Policy Briefing

Co-Designing Urban Play Spaces to Improve Migrant Children's Wellbeing

Between 2001 and 2011, India's urban population increased from almost 28 per cent to just over 31 per cent. Almost **139 million people migrated to cities** (mainly Delhi and Mumbai), often bringing their children with them. Most live in poverty in informal settlements that lack basic infrastructure and services. Their children are often out of school and have no safe spaces to play. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by India in 1989, recognises children's right to play as fundamental to their social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Urban planners need to involve children in co-designing better neighbourhoods that accommodate children's right to play.

Key messages

– Children need access to safe and age-appropriate play spaces for their healthy development and wellbeing.

– Urban planning and development processes need to be more child-friendly to design safe, sustainable, and inclusive cities for everyone.

– Urban policy frameworks and planning processes should recognise the needs of children of migrants and other disadvantaged groups, and involve them as co-designers of public spaces.

– State-level organisations and departments tasked with providing services for slum dwellers (such as the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board) should prioritise designated play and childcare spaces.

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Anandini Dar and Divya Chopra

Significance of outdoor play and its benefits for children's wellbeing

Play is an important part of a child's overall development and wellbeing, as children learn important skills (physical and social) during play. When playing outdoors, they exercise more and learn how to interact with other children and their environment. Children do different types of play: solitary play, free play, parallel play, and more. Play requires adequate and age-appropriate spaces, which children living in poor areas of urban India do not have. Even children in schools are not guaranteed play spaces (it is estimated that approximately 40 per cent of schools in India do not have outdoor playgrounds).

Children growing up in informal urban settlements typically have no safe space to play. There is limited open outdoor space for residents of all ages, and parents often fear for their children's safety (particularly daughters' safety), which further restricts children's mobility. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many girls have not been able to access the playgrounds in their schools. There is an urgent need to develop more public play areas for children in cities to improve their wellbeing. Children's development and wellbeing also has impacts within their family and wider community, and the nation at large.

Planning child-friendly neighbourhoods

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched the **Child Friendly Cities Initiative** in 1996. It aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, and has been promoted by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). The characteristics of a child-friendly city include creating a safe and secure environment for children, space for freedom of movement (independent mobility), spaces where peers can gather (including play spaces),

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and giving children the opportunity to participate in designing and planning their community. The concept recognises children as important stakeholders in the city and their neighbourhoods, and is aligned with children's right to participation (Article 12 of the UNCRC) and to play (Article 31). In the 1990s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also initiated a project, **Growing Up in Cities**, whereby children were included in planning to develop their community. These children expressed a desire for playgrounds, common spaces to meet and spend time with peers, freedom for mobility, and safe and green environments. This and other evidence indicates that children are able to help develop sustainable and safe neighbourhoods and should be included in urban planning.

In India, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on children's rights are calling for a **national urban policy with a child-centred lens**. They want urban planners to involve children in designing child-friendly neighbourhoods with adequate places for play. They envision a policy that encourages children to participate in urban design and planning processes, so that they can share what types of play spaces they would enjoy that are appropriate for their age and cultural background. Some initiatives are already underway, in neighbourhoods of **Bhubaneswar** and, more recently, in **Udaipur**, to involve children in designing child-friendly spaces that support sustainable urban development and community wellbeing.

The government has launched several flagship projects for urban development, such as the Smart Cities Mission and the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation. These initiatives should be approached through a child-friendly cities framework for better sustainable development and wellbeing of migrant children, who constitute a large part of the urban population in India.

Co-designing accessible, safe, and creative play spaces with children

The Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, working under the government of the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi, is responsible for providing housing for homeless people and those living in poverty. It is tasked with improving urban slums and resettlement areas by providing facilities such as community halls/*Basti Vikas Kendra* and early childhood care and education centres/*Shishu Vatika*, as well as bathing spaces and toilets. However, as per the existing schemes proposed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, childcare facilities are only available in a few informal settlements for infants and young children aged up to six years in the form of *anganwadis* and mobile creches. There is no formal provision of childcare or designated play spaces in Delhi for children over the age of six.

Our field research, conducted in the social design studio at Dr B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD), highlights some of the

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biggest challenges facing young children – particularly girls – in these densely populated neighbourhoods. Most girls, irrespective of whether they attend school, face restrictions on their movement outside the home, have no access to play areas, and face constant concerns over their safety and security. As part of our design studio process, we talked to girls regularly and involved them at every stage, from research design to data collection, to developing playground design proposals. Through working with these young girls, we learned that above all other requirements for their *basti* (urban informal settlement) – such as safe drinking water and cheaper electricity – they wanted a playground and child-friendly environment. They also gave detailed information about what kind of playground they wanted. They asked for a small shop selling things to play with, as well as a source of fresh drinking water and a dustbin. Many (remembering their home villages) asked for trees and foliage to surround their playground.

Finally, as another effort toward creating child-friendly environments in the *basti*, we worked on a project to brighten up the outdoor area next to the two-classroom block of an NGO-run school. This not only resulted in an exciting, colourful space for children but also promoted a sense of belonging and ownership of the space, as the children had taken part in the planning and had co-produced it. Transforming the site into a colourful, open play space encouraged more children to go to the NGO-run classes, and the area started to be used more frequently for social gatherings.

Policy recommendations

– **Urban development frameworks (such as master plans, welfare schemes, policies, and projects) should prioritise safe, age-appropriate play spaces** for children in their neighbourhoods, by adopting a child-centred lens towards creating safe and inclusive cities.

– **City planners should recognise children (especially children of migrants and other disadvantaged groups) as key stakeholders** and involve them in co-designing child-friendly spaces such as playgrounds in every neighbourhood in the city.

– **Urban governmental bodies, working alongside NGOs on urban slum development and resettlement**, need to propose targeted interventions in the form of childcare infrastructure and designated age-specific play spaces for children (at district, neighbourhood, and street levels).

– **Play spaces of all kinds should be co-designed with children**, based on what they want, and using recyclable, sustainable, and locally made materials.■

Further reading

Dhar, D. and Thakre, M. (2020) '**No Child's Play: The Enduring Challenge of Creating Child-Friendly Cities**', *ORF Issue Brief* 415, New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation (accessed 14 June 2022)

Mishra, S. and Singh, S. (2021) 'Children Friendly Cities – Planning Strategies and Issues in India', *Local Government Quarterly* October–December: 48–54

Tyagi, M. and Raheja, G. (2021) '**Indian Parents' Perception of Children's Independent Mobility in Urban Neighbourhoods: A Case Study of Delhi**', *Children's Geographies* 19.4: 390–406, DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2020.1797996 (accessed 14 June 2022)