decision we make, down to when and where we buy groceries, so that we can have a better chance of avoiding confrontation. We’ve seen enough to know that once you’re in a gang, you’re done. There is a good chance that you’ll have to die to get back out.

Young people feel a common pressure to gain respect and a sense of belonging, but overcrowded living conditions and constant changes in our lives can make accomplishing that impossible. Gangs give a kind of power and protection, and this creates as lot of pressure to join. It’s true that you can get respect for doing something you’re good at, but if you live in an under-resourced neighbourhood the opportunities and support you need to get truly good at something don’t come so often. The fact that people believe joining a gang is their best option shows how deeply problems run here.

Violence is serious in poor communities; it creates a cycle that keeps people in poverty. But extreme poverty is a form of violence itself, because it forces children and families to use so much of their energy to defend their rights against such threats as eviction and gentrification, which cause rents to rise and force poorer families to move frequently. As a result, many of us have had to move to completely different neighbourhoods and schools. These kinds of transitions are always scary and challenging, but in the city, they are common and can be downright dangerous for us. When you’re new to a neighbourhood or school, people want to test you. If you fail those tests, you’re a target. Kids who don’t fit in get teased, harassed and even attacked. As our 17-year-old peer Crystal told a United Nations panel in 2011, she was attacked by seven girls on her way to a bus stop because she was wearing brand-name clothes popular at the school from which she had just moved, but shunned at her new school.

We’ve all had these kinds of experiences, but we have learned how to handle them and move forward.

Young people like us have a role to play. Even in difficult neighbourhoods there are the positive influences of strong families and inspiring people, and we have the power to seek out those positive role models and to become them ourselves. All of us want to be those people, and we want a chance to change the communities we grew up in for the better. By living through so many of the injustices associated with growing up in under-resourced neighbourhoods, we’ve gained the knowledge we need to start the process of change, change that will create places where all families are treated with respect and dignity.

Speaking out about our lives is part of how we can create that change. People can’t speak for us who have never lived the lives we describe. But when we get to speak on behalf of our own experiences and ourselves, that’s freedom of speech, and that’s a positive step.
The causes of violence affecting children in urban areas are many and complex, but prominent among them are poverty and inequality. The insufficient provision of public services and such community infrastructure as schools and recreational areas is common to the cities of low-income countries and those in high-income countries whose governments are prone to social austerity. High rates of crime and violence often prevail in such places. The experience of being deprived of something to which one believes one is entitled triggers a sense of exclusion and can lead to frustration and violence. A study of 24 of the world’s 50 wealthiest countries confirmed that more unequal societies are more likely to experience problems associated with this kind of relative deprivation: high rates of crime, violence and imprisonment. Incarceration is itself a problem because violence is common in prisons and detention centres.

In many parts of the world, urban gangs made up entirely or partly of young people are known for committing such crimes as extortion, petty theft, selling or trafficking drugs, armed robbery, murder and carjacking. On average, children join gangs around age 13, but evidence suggests a trend towards earlier enlistment. In marginal urban settings, gangs can offer children a sense of identity, belonging and protection, as well as financial reward. Children from poor backgrounds, often growing up with few opportunities to escape unemployment, may see little prospect of securing their own future or supporting their families. They drop out of school, disillusioned with its lack of potential to improve their situation. In urban areas where the state fails to provide such essentials as safe water, electricity or gas, health care, housing, education or legal protection, gangs sometimes step in to fill the vacuum.

While it is difficult to measure the impact of specific institutional approaches to the challenge of reducing violence, evidence suggests that community policing programmes – which include community participation and special training for police personnel – have proved successful in urban areas of Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica and Guatemala.

Successful strategies to prevent violence involve all levels of the community and serve to establish trust.
between them, creating ties among children, adults, schools, institutions, civil society and local and national governments. The ideal protection, albeit one that is unattainable for many children, is a stable family unit, characterized by strong bonds between children and parents and non-violent forms of discipline. Such settings help insulate children from a violent urban reality and enable them to better recover from psychological distress if they do suffer violence.

**Disaster risk**

For millions of children, urban poverty is complicated and intensified by exposure to hazards such as cyclones, floods, mudslides and earthquakes. When combined with acute vulnerability, these hazards can become disasters. While large-scale events are major enough to qualify as disasters, others, far more numerous and ultimately affecting many more children and families, are too minor or too slow-moving to meet the formal criteria for ‘disaster’. But they are still significant enough to turn lives upside down, bringing intense rainfalls that flood homes and destroy possessions, prolonged droughts that exhaust an already unreliable supply of water, or heat waves that turn unventilated shacks into ovens.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, recorded disasters have increased tenfold, with the majority stemming from weather-related hazards. Even conservative models predict more extreme weather – heavier rainfall, stronger windstorms and more intense heat waves – adding to the existing burden of disaster. Vulnerable locations and the great and generally increasing concentrations of people and enterprises can make cities especially dangerous. The proximity of residential and industrial areas, the lack of space for evacuation, poor drainage, the potential for the rapid spread of communicable disease due to high population density – all of these factors can intensify disaster risk.

In the face of a disaster, children are among the most susceptible to injury and death. Over three quarters of casualties in recent decades have been children in sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia. Droughts, flooding and post-disaster conditions all intensify the risk of, for example, sanitation-related illnesses and school dropout, especially in congested urban areas and among young children in particular. Warmer temperatures are expanding the endemic areas of malaria, dengue fever and other vector-borne diseases – for instance, into the East African Highlands. Children, along with the elderly, are also at highest risk of harm from heat stress, especially in urban ‘heat islands’. A 2003 study in Sao Paulo found that for every degree of increase in temperature above 20° C, there was a 2.6 per cent increase in mortality among children under 15.

Disasters take a particular toll on underprivileged urban residents because of where they live, and also because they are inadequately served and ill-equipped to prepare for or recover from extreme events. The poorest urban populations and their children make their homes wherever they can find land or afford rent within reach of work: often in congested slums or informal settlements on flood plains or steep slopes, under bridges or on sites close to industrial waste. Children are at high risk in such locations, as they seldom have access to information or the protective infrastructure – storm drains, sewer systems, sea walls or paved roads – that can help people withstand extreme events. Homes are often built from flimsy materials that cannot stand up to high winds, mudslides, rushing water or earthquakes.

A boy stands near a rubbish-strewn gully on the outskirts of Luanda, Angola. The area lacks running water, basic sanitation and adequate housing. The gully floods during the rainy season.
There are few places in the world where population growth and urbanization collide more starkly with vulnerability to climate change and disaster risk than in the Pacific region. This confluence of issues is central to the focus of the Pacific Plan, the master strategy for regional development endorsed by leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2005 to promote economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security. As increasing numbers of Pacific Islanders move to towns and cities, the region’s long-standing tradition of rural ‘subsistence affluence’ is being eroded, and societies are grappling with new aspects of urban poverty, including undernutrition, youth unemployment and crime.

Almost a quarter of Pacific Islanders live in urban centres (up from only 8.5 per cent in 1950), and half of the countries in the region already have majority urban populations. While Vanuatu and Solomon Islands remain predominantly rural – 74 per cent and 81 per cent, respectively – their urban growth rates are among the highest in the world. In Fiji, urban growth has been compounded by the termination of land leases in some rural areas, which pushed renters to seek employment and shelter in towns and cities. Migration, both rural-urban and international, has resulted in the decline of stable populations in parts of Polynesia. Rapid urban growth is particularly significant in the context of the geography of Pacific Island countries. For example, the Tarawa atoll in archipelagic Kiribati includes some of the most densely populated islands in the world, with certain areas reaching a density of 7,000 people per square kilometre.

While urbanization affects all members of our communities, it is clear that its manifold social, environmental and economic consequences significantly affect the lives of children and young people. A recent study conducted by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Centre of the United Nations Development Programme, Urban Youth in the Pacific: Increasing resilience and reducing risk for involvement in crime and violence, documented a wide range of links between urbanization and social problems, with a particular focus on young people’s heightened exposure to crime and violence. Another research study found that one third of all children in Port Vila, Vanuatu, live in poverty – a rate nearly 20 per cent higher than the national average.

Traditionally, the land and the sea have provided generations with shelter and sustenance. The links between urban communities and the environment are weaker. People are more dependent on store-purchased commodities and, consequently, are vulnerable to the vagaries of global economic fluctuations. The knock-on effects are felt as children are taken out of school, families cut back on food, and financial worries lead to increased domestic violence and youth crime.

Despite the disadvantages, the possibilities offered by the urban environment attract young people over any other group. These include opportunities for artistic expression, forging of new identities, better access to technology, wider social networks and new forms of entertainment. At the same time, the combination of elevated school dropout rates, unemployment and the absence of stabilizing traditional social support structures renders many young people vulnerable to destructive influences.

Proactively addressing the challenges presented by urbanization will have a great impact on the well-being of children and young people – the major players in building the future success of our communities and ensuring the continued viability of our environments. The situation demands a holistic and equitable approach, beginning with critical issues such as access to safe water, housing and schools. Disaster mitigation and preparedness strategies are also of fundamental importance in densely populated areas. At the same time, a deeper understanding of the push and pull factors that result in the rural-urban drift may enable us to develop sustainable, targeted and practical policies to better harness the potential of our young people in both the formal and informal sectors.

Pacific leaders need to make a determined effort to tackle the challenges of urbanization, because unless we address what is one of the most pressing forces of our time, the vision of the Pacific as a region of peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity – where everyone can lead free and worthwhile lives – will remain illusory. The future of the next generation is at stake.
In Haiti, the January 2010 earthquake is estimated to have destroyed 250,000 residences and 25,000 public and commercial buildings, and to have killed an estimated quarter of a million people. The underlying causes of the devastation and the human death toll in Haiti were manifold. Extensive deforestation had degraded the soil, resulting in the loss of rural livelihoods and pushing many people to move to cities. Inadequate or poorly enforced building codes meant that few homes had been built to resist earthquakes. (It remains an open question whether people could have afforded the costs of complying with higher standards.) The slums of Port-au-Prince were overcrowded, and sanitation systems, where these existed, had long been fragile. This combination proved especially conducive to the spread of disease after the event.

In poor urban areas, failures in development contribute to disasters, and disasters, in turn, undo or undermine development gains – deepening poverty and further widening the social and health gaps separating poor from rich. Routine, small-scale calamities in many settlements result from poor governance, planning and management, and often indicate vulnerability to much larger disasters.

Existing poor health and nutrition can increase disaster risk for children, hamper recovery and, if not addressed in the emergency response, leave children more vulnerable to future shocks.

When disaster strikes, supportive environments critical to children’s well-being may break down. Families may remain in emergency camps for extended periods, and these dysfunctional environments can become the only home children know during their formative years.

In this context, the experience of young girls in particular may be fraught with particular challenges. Simply by attempting to use distant toilet blocks or to wash where there is no privacy, young girls may find themselves exposed to harassment and danger. Reports of gender-based violence are common in post-emergency settings.

Recent years have seen the emergence of initiatives aimed at reducing disaster risk.

The Hyogo Framework for Action, endorsed by 168 governments in 2005, calls for the enhancement of communities’ and countries’ resilience. Moreover, there is growing recognition of the role children have in helping themselves and their communities to be safe. In the Philippines, for example, school children made a video of the risks in their community and presented it to the local authorities. This resulted in dialogue between adults and children, the planting of trees to reduce the risk of landslides, and the relocation of a school to facilities built to minimize vulnerability to flood damage.

Case studies from the Caribbean suggest that efforts geared towards reducing local risks – supporting, for instance, community construction of emergency access stairs, bridges, drains and walkways along ravines – have served to build local governance and strengthen disaster risk reduction as an integral part of city development. In Thailand, enabling disaster survivors to manage rehabilitation through shared community funds has served not only to stretch resources further, but also to enhance collective organization.

Indeed, inclusive approaches often prove to be highly effective in solving all sorts of problems. The next chapter provides examples from around the world and across the spectrum of urban issues.