Guide to creating urban public **SPACES** for children

World Health Organization

unicef
for every child

UN-HABITAT

Guide to creating urban public SPACES for children

World Health Organization

unicef
for every child

UN-HABITAT

Cover: 1. Redesigned underused spaces for play for girls and young children in a park in Warangal, India. Photo credit: WRI India; 2. Grazze, Lebanon. Photo credit: Catalytic Action; 3. Pop up play in progress in a park in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee; 4. Boys rolling wheels down a hillside in Scotland. Photo credit: Play Scotland; 5. An inclusive child-friendly urban plaza in Amsterdam, the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Photo credit: Carve NL.

Contents

Foreword

Children need public space

Safe, inclusive places to play and gather are fundamental to children's health, development, learning and social ties, and are a core right. Yet access is shrinking: only 44% of urban residents live near open public space – a figure that falls to just 30% in low- and middle-income countries, as motorization, privatization and urban sprawl erase child-friendly areas.

Children are growing up in the context of climate change, humanitarian crises, natural disasters, conflict and rapid urbanization. These pressures are reducing access to public space and safe opportunities for play, with inequities in access particularly stark for children in informal settlements and other disadvantaged urban settings. From COVID-19 lockdowns to extreme weather and rising displacement, there is a greater need than ever to make resilient, inclusive public spaces non-negotiable for children's well-being.

When planned, developed and programmed inclusively and sustainably, public spaces can enable children to breathe cleaner air, exercise, play, learn, make friends and bond with family. More broadly, these spaces foster social cohesion, revitalize local economies and engender social and environmental resilience, all of which support children's health and well-being, their safety and security, and their ability to thrive.

UN-Habitat, UNICEF and WHO have come together to highlight the importance of public spaces for realizing children's comprehensive rights, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and set out in many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on these agencies' long-standing work – spanning healthy urban planning, clean air, safe water and sanitation, healthy and safe mobility, better food systems, disease prevention and control, and readiness for health and humanitarian emergencies – this guide supports practitioners in improving public spaces for children. All three agencies are committed to raising the voices of children and youth, recognizing their unique perspectives on shaping the cities they live in today and will inherit tomorrow.

Investing in children drives healthier, more prosperous societies, and this guide shows how: it is both a technical resource and a call to action for governments to invest in urban public spaces that put children's health, development and rights first.

Jeremy Farrar
Assistant Director-General
Health Promotion, Disease Prevention and Care
World Health Organization

Omar Abdi
Deputy Executive Director (Programmes)
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Rafael Tuts
Director
Global Solutions Division
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Public spaces are important for everyone, but especially for children's health and well-being. They help meet children's needs and rights to play; support their engagement in social and physical activities; help improve the quality of their everyday lives; and support their learning and natural-world socialization, active lifestyles, and healthy behaviours. Moreover, well-designed public spaces that are regularly used by children are a strong indicator of a livable city – not just for children but for all city dwellers.

About SPACES

This guide, hereafter referred to as SPACES, has been developed by the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO) to support the creation and improvement of quality public spaces for urban children, ensuring these spaces cater to children's needs and help meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It emphasizes the importance of children's right to play, as enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides the universal legal basis for children's right to rest, relax, play, and participate in cultural and creative activities. It shows how public spaces for children can both help meet this right and achieve multiple SDG targets, particularly SDG Target 11.7, which aims to provide universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces by 2030.

Context

The guidance presented in SPACES is set within the context of numerous challenges and obstacles to children's access to public spaces, including urbanization – often accompanied by rapid motorization – and the privatization of public land. These trends place public spaces under increasing threat, leaving a small and shrinking proportion of children with access to play, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Across all country-income levels, access to public spaces remains uneven, with vulnerable populations, including those in informal settlements and crisis contexts, facing the highest risk of adverse impacts. Moreover, the need for public spaces for children is highlighted as particularly urgent due to the cost-of-living crisis and the growing obesity crisis. These factors have exacerbated inequalities in access to safe, supportive environments for children.

Who this guide is for

The guide is intended for a wide range of stakeholders, including governmental actors, non-governmental actors, communities, schools, parents' associations, and private-sector stakeholders. It aims to help frame the issue of public spaces for children and provide entry points for investment and action. It was developed using a comprehensive methodology that included a literature review, consultations with children, a survey of global experts, and a review of existing guidance and city examples.

Defining public spaces for children

Public spaces for children are defined as places that can be easily and freely accessed and enjoyed by all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social status, or physical ability. These spaces should be safe from physical and social hazards, and support children's play, learning, social relations, and connections with nature. They should provide safe environments for play, learning, socialization, and cultural engagement, directly supporting children's health, resilience, and inclusion.

Principles for quality public spaces

SPACES centres on six principles that are at the heart of creating quality public spaces for children (and that together form the SPACES acronym): Safety and protection, Play and developmental needs, Access where need is greatest, Child health and well-being, Equity and inclusion, and Sustainability and resilience. As well as these six principles, SPACES considers the provision of urban public space for children in three contexts: planned, informal, and crisis/resilience-building.

Implementation pathways for creating urban public spaces for children

Two key pathways for implementing public spaces for children are set out in this guide: government-promoted pathways and partnership-based pathways. Examples of successful initiatives from around the world are presented in Annex 2, illustrating how public spaces for children are being created and improved in different contexts, including planned, informal, and crisis settings.

There are myriad ways in which public spaces for children – be it near the home, in the local neighbourhood, or at the city level – can be created or improved. As a critical determinant of children's health and development and an essential child right, creating and maintaining public spaces that cater to children should be high on the agenda of all urban policy-makers. The principles and guidance in this resource invite stakeholders in all sectors, be it health, social welfare, education, finance, construction or urban design, and across government, the private sector and civil society, to play a role.

Across all country-income levels, access to public spaces remains uneven, with vulnerable populations, including those in informal settlements and crisis contexts, facing the highest risk of adverse impacts.
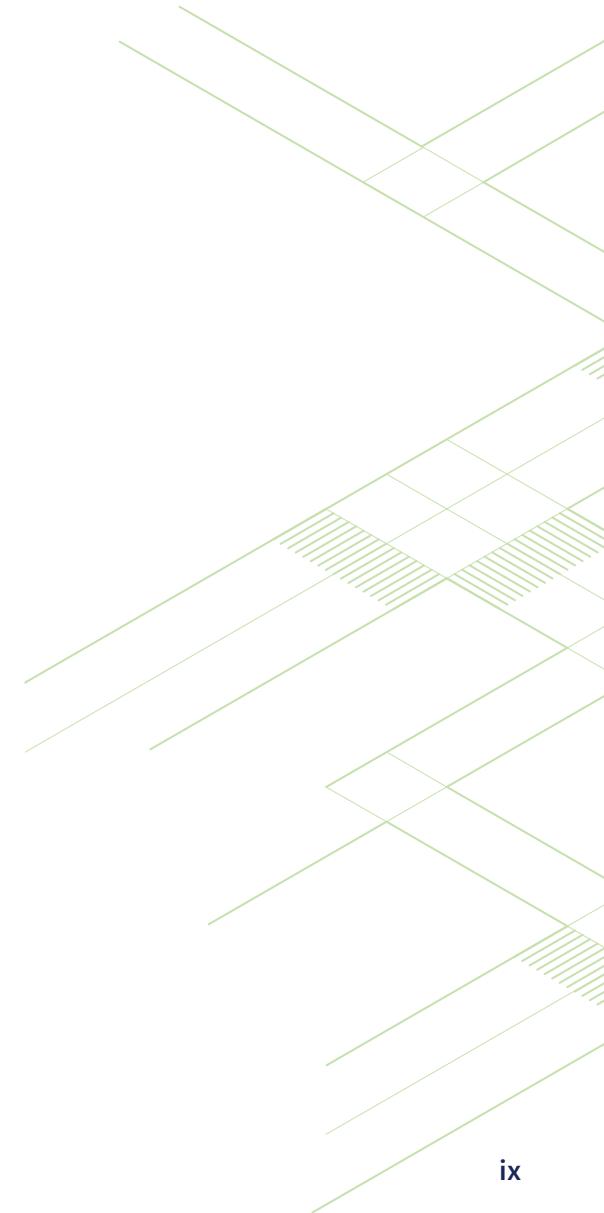
Looking ahead

WHO, UNICEF and UN-Habitat hope that SPACES will help governments, who are at the heart of creating public spaces for children, to deliver better policies and programmes; allocate funding; and set up the systems for managing and maintaining these spaces. Policy-makers and other duty bearers have the power to improve children's living conditions in cities by promoting safe, green, and resilient public spaces in line with the commitments embodied in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the SDGs. The guidance and principles outlined in this resource can help them do it.

Children enjoying pop-up play opportunities in Plaza Santa Catarina, Mexico City. Photo credit: Leticia Lozano

Introduction

Public spaces for children are a key determinant of children's well-being and development *(1)*, with evidence suggesting children's optimal development is strongly associated with access to open spaces and facilities, green spaces, safe and clean streets, clean air, outdoor activities, and the ability to get around freely and safely *(2, 3)*. Public spaces also help to meet children's needs and rights to play (Box 1); support their engagement in social and physical activities; help improve the quality of their everyday lives; and support their learning and natural-world socialization, active lifestyles, and healthy behaviours. Such spaces also foster citizenship by allowing informal participation in community life and help boost children's desire and capacity to become environmental stewards *(4, 5, 6)*.

Well-designed public spaces that are regularly used by children are a strong indicator of a livable city – not just for children but for all city dwellers *(7, 8)*. Yet globally, only 44% of urban residents have an open public space close to them, and in low- and middle-income countries this figure falls to 30% *(9, 10)*. Vulnerable children, such as those living in poorer urban areas, are disproportionately affected, often living on busy roads in places with few green spaces and play areas. Even in cities offering overall greater green-space availability there are substantial inequalities, with the most deprived neighbourhoods lacking access *(11, 12, 13, 14)*. Lack of disaggregated data on children in urban settings remains a key challenge. Nonetheless, available estimates suggest that around 1.18 billion children now live in urban areas globally. Between 350 and 500 million of these children reside in slum conditions, predominantly in Africa and Asia *(3)*. Unplanned and unregulated urbanization, population growth, the privatization of public space, rising pollution and motorization, and increasing climate hazards further challenge access to, and availability and quality of, public spaces that support children's everyday and long-term needs *(15)*.

Governments have a responsibility to shape inclusive urban policies on public spaces for children that ensure all children enjoy a healthy and safe childhood,

in which they are protected from harm and supported to reach their full potential. Inclusive policies are those that include children as a demographic group, but that also pay specific attention to age, gender, ethnicity and disability. Addressing these intersecting characteristics will help children to feel included, and to be healthy and safe when using public spaces.

Moreover, in 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued General Comment 26 to Article 31 with a focus on children's rights and the environment, and in particular in relation to climate change. General Comment 26 (binding on all countries that have ratified the Convention) requires that "States shall take effective legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure that all children, without discrimination, are able to play and engage in recreational activities in safe, clean and healthy environments, including parks, natural spaces and playgrounds." It also calls for children's views to be included in the planning and design of these environments.

Complementing this rights-based perspective, the New Urban Agenda (NUA) underscores not only the importance of public spaces within the existing urban fabric, but also the need to explicitly plan for high-quality public spaces as integral components of all urban extensions.

Box 1. **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, government responsibilities, and the right to play**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 – this includes younger children as well as adolescents and young people, because the play, health and developmental needs of children and young people change significantly during childhood and adolescence.

Article 31 of the Convention provides the universal legal basis for the right to "rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities", and clearly states that while play belongs to children, adults have a crucial role in promoting, protecting and preserving this right for them. General Comment 17 of Article 31 highlights the importance of creating time and space for spontaneous play, the promotion of societal attitudes that support and encourage play, and offers a valuable range of justifications, considerations and recommendations for improving the conditions to support play.

General Comment 17 also clearly outlines the responsibility of municipal governments to ensure the fulfilment of all Article 31 rights of children by adopting legislative, administrative, and practical measures that guarantee these rights for every child, without discrimination. These measures include:

- **legislation and regulation:** laws must guarantee non-discriminatory access for every child to recreational, cultural, and artistic environments, both in public and private domains.
- **disaggregated data collection and research:** governments must find out how far children are able to engage in play, recreation and cultural and artistic life, and to use the results to inform planning and measure progress.
- **provision of facilities and services:** governments are required to make available and maintain safe, accessible spaces such as parks, playgrounds, sports venues, museums, and libraries, to facilitate the exercise of Article 31 rights.
- **policies and budgets:** allocating resources and enacting processes to ensure the ongoing promotion and delivery of play, creativity, and recreation opportunities are essential.
- **monitoring and enforcement:** States should have effective systems to enforce these rights, including regular assessment of accessibility and safety, and mechanisms to address violations.

Children enjoying independent mobility on scooters in Barcelona's superblock neighbourhood of San Antoni. Photo credit: Sophie Davies

About SPACES

This guide has been developed by the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO) to support the creation of quality public spaces for urban children and to ensure that existing public spaces cater to children's needs; help meet the SDGs (Box 2); and honour commitments in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

SPACES contains a definition of public spaces for children and accounts for childhoods being nurtured in different contexts and urban realities. As such, it is structured around a set of clearly defined scales, categories and contexts in which public spaces for children occur (these are set out in Section 1).

Section 2 is structured around six principles that are fundamental to quality public spaces for children, specifically:

Safety and protection

Play, recreation and developmental needs

Access where need is greatest

Child health and well-being

Equity and inclusion

Sustainability and resilience

These six principles, rooted in the research underpinning the development of this guide (see Annex 1), have been identified as essential for protecting children's health and well-being and promoting equitable opportunities. Section 2 offers a rationale for each principle, and concludes with a broad set of associated recommendations.

Section 3 summarizes the two key pathways for implementing public spaces for children – government-promoted pathways and partnership-based pathways (including initiatives run by civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector, or children themselves). It describes some of the key activities for creating and improving these spaces and some of the implementation considerations and challenges involved in their planning (noting that these needs change among different age groups), and in involving children themselves in the design, co-creation and maintenance of these spaces.

Box 2. **Public spaces for children and the SDGs**

Developing public spaces for children contributes to achieving multiple SDG targets, and particularly SDG Target 11.7: "By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities."

It can also help meet other SDGs, including:

- **SDG 3:** good health and well-being;
- **SDG 4:** quality education;
- **SDG 10:** reduced inequalities;
- **SDG 11:** sustainable cities and communities;
- **SDG 13:** climate action.

SPACES – city examples from around the world

Finally, SPACES presents a wealth of city examples from around the world that describe how urban public spaces for children are being created across planned, informal, and crisis and resilience-building settings in countries at all income levels. While these examples do not present an exhaustive list of evidence-informed policies, programmes and practices, they vividly illustrate initiatives that are being taken at local, city, regional and national scales to provide appropriate, beneficial, participatory and inspiring ways to meet children's right to play.

Who SPACES is for

SPACES is intended to help everyone involved in creating, providing, maintaining and using public spaces for children, be they governmental actors (national or subnational); nongovernmental actors (CSOs, community-based organizations, residents' associations etc.); communities; schools and parents' associations; or private sector stakeholders. The target audience may differ according to context – for example whether they are formal, planned contexts or informal settlements.

As urban public spaces for children vary widely, SPACES may also be useful for parents, children, and adolescents who are keen to advocate for improved provision of public spaces and get involved in their development to ensure that they are tailored to their needs.

It is hoped this resource will help frame the issue of public spaces for children for stakeholders at all levels. For some users it may act as an introduction to the need for public spaces for children, while for others it may provide entry points for starting to invest in public spaces, setting out the many intersections and perspectives that need to be considered, as well as the myriad implementation considerations that will inevitably arise.

The need for public spaces for children in urban areas is as acute as ever, with funding cuts in many countries affecting the provision and maintenance of public spaces in which children can play, explore, and interact with others, exacerbating existing inequalities in access.

Why now?

The need for public spaces for children in urban areas is as acute as ever, with funding cuts in many countries affecting the provision and maintenance of public spaces in which children can play, explore, and interact with others *(16)*, exacerbating existing inequalities in access.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how limited public spaces negatively affect children's resilience and well-being *(17, 18)*. As opportunities for outdoor play and socializing diminished, particularly within urban areas, many children were left without the safe, supportive outlets that are crucial for their emotional and physical development. Furthermore, many countries have documented increasing mental health issues among children, exacerbated by social isolation, academic pressures, and a lack of meaningful outdoor experiences.

Added to this, the climate crisis makes c hildren especially vulnerable when living in unventilated and non-air-conditioned homes – for example in slums and informal settlements and crisis situations. In these contexts, public spaces become not just good to have but essential for survival. Urban infrastructure, including green spaces, can be one of the most powerful tools to keep people cool, without relying on energy-hungry air-conditioning *(19)*.

These global factors, combined with a growing obesity crisis (partly due to food poverty and reliance on cheaper, unhealthy food) mean that the need for spaces where children can engage in physical activities and develop social connections is more urgent than ever. This guide is intended to help catalyse action.

Methodology

This guide was developed using a comprehensive methodology that drew on both research and practice, examining the development of public spaces for children from conceptualization to implementation and from the point of view of sustainability. The methodology included a review of published and grey literature, including existing guidance from multiple sectors and stakeholders on public spaces; a survey of global experts; a consultation with children; peer review; a global consultation with children; and a review of illustrative initiatives being taken at local, city, regional and national scales to provide appropriate, participatory and inspiring ways to fulfil children's rights in cities, and in particular their right to play. All experts contributed a declaration of interest form. For more information see Annex 1.
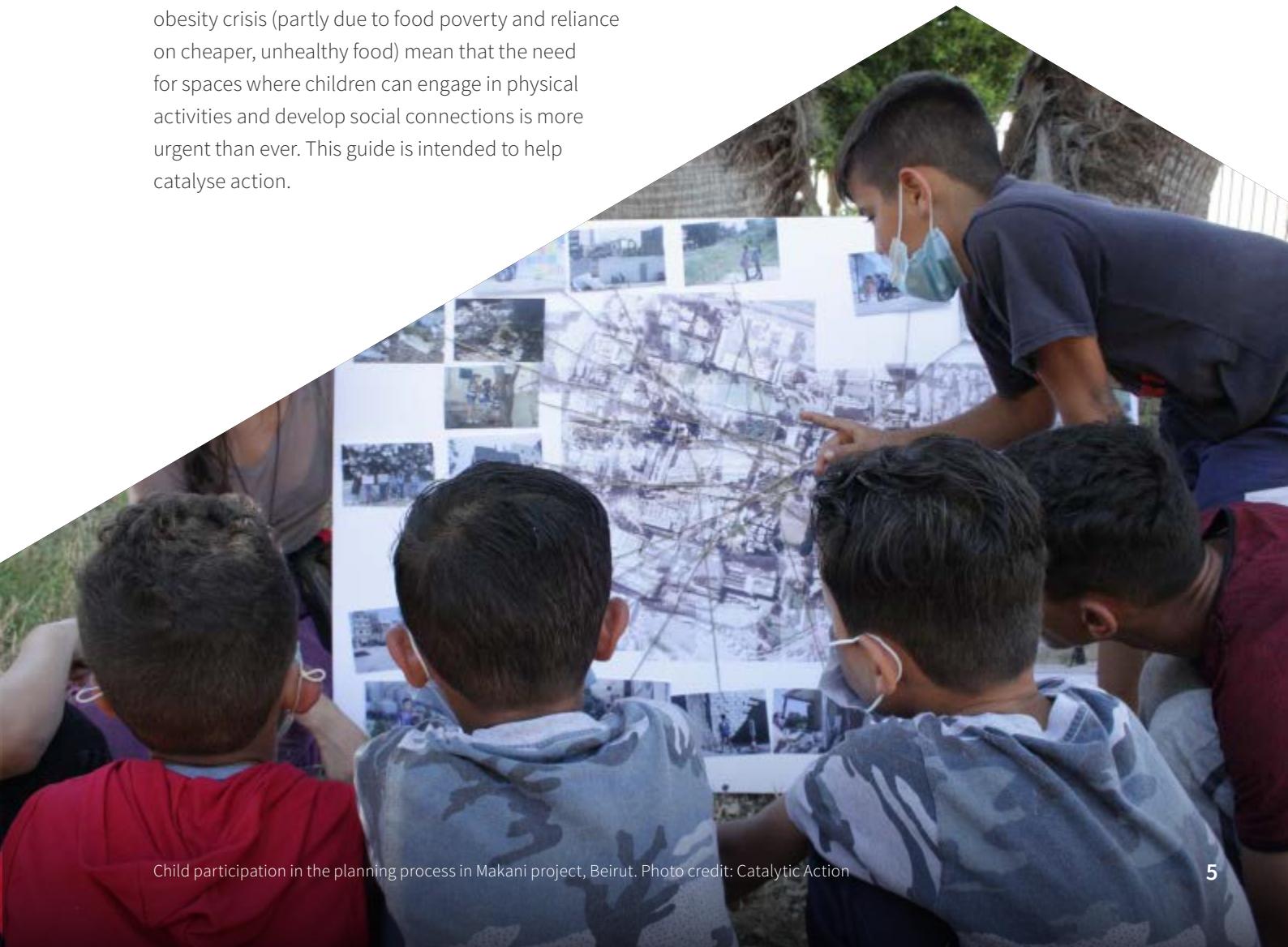
Child participation in the planning process in Makani project, Beirut. Photo credit: Catalytic Action

Section 1.
Defining public spaces for children: scale, category, context

Incorporating play infrastructure in everyday access spaces, Recife, Brazil. Photo credit: Edson Alves

Around the world, national and regional governments, local authorities, communities, CSOs and many other stakeholders are working to improve the public spaces that children use – be they streets, neighbourhoods, existing public open spaces, or the small, "liminal" spaces, such as stairwells or alleyways from which children carve out a place for themselves. A regular pattern of everyday access for play and social interactions in spaces such as these helps to forge "place attachment" *(20)* and "place friendship", *(21)* which in turn contribute to better health, development, and well-being outcomes for children *(22, 23, 24)*. This section describes the scales, categories and contexts in which these spaces are found.

Parks and playgrounds are typically considered the most relevant "places for children" in the formal urban planning system as they are intended to keep children safe and away from the hazards of traffic and other dangers of the street *(25)*. In addition, there are less-formal examples of other kinds of safe public spaces for children, including alleys and sidewalks; those created through environmental improvements and informal settlement upgrading; and those created through rehabilitation and resilience-building in crisis situations.

Streets, which comprise the largest and most immediately accessible public spaces for children, are places where children spend time and thrive (particularly in neighbourhoods that lack parks and playgrounds), offering a play and learning landscape in which they can spend time navigating the city, walking to school and other destinations *(26, 27)*. For older children, much social time can be spent on streets. Children show a preference for informal, marginal, transitional, "leftover" and often accidental spaces for play, whether they live in formal *(28, 29, 30, 31)* or informal settlements, or in refugee camps or temporary housing in crisis situations *(32, 33, 34)*.

This guide therefore considers public spaces for children to be both those that are mostly (or exclusively) used by children (e.g. playgrounds), and spaces that are used by everyone, including children (e.g. streets and parks) (Box 3).

Box 3. **Defining public spaces for children**

This guide refers to public spaces for children as places that can be easily and freely accessed and enjoyed by all children, either alone or with friends or family, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, social status or physical ability. Whatever their context, these places are safe from physical hazards (such as pollution, waste, traffic, falls or drowning risks); and social risks (such as crime, exclusion, or bullying). They are places that support children's play, learning, social relations, connections with nature, and free and spontaneous action.

These spaces can be both "places for children" and "children's places" *(35)* by ensuring they are *(36, 37)*:

- **Places that children *learn* from**, such as school grounds; community gardens; open spaces around religious places and markets; and culturally significant natural places and public facilities that offer social learning, experience of social and natural relationships, and opportunities for internal growth and developing competence *(38)*. Children in cities also learn when navigating the city, including while walking to and from school or other destinations, providing autonomy and other core life skills *(39, 40)*.

- **Places where children *engage* with nature,** such as formal parks and playgrounds and other green and blue spaces, and well-maintained public facilities that allow children to engage in caring for them.

- **Places that *support* children's free action**, such as diverse, open spaces, low-traffic and pedestrian streets, vacant lots and patches of wilderness, parks and playgrounds that allow children to spend their free time in spontaneous ways.

- **Places that *nurture* children's cultures and adventures**, such as diverse "liminal" spaces (see a full description in the "Categories of public spaces for children" section) within and around their local area, claimed by children as spaces just for them.

Acknowledging that child-friendly spaces should have one or more of these characteristics can help ensure they provide developmental, psychological, health and educational benefits; cater to children's experiential needs; and foster environmental concern and stewardship.

This guide outlines how efforts to provide good public spaces for children are informed by:

- the different spatial **scales** where such spaces exist (i.e., housing, neighbourhood or city scales);

- the specific **categories** of public spaces for children that can appear at these spatial scales (i.e., streets, public facilities, found or "liminal" spaces (see page 11 for a detailed discussion) *(41, 42)*, public open space);

- the **context** in which they are located (i.e., planned contexts; informal contexts; and crisis and resilience-building contexts).

Scales of public spaces for children

Three scales are important when planning public spaces for urban children so that as they grow, they encounter and engage with a wide range of age-appropriate public spaces in their everyday lives *(43)*. These are the:

- **City scale** (e.g. parks and squares, open spaces around public buildings, sports complexes, botanical gardens);

- **Neighbourhood scale** (e.g. parks, playgrounds, playing fields, school playgrounds, streets, city farms, incidental or natural green spaces, see Box 4);

- **Housing/domestic scale** (e.g. housing areas, community gardens, allotments).

Box 4. **Neighbourhood play: safety, risk and independent mobility**

Children need opportunities to play in their local communities where they can socialize, move and be active participants, so creating streets and urban infrastructures that facilitate children's safe play is a priority.

Neighbourhood play especially has many benefits as it:

- promotes physical activity (running, jumping, scooting or cycling) that benefits children's physical and mental health;

- promotes development through open-ended play opportunities that can help build skills associated with risk and resilience in urban environments;

- helps build community connections through socializing in shared spaces.

Categories of public spaces for children

This guide uses four broad categories where public spaces for children may exist – **streets, public facilities, public open spaces** and **liminal spaces**.

Streets

Streets are one of the most important public spaces in a city that are accessible and enjoyable for all, for free *(44)*. Historically, streets have been a vital public space for children to play and socialize in – especially those lacking access to parks, playgrounds and other designated recreation spaces. Streets can determine how easily and safely children and young people can access friends and amenities (schools, leisure activities, libraries etc.) and take advantage of services – the larger a city, the more decentralized and the more important it is that children can move independently and safely.

Public facilities

Public facilities include amenities that are publicly owned and maintained and accessible to users for free, such as public libraries, civic/community centres, municipal markets and public sports facilities, youth centres, museums, transport hubs, etc. Public facilities specifically for children are institutional responses to children's basic human needs, such as health, education, safety, recreation, mobility and culture, among others. In slums and informal settlements, public facilities also include shared water and sanitation infrastructure. Public facilities are provided by every level of government, and other public, semi-public organizations as well as private organizations. However, using these spaces for specific purposes (e.g. children's play) can be contested when they become privatized (see Box 5).

Box 5. The contested and changing nature of "public" spaces

Some countries have formal definitions of public spaces but they vary by context. Public spaces may be owned by the State, or by no-one, and may (in contrast with private spaces) be subject to the country's standard laws and norms.

However, the picture has become increasingly complicated in urban areas, and what may appear to be public spaces are sometimes privately owned and controlled. These include quasi-public spaces such as urban squares in regeneration sites, which can look and feel "public" but may be controlled by separate or additional laws, security guards and other forms of surveillance. All of these kinds of spaces, but particularly quasi-public spaces, can be subject to regulations that disadvantage children and young people in particular (e.g. rules relating to children playing games, and efforts to disperse groups of young people from some public spaces where they are not seen as welcome).

Public open spaces
(differentiated by scale)

Housing scale

Semi-private open spaces
These include courtyards in multi-family housing, communal gardens, and small, doorstep play areas in high-rise housing that are accessible to people living in the broader housing area. These spaces are particularly important to young children, girls and children with disabilities. Semi-private open spaces are relevant also in times of crisis when there may be restrictions on movement (e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic). In informal settlements, where housing is often densely packed and formal public space is limited, these semi-private areas, such as shared courtyards or widened alleys, can serve as critical play and social spaces for children.

Neighbourhood scale

Public open spaces

These include urban parks, community parks or gardens, and playgrounds within parks, where children can climb trees, play safely around water, and experience flowers and wildlife. In informal settlements, such spaces may be improvised or community-created, often from reclaimed or under-used land.

Semi-public open spaces

Schoolyards and community gardens are seldom publicly owned or managed but represent two of the most important open spaces in children's lives in many neighbourhoods. Many cities' schoolyards are opened to the community after school hours and on holidays, creating additional play spaces in neighbourhoods with limited open areas *(45)*. In many communities, school buildings and grounds are often the largest single community asset. This is also true in the humanitarian context and in many urban poor neighbourhoods *(46)*. Many residential neighbourhood parks, maintained by residents' associations, effectively function as semi-private spaces by controlling access through restricted opening times or barring certain groups. In informal settlements, schools often double as safe havens and community hubs, with their open spaces playing a vital role in children's daily lives, especially where formal recreational infrastructure is lacking.

City scale

Blue-green spaces

At a city scale these include municipal parks, woodlands, waterfronts, wetlands and marshes, public gardens, natural recreational areas, among others, and serve to promote the health and well-being of all members of the urban community – especially children. This can include ensuring safe, green space for local communities as well as adopting a nature-based approach to greening, river restoration, reducing soil erosion, etc.

Civic open spaces:

These include civic squares, open-air museums, sports fields, open public markets and educational, recreational, and transport areas. These open spaces are further away from home and most children would visit these occasionally with family, with the school, or in the case of older children, with friends. Typically, these places are not designed for children, except for the occasional public space around recreational and cultural facilities that get many child visitors and school groups.

Brixenpark in Regensburg, Germany. Photo credit: City of Regensburg
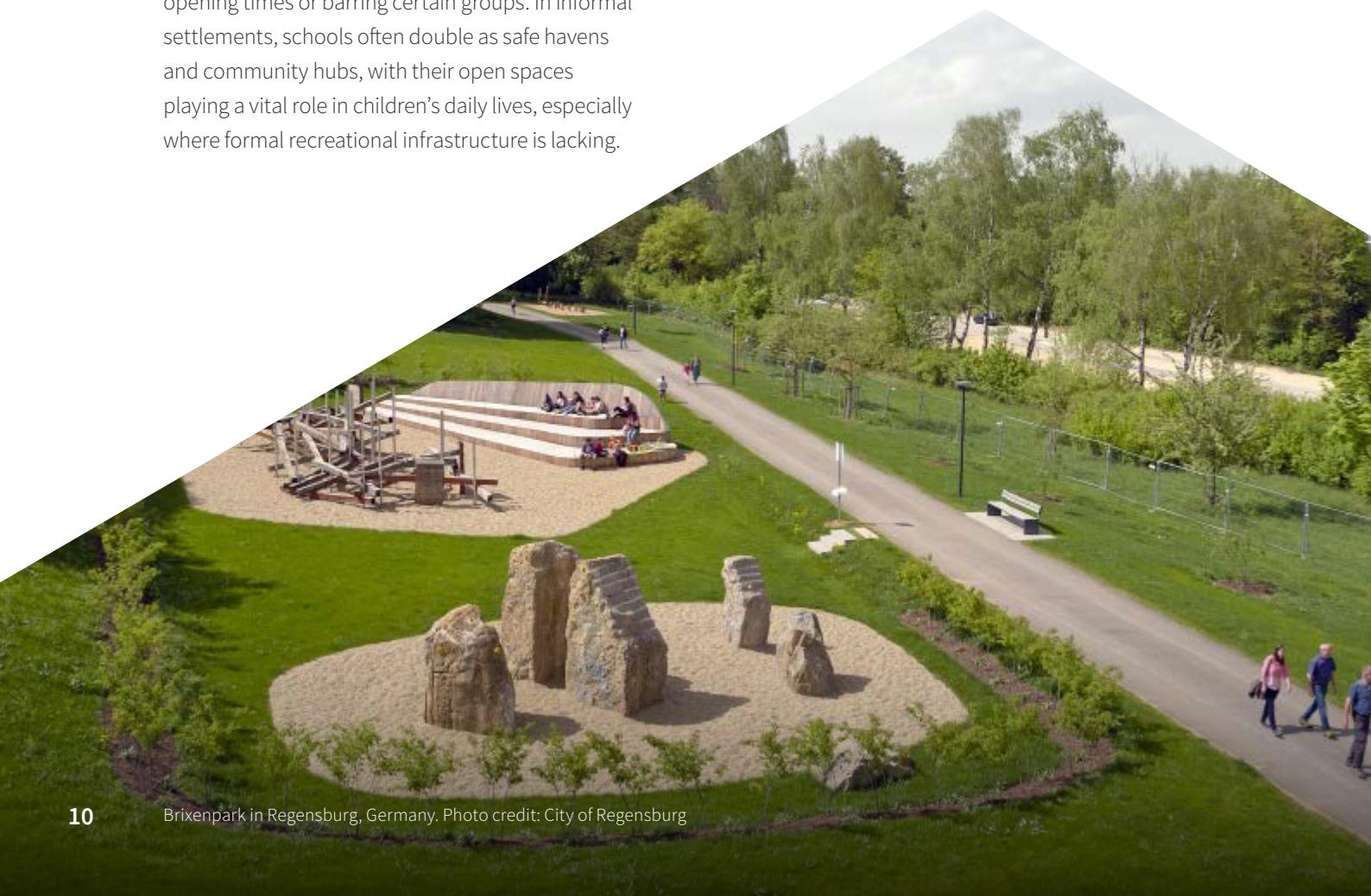
Liminal spaces

Liminal spaces are those that typically have no fixed use or purpose, or have been forgotten, neglected, or misused. These marginal, transitional and often accidental public spaces between destinations or awaiting redevelopment have immense value for children's free play, as adolescent hang outs and "secret" places at all three scales: e.g., at housing scale (spaces between homes); neighbourhood scale (dead-end streets, vacant lots, wild planted areas); and city scale (spaces under flyovers, building sites, abandoned spaces). Such spaces are particularly important in informal contexts where access to formal public spaces is often limited, such as in overcrowded and congested cities, in slums and informal settlements, and in refugee camps and temporary housing in situations of crisis (see Box 6 for more on the issues around children's use of liminal spaces).

Contexts of public spaces for children

In addition to the three scales (city, neighbourhood, housing) and the four categories (streets, public facilities, liminal spaces and public open spaces), this guide also looks at public spaces according to three specific urban contexts: **planned contexts, informal and slum contexts, and crisis and resilience-building contexts)**.

Planned contexts

A planned urban context is one in which the use of land, development of housing and the maintenance of environments is pre-considered and designed to shape a city and best manage its development. Parks and playgrounds are typically considered the most relevant places for children within formally planned environments to keep them safe, though far too many children lack access to well-provisioned parks and playgrounds due to inequity in distribution. In addition to parks and playgrounds, streets, liminal spaces, and semi-private and semi-public spaces in local areas are regularly claimed by children for play, and in many ways are the only public spaces many children know.

Informal and slum contexts *(47)*

Informal settlements are typically high-density, mixed-use areas that are often left out of the urban development planning process and frequently lack proper infrastructure and services. In general, there is low security of land tenure and households may have limited indoor space. Slums are a specific subset of informal settlements, characterized by particularly poor living conditions *(2, 7)* and are typically compact, walkable, high-density, mixed-use areas, with less motorized traffic in narrow streets, and large populations of children who have less tightly scheduled time and constraints (such as lack of permission) to play outdoors *(48)*. These factors contribute to making many slum streets and open spaces rich play environments, though there are often cases where the only available outdoor spaces are liminal in nature, such as solid waste dumps, flood zones, or other areas that are not always safe for children's play *(49)*.

Box 6. **Exploring the concept of liminal spaces for children**

There is an important balance to be struck between allowing children to explore liminal spaces to promote their independence and the risks they may be exposed to as a result. The question of children's access to such places may ultimately be a question for local, contextualized decision-making (e.g. some former industrial sites may be too dangerous and require proper security to prevent anyone accessing them, whereas areas of "wild" vegetation between houses that are not used by others may be quite safe, even if out of view).

There could also be discussion of how such "temporary" or "interim" uses could be formally sanctioned by city authorities – both to allow their use to emerge over time through children's play (e.g. the use of land under flyovers for skateboarding or basketball), and so that some urban spaces remain flexible to the needs of local people.

Crisis, recovery and rebuilding contexts

Globally, urban areas are at the centre of migration and displacement issues: more than 60% of all refugees and 80% of all internally displaced persons live in urban areas *(50)*, while globally the numbers of children displaced continues to rise. In 2024, UNICEF estimated that 48.8 million children were displaced from their homes, including 19.1 million refugee and asylum-seeking children, and nearly 29.4 million were internally displaced because of conflict and violence *(51)*. Children affected by disasters or conflicts face immediate and long-term consequences and re-establishing normality is key to their psycho-social well-being and post-trauma recovery *(52)*. This is dependent (among other things) on public spaces such as schools, play spaces, and streets that allow them to play, learn, and socialize with peers *(34)*.

However, in crisis situations, play is often considered non-essential and ensuring that children have access to safe public spaces remains a challenge, limiting their right to play and fully develop *(53)*. And while camps for displaced people (an important part of a city's emergency, recovery, rebuilding planning response) are often designed as short-term emergency measures, the reality is that they can become semi-permanent or permanent *(54)*, meaning steps should be taken to ensure they are safe and child-friendly from the outset.

Table 1 sets out an illustrative list of public spaces, based on a literature review, case studies, and a global survey with experts (see Methodology, Annex 1).

In summary, within the specific contexts where urban public spaces exist, formally **planned** environments, **informal settlements** and crisis and resilience-building contexts there are three scales that are particularly important, in which children encounter and engage with open spaces in their everyday routines (**housing, neighbourhood** and **city**).

Within each scale, we categorize public spaces as streets, public facilities, public open spaces and found and liminal spaces. Table 1 gives examples of public spaces within each of these types of categories and within the different scales.

Children claiming their territory in a vacant lot in a Bhubaneswar slum. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

Table 1. **Examples of public spaces, by scale and category**

Housing	Neighbourhood	City
Streets	**Streets**	**Streets**
• Sidewalks, alleyways, cul-de-sacs	• Market streets, residential streets, sidewalks, pedestrian bridges	• Streets in front of cultural facilities, main streets in shopping areas
Public facilities	**Public facilities**	**Public facilities**
• Play areas for young children, exercise areas, community halls	• Community centres, youth centres, open shelters, bus stops	• Public libraries, museums, sports complexes
Public open spaces	**Public open spaces**	**Public open spaces**
• Semi private open spaces: e.g. shared courtyards between buildings, allotment gardens, rooftops in multi-family homes, lobbies and corridors in high-rise apartment blocks	• Semi-private spaces: e.g. schoolyards, sports facilities, afterschool clubs, community gardens and farms • Public spaces: e.g. wooded areas, playground, street squares, greenways	• Public green or blue spaces: e.g. urban forests, parks, beaches, botanical gardens • Civic urban spaces: e.g. plazas, squares, open spaces around public buildings
Found and liminal spaces	**Found and liminal spaces**	**Found and liminal spaces**
• Spaces between homes, lanes between buildings, planted and wild landscapes, common staircases	• Vacant lots, wild planted patches, dead-end streets, leftover spaces between properties	• Empty abandoned spaces, vacant lots, dead-end streets

Section 2.
SPACES principles and guidance

Children playing in the upgraded, child-friendly courtyard of a health centre in Kohima, India. Photo credit: WRI, India

Creating or improving public spaces for children may be initiated through mayoral visions; formal policies, plans and programmes; or grassroots-generated demands with catalytic inputs from civil society organizations (CSOs) and from children themselves. Whatever their origin, this section outlines six SPACES principles that should underpin and guide all initiatives and action to create safe, healthy, accessible, inclusive and equitably distributed urban spaces for children. See Methodology (Annex 1) for information on selecting the six principles.

Principle 1. **Safety and protection**

Rationale: All public spaces should be safe and secure for children, yet in cities worldwide, children's safety and protection are compromised by a range of environmental and social risks *(55, 56)*. Ensuring safety in public spaces includes addressing risk of injury and violence (e.g., road traffic; unprotected balconies and terraces; waterbodies; or contact with contaminants). In informal and formal contexts it means improving poorly lit streets and alleys and neglected parks and playgrounds that expose children to different forms of violence and abuse that consequently prevent their free use of these spaces *(57)*. Fear of crime and violence involving guns and gang fights disproportionately affect adolescent boys, while sexual harassment and violence are a daily reality for girls and women in urban public spaces *(58).* In many cities, children have no or very limited opportunities to play outside unaccompanied by an adult.

Safety concerns are not only relevant to children in public spaces, but also, in the case of younger children, to caregivers. As women are often the main caregivers, exposure to harassment and security concerns are key reasons for not taking young children to public spaces. In the context of crisis settings, while such contexts are often established as short-term solutions and may become longer term, there can be tensions between host communities and new families that result in unsafe situations, especially for children *(59).*

The six SPACES principles are:

Safety and protection

Play, recreation and developmental needs

Access where need is greatest

Child health and well-being

Equity and inclusion

Sustainability and resilience

Many strategies exist to make public spaces safer for children, including measures such as reduced-speed streets and safe routes to school; removal of parking spaces (as obstacles to visibility), and creating safe-crossing options, wide footpaths, and play and rest spaces. Many cities across the world are reducing speed, redesigning and retrofitting streets as shared spaces to enable community life and children's play, particularly in residential neighbourhoods, around schools and in commercial areas (see city example 1).

City example 1. **City-led initiatives to create safer streets for children** (worldwide)

Renovated street in Pune with play equipment, wide pavements, green buffers and seating spaces. Photo credit: Oasis Designs Inc

In **Bogotá**, more than 2000 school zones and other local streets have new infrastructure and signs setting maximum 30 km/h speeds, while in **Pune**, **Moscow**, and **Barcelona** there are efforts to create complete streets and shared streets – this involves increasing greenery and shade as well as providing for children's play and rest by incorporating flexible and multi-functional play and seating elements. In India, the Pune Complete Streets Program is transforming 150 km of city streets into walkable, people-friendly, green destination spaces that also include strategically placed rest and play spaces for children. This initiative is part of the national Smart Cities Mission, which has set a challenge to make India's cities more liveable, inclusive and sustainable.

And in Zümrütevler Square, **Istanbul, Türkiye**, a multi-partner collaboration has provided safe access to schools and created a child-friendly square by claiming space from a wide road intersection. Zümrütevler neighbourhood was chosen for the pilot as 30% of the population was under the age of 18 years, with many disadvantaged families and little access to open spaces. Despite its proximity to three schools there was no safe access to them and many school-children crossed the busy traffic intersection on their way to school. Post-intervention data reveal a 43% increase in children walking alone, with 89% using the specified zones for safe walking.

City example 2. **Government-led initiatives to promote child safety and well-being in crisis and resilience-building contexts** (Egypt)

Upgraded child and women-friendly public space between a health centre and a kindergarten, Greater Cairo Metropolitan area. Photo credit: Ecumene Studio

By late 2014, **Egypt** was host to 140 000 Syrian refugees. The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) aimed to enhance protection and support for both refugees and host communities through food, health, education, and livelihood assistance. It also promoted social cohesion initiatives, such as the Y'ahl El-Hay project, which renovated public health centres to create welcoming spaces for women and children from both communities.

Carried out by Ecumene Studio in collaboration with UNHCR and other partners, the project repaired interiors and facades (such as painting walls, laying new floors and wall tiles, fixing

broken doors) to create more child-safe and welcoming spaces; improved semi-open spaces in an adjoining kindergarten in one intervention site with better flooring, seating, and play equipment; and transformed vacant, underused spaces near health centres into vibrant, child-friendly safe spaces with play equipment, soft landscaping, and resting and gathering spaces for staff and caregivers. The intervention provided much-needed neighbourhood-level play and gathering spaces for host and refugee communities, relieved crowding in public health centres and made them more inviting, improving relations between host and refugee communities.

In informal settlements, public facilities such as youth centres, community toilets, and water collection points (when designed with safe access for children – and especially girls – in mind) decrease risky behaviour in adolescents and minimize risks of harassment from adults; reduce violent crime-related fatalities; and improve girls' safety. And in crisis and resilience-building contexts, humanitarian strategies and programmes can help improve

safety and protection, for example by creating safe parks and child-friendly spaces for children in disaster-affected neighbourhoods, host and refugee settlements; and upgrading public facilities such as schools and health centres as safe and socially cohesive spaces for host and refugee children and caregivers (see city example 2). It is worth noting that while short-term emergency play spaces are very important, they should not be considered an

alternative to ensuring that the entire settlement be made safe and child-friendly.

In all contexts, making walking safer for children, installing lights to increase safety, and disseminating information about how children can easily ask for help can all contribute to child safety in public spaces. And in crisis and resilience-building contexts, investing in child-friendly spaces, parks, streets, and staffed play facilities can help provide safe and protective spaces for children and caregivers, as well as help integrate host and refugee communities (see city example 3 and city example 4).

City example 3. **Partnerships for child-friendly cities** (Quelimane and Maputo, Mozambique)

Maputo public space intervention in a liminal space claimed from street intersections and used for rest and play.
Photo credit: UN-Habitat Mozambique

City-level programmes to help make cities safer for children include those supported by UNICEF and other international agencies. In Mozambique, UN-Habitat built on foundations laid by the UNICEF Child-Friendly Cities Initiative to implement pilot projects in **Quelimane** and **Maputo**. The Maputo pilot site was in a neighbourhood with high rates of crime and violence, and a lack of adequate public services.

Exploratory walks with children revealed that pathways and roads were the main public spaces used by children, so the project claimed residual space from a junction of three unpaved roads to make a safe island of public space for children. Many of the ideas developed in participatory workshops with children asked for street design to protect pedestrians; better lighting at night; more garbage bins and regular maintenance; improved water and sanitation facilities; better quality and regularly repaired street furniture; regular cleaning of open drains; and development of play spaces in areas identified by children.

City example 4. Social urbanism policies targeting vulnerable locations to create safe public spaces to benefit children (Medellin, Colombia)

Communa 13 urban transformation, Medellin, Colombia. Photo credit: Mark Pitt images

The "right to the city" movement seeks to reshape urban life by promoting social and recreational programmes in informal areas, and has influenced the creation of plazas, libraries, housing, schools, and transport infrastructure. For example, in 2004 the Mayor of **Medellin**, **Colombia**, directed 40% of the city's annual budget to create nine architecturally prominent libraries located in parks in low-income neighbourhoods that were torn by civil strife and drug wars. As this effort was accompanied by innovative strategies such as escalators and cable cars to connect these spatially dislocated neighbourhoods, access to libraries increased as well.

These efforts were instrumental in reducing neighbourhood crime and creating safe spaces for children where they could dance, sing, read, socialize, play computer games, gain reading and technology skills, as well as find social and emotional support. Most importantly, the co-location of parks and libraries fostered community cohesion and provided a pathway for lifelong learning, increased employability, and integrated otherwise isolated neighbourhoods with the rest of the city and the world.

Principle 2. **Play, recreation and developmental needs**

Access to public spaces for play and recreation are also constrained by gender, disability, and class-based and cultural norms and practices.

Rationale: Play is vital to help children learn and take part in the world around them, stay active and healthy, learn and push boundaries, build resilience and friendships, and develop coping mechanisms for stress (see Box 1 for a brief definition) *(60)*. Research shows that play also enhances brain structure and function, academic skills, and has both physical and mental health benefits *(61)*.

Play is essential to children's development, particularly in the first 1000 days of life *(62)*. Through play and interaction, infants and toddlers learn to move, communicate, socialize and make sense of the world around them. In middle childhood, children look for social independence, to spend time with their peers, and to engage in informal play and recreation as well as organized sports *(63)*. And as well as these benefits, there is growing evidence to suggest that play has intrinsic value in itself, and that modern society's tendency to overprotect children and minimize risk has led to significant reductions in opportunities for adventurous and outdoor play – even though, for children in informal and slum contexts in particular, play is an outdoor activity *(47, 64, 65)*.

In recent years, children's right to play has been curtailed by the rise in motorized traffic. Parents' and caregivers' perception of the lack of road safety leads them to withhold permission for playing out *(66)*, while children and adolescents do not use streets as an everyday public space like previous generations *(67)*. Loss of traditional play spaces and increased educational demands have also curtailed children's freedom to play *(68, 69)*.

Access to public spaces for play and recreation are also constrained by gender, disability, and class-based and cultural norms and practices *(70)*. To address the factors – including structural inequities – that thwart children's play, governments around the world have developed policies, programmes, and guidelines for enabling inclusive, safe and equitable play in streets, public open spaces, public facilities, and found and liminal spaces. This includes low-speed streets (30 km/h speed limits and zones, as recommended by the Stockholm Declaration on Road Safety) based on studies across the world that show 30 km/h streets where people mix with traffic not only save lives but also promote walking, cycling, and a move towards zero-carbon mobility *(71)*. Many cities are implementing low-speed zones in residential neighbourhoods and around schools to improve children's independent mobility *(72)*.

From infancy to adolescence, the idea that all children, regardless of their background, will grow up in a safe, nurturing, clean and unpolluted environment is central to the concept of child-friendly cities *(73)* – places that provide adequate services, public spaces and opportunities for play so that children can enjoy a rich social, cultural, family and community life, where their voice matters *(36)*.

This includes creating safe environments for free play, for example by designing zones in which pedestrians and cyclists have priority over motorized traffic; provision of clubs, sports facilities, organized games and activities for both girls and boys of all ages and from all communities; and dedicated and affordable cultural activities for children of all ages and from all communities, including theatre, dance, music, art exhibitions, libraries, and cinema; and identifying liminal spaces that are used for play to ensure they are safe (see city example 5 and city example 6).

City example 5. Government-led partnerships promoting play facilities in green spaces (Jakarta, Indonesia)

RPTRA Rawa Badak Utara, Jakarta. Photo credit: Rahmatharman

Government policies that promote child development and well-being can broadly facilitate intersectoral coordination and integrated development of community public spaces for urban children living in poverty and informal settings. In **Indonesia**, the Child-friendly Integrated Public Spaces (RPTRA) initiative in **Jakarta** was rolled out in 2015 in high-density urban areas close to low-income housing. RPTRA were designed and programmed as multifunctional public facilities in park-like settings to increase access to play, recreation, socialization, and informal learning facilities for children and families living in poverty and informality. They were also designed to provide a safe and quiet space for completing homework after school, as well as adult-facilitated environmental learning and training children in traditional games and cultural activities. There are now 300 such sites across Jakarta.

City example 6. Government-led initiatives for legally mandating a "masterplan for play" approach for urban development (Regensburg, Germany)

Brixen Park, Regensburg, codesigned with children as part of the urban redevelopment of military land to serve civic, ecological, and recreational needs. Photo credit: City of Regensburg.

Regensburg's Masterplanning for Play approach is a legally binding, rights-based initiative aimed at making the city child- and family-friendly. It integrates child participation into urban planning, ensuring children's voices are heard and their needs are prioritized. The approach involves child-led audits, surveys, and mapping of public spaces to identify issues and propose solutions. The city's youth welfare planner plays a key role in coordinating these efforts and ensuring children's rights are upheld in all urban planning projects. The legally binding nature of the masterplan ensures its continuity across political transitions, supported by cross-sectoral budgets. Regensburg, a UNICEF-recognized child-friendly city, has successfully embedded playability into the city's urban planning, creating vibrant, inclusive, and child-friendly public spaces that enhance children's capabilities through participation and spatial justice.

Key features include:

- **Child participation:** children actively participate in diagnosing issues, mapping their neighbourhoods, and co-designing play spaces.

- **Regulatory framework:** the city enforces technical guidelines, such as minimum playground sizes, proximity indicators, and accessibility standards.

- **Playability across the city:** play is integrated into the urban fabric, including playgrounds, play streets, car-free zones, and natural areas.

- **Inclusivity**: special attention is given to marginalized neighbourhoods, such as areas with large migrant populations, to ensure equitable access to play spaces.

- **Risky play:** the city incorporates nature-based and challenging play elements, respecting children's ability to assess risks.

Partnerships involving private companies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community and grassroots organizations also create, manage and sustain efforts to promote children's opportunities to play and develop, be it redeveloping derelict local spaces for children, or pop-up play opportunities in temporary camps. Creating public spaces for children can also support play for adults to enable intergenerational play in public spaces – activities that may help make children's play less marginalized and contribute positively to decisions on contested public spaces (see city example 7) *(74)*.

City example 7. **Community advocacy to revitalize green spaces** (São Paolo, Brazil)

Community advocacy to revitalize green spaces and mobility infrastructure. Photo credit: Movimento Boa Praça

Recognizing, protecting and upgrading common spaces for children and other community groups in government, civil society, and community-led upgrading and redevelopment initiatives can transform neglected spaces into productive community spaces.

In **Boa Praça**, **São Paolo**, **Brazil**, The Movimento Boa Praça (Good Square Movement) was started by a child's desire to celebrate her birthday in a neighbourhood park in São Paolo. Seeing the state of disrepair, her mother mobilized her neighbourhood and local officials to regenerate the square. The experience triggered a series of transformations in other squares across the city in collaboration with citizens, NGOs, universities, and local officials. Children were an essential part of every pocket-park transformation.

Movimento Boa Praça has organized more than 100 picnics, revitalized 13 pocket parks and participated in more than 40 workshops, forums and talks. Neighbourhood parks and squares, which were once dead spaces, have been revitalized through physical changes such as the addition of trees, new furniture, rain gardens and murals, renewed play equipment and improved signage. The renovated parks also host regular activities such as picnics, theatre, dance, music, games, composting, workshops to build kites and roller carts, and fairs for exchanging toys and objects. Community fundraising and in-kind donations and grants by NGOs or foundations were the main source of funds and resources.

The organizers of the movement also carry out advocacy and awareness activities by engaging with government officials, and broadcast their work through various forms of media. In 2013, the Movimento Boa Praça joined other organizations to draft the "Law on Participative Pocket Parks Management" which proposes that people living near a pocket park can form user committees and act together with the city government to recommend measures, supervise public acts, and revitalize those spaces. The law was approved by the Chamber of Councillors in 2015 (though is yet to be implemented by the city's executive authority).

In **Jardim Nakamura**, **São Paulo**, Brazil, the "Mind the step: transforming degraded public staircases" project was developed by a social organization founded mainly by young Brazilian architects and urban designers called Cidade Ativa who focused on improving the abandoned and degraded public staircases across the city. Through their design interventions, they reactivated the staircases as important pedestrian mobility networks, linking inaccessible hill-side neighbourhoods, and providing vital public spaces that enable people, including children, to gather, play and engage in leisure activities. For one of their projects in Jardin Nakamura they collaborated with UN-Habitat's Public Space Programme, using gaming software and the "Block-by-Block" methodology as a tool for the participatory design that engaged the local community, especially young children.

Mind the Step project in Jardim Nakamura, São Paulo, Brazil. Photo credit: UN-Habitat

Principle 3. **Access where need is greatest**

Rationale: Inadequate and inequitable distribution of public, open, especially green and blue spaces leave far too many urban children lacking access to them *(75, 76, 77)*. In formal cities, streets and buildings are already laid out and in densely built informal contexts and in crisis settings there is often no space to be carved out for children to play. Moreover, the scarcity of safe open space means it is constantly threatened by city and settlement expansion *(78)*.

Globally, almost one in three urban residents (and more than 60% of people overall in low-income countries) live in informal contexts – worldwide, this adds up to over a billion people. With little indoor space available, and formal parks often located in the more affluent parts of cities, children seek common and public spaces within and near their homes in which to spend time with friends, and to study, play, do chores and seek adventure. In situations of crisis or extreme poverty in precarious urban environments (where children often have a heightened need for play) this can lead to them playing in very unsafe areas *(60)*. And where amenities do exist, they are often not available to everyone, or are underused (e.g. school grounds and facilities that potentially could be used after school hours).

Only 40% of city dwellers can easily reach open public spaces but this varies dramatically by country-income level: for example, in the city of Maiduguri in Nigeria, only 2% of the population has access to any public open space, while in Odense, Denmark, this figure is 93% *(79)*. Between 2000 and 2020, cities sprawled up to 3.7 times faster than they densified, resulting in negative impacts on the natural environment and land use *(80)*. Recreational facilities and community public spaces therefore have a special significance for improving children's quality of life and should be a focus of improvements and upgrades in informal settlements.

Government policies, and advocacy and support from NGOs, can empower local governments and community organizations to promote urban neighbourhood environments that have well-located destinations for children to use, such as green play and learning spaces, recreational centres, libraries, schools, or child health centres – all of which are associated with better child development, socio-emotional development and overall health, and improved parental perceptions of neighbourhood safety (see city example 8). They can also encourage local authorities to open up schoolyards after hours for the community to use, improving educational experiences and helping to build social cohesion *(81, 82)*.

Public spaces created as part of the upgrading of low-income housing and crisis and resilience-building efforts provide children and other groups with much-needed neighbourhood and city-level opportunities for outdoor play, recreation, learning, socialization, and access to green spaces, while acting as vital spaces for enabling rescue and recovery operations during disasters. These include street-based interventions for promoting road safety and provision of play spaces, improving school playgrounds in cities and towns hosting significant refugee populations, and creating child and women-friendly public spaces around service hubs to cater to the increased demand for essential and social services, among others (see city example 9).

Only 40%
of city dwellers can easily reach open public spaces but this varies dramatically by country-income level: for example, in the city of Maiduguri in Nigeria, only 2% of the population has access to any public open space, while in Odense, Denmark, this figure is 93%.

City example 8. **City government-led public space for children in informal and resilience settings** (Recife, Brazi)

Upgraded informal hillside settlements as part of the *Mais Vida nos Morros* initiative in Recife, using tactical measures.
Photo credit: Édson Alves

In **Recife**, **Brazil**, the mayor initiated the *Primeiro a Infância* (Early childhood) programme to make public spaces safer and friendlier for young children and their caregivers by integrating early childhood development strategies with urban planning policies and programmes. This resulted child-friendly public spaces being piloted in two marginalized neighbourhoods, and several tactical interventions to claim public spaces for children in vulnerable hillside communities that were lacking open space (as part of the *Mais Vida nos Morros* (More Life in the Hills) project.

Using the model of the "child priority zone", in 2017 the mayor leveraged the existing "Mother Owl" programme to improve the quality of public spaces between the homes and public facilities that serve young children (such as schools, health centres, early childhood centres, among others).

Technical teams visited the communities to scope and engage them through workshops to develop ideas for improvements. The tactical interventions included improving stairways, sloping alleys and vacant land, and adding child-friendly elements in found and liminal public spaces to re-enchant them for children (mainly through painting bright murals on walls and floors of public spaces). Pre- and post-implementation surveys showed increased use of newly constructed public spaces by children and their caregivers (as families were newly finding leisure areas on their doorsteps), and an increase in perceived safety in at least one neighbourhood. The city initiative made a special effort to ensure access to early childhood services reached Venezuelan refugee families, including employing interpreters to help expectant mothers register for support, and funding the construction of playgrounds and safe walkways for refugee children and their parents *(83)*.

City example 9. **Schools as vital public spaces for host and refugee children** (Ghazze, Lebanon)

Basma schoolyard transformation providing access to a public space for host and refugee children in Ghazze, Lebanon.
Photo credit: Catalytic Action

Ghazze, a small municipality in the Beqaa region of **Lebanon**, has been host to large numbers of Syrian refugees, and local schools have struggled to accommodate both host and refugee populations. To address this, a local NGO called Social Support Society partnered with a neighbourhood school to implement an evening education programme for Syrian children.

As part of this they rehabilitated the school's facilities and furniture (which benefitted both Lebanese and Syrian students) and collaborated with Catalytic Action (CA) to create a playground in an adjacent neglected area. The Basma schoolyard intervention saw CA adapt its 2015 Ibtasem model, which creates modular play spaces using local materials. The project engaged various stakeholders, including school staff, students, and local organizations, in participatory processes to design a play space catering to all children. Emphasis was placed on using local materials, with local builders and volunteers contributing to the construction, ensuring durability, easy maintenance, and repair.

Principle 4. **Child health and well-being**

Rationale: Persistent environmental health risks, such as those resulting from climate change, air pollution, and inadequate infrastructure for water and sanitation, threaten the well-being of many children in cities *(84)*. Indeed, inequitable development in many cities has created pockets of high deprivation where neglect of basic urban services (including sanitation) prevents children playing outdoors. Garbage, open water, exposed electrical wires and other hazards also pose risks to many urban children, while in some informal settlements, in the absence of basic services, large open spaces and natural water bodies are often used as community dumping grounds and open toilets – despite their huge potential as public green spaces or playgrounds.

Use of pesticides in parks and other green spaces can have negative impacts on children's health, as can the presence of toxic substances (e.g. lead, mercury and other heavy metals) that may arise from industrial sites, waste incinerators, unsound practices such as informal e-waste recycling and landfill etc. *(85)*. These situations are more likely in informal settings or in crisis and resilience-building contexts *(86)*.

Rising global temperatures disproportionately affect children because they are less able to regulate their body temperature than adults during times of extreme heat, while all children suffer physical and mental health impacts when sleep is disturbed by excessive heat *(84)*. And the increase in extreme heat worldwide means the opportunity for children to play outside or engage in sport is restricted and made even more difficult (this may also occur because of heavy rains, monsoons and flooding) *(27)*, adding to the list of safety concerns that limit children's free play.

A network of planned public spaces that children can claim to play freely around schools, within schoolyards, streets, and other public open spaces (see city example 10) *(7)* can improve children's physical and mental health and support their overall development

(45). Access to quality, inclusive, and accessible public open spaces increases children's physical activity, improves children's overall physical and mental health and cognitive development, and reduces the risks for overweight/obesity *(87, 88)* – a key benefit given only 20% of the world's adolescent population is estimated to be sufficiently physically active *(89)*.

Beyond access to public spaces in general there is increasing evidence that exposure specifically to green spaces not only facilitates healthy development in childhood but also provides long-term health benefits through adulthood *(90)*. It has been shown that socioenvironmental risk factors in prenatal life, infancy and childhood also have an effect over the entire life-course *(91, 92)*. Exposure to, and living close to, green spaces is associated with better birth outcomes as well as reducing maternal stress *(93, 94)*. A study of children aged 6 years living more than 20 minutes away from green spaces revealed they had worse mental and overall health, and watched more TV, than those living just 5 minutes away from green spaces *(95)*. Attention deficit disorders and hyperactivity are rapidly increasing among children in general, and studies show that when children (aged 4–18 years) spend time in green spaces they are more focused and attentive and exhibit fewer attention-deficit-associated symptoms *(96, 97)*. Urban gardens as public spaces can also play an important role in improving dietary habits and access to healthy foods *(98)*.

In general terms, if access to green space can stimulate the development of gross and fine motor skills as well as cognitive, emotional, social and physical development in children *(99)*, then these may lead to better health and a better ability to maintain healthy lifestyles in adulthood. There is also evidence that the health benefits linked with access to green space may be strongest among the lowest socioeconomic groups, in part by contributing to improvement in activity levels *(100)*.

The health and well-being of parents and caregivers can also benefit from access and proximity to public, green open spaces. This is important because caregiver well-being is fundamental to providing responsive caregiving – strengthening their capacity to communicate and play with the child, and reducing the risk of harsh discipline and delayed care-seeking in times of need. There is increasing evidence that suggests that parents, caregivers, and families need to be supported in providing nurturing care and protection in order for young children to achieve their developmental potential *(101)*.

Promoting high-quality, well-located, well-connected and universally accessible green and blue public open spaces for children's formal and informal play and recreation, and encouraging walking and cycling, can enhance child and adult health and well-being (see city example 11).

City example 10. **City-led planning for play to promote happy and healthy childhoods** (Barcelona, Spain)

Targeted intervention for a playable public space in Raval Neighbourhood, Barcelona. Photo credit: Sudeshna Chatterjee

Barcelona City Council's "Plan for Play in Public Spaces with a Horizon to 2030" – its "Playable City" plan – offers a roadmap for citywide interventions in public open spaces, areas around and within schools, residential streets, and natural areas to promote play and physical activity to make the city more liveable and healthier for all citizens.

A key strand of the initiative represents a shift towards encouraging urban planners to consider playability from the outset of any public space design, embedding it into projects like street calming, greening, and retrofitting.

Through one strand of the Playable City initiative, the "Protecting schools" programme is transforming school environments both within and outside schools through measures such as traffic calming;

improving access conditions; expanding green areas; and incorporating new street furniture such as benches or planters. Transforming schoolyards into green spaces supports outdoor learning, play diversity, community gathering after school hours, clean-air zones, and community socialization. These actions support the achievement of one of the goals of the initiative, which is to improve the physical and mental health of children and teenagers by promoting play and physical activity. For example a reduction in traffic can result in reduced road traffic injuries as well as contributing to better air quality and improved levels of physical activity. And as schoolyards are where the Plan for Play intersects with the city's climate change adaptation plan, the goal is to climatically adapt every schoolyard in the city by 2030, thereby improving their play value.

City example 11. **Upgrading and redeveloping informal settlements for child health** (Jhenaidah, Bangladesh)

In the small town of **Jhenaidah**, south-west **Bangladesh**, a community-centred architectural practice used seed funds from the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights to understand the public space needs of five pondside communities. Seeing the opportunity to extend this to a broader process of creating urban open spaces next to rivers, ponds, roads and using leftover pockets of land, the process was extended to a city-wide consultation involving more than 20 civic groups, volunteers and architects from across the region (plus the municipality as an observer).

Children were an integral part of co-designing these spaces, and were valued for their ability to be inclusive, de-politicizing the process and bringing in innovative ideas and enthusiasm. The result was a community-led plan representing the public space needs of different groups (children, youth, men, women, and older people) in the form of city-wide, pondside, networked community spaces. These included bathing ghats for women; play areas for children; water gardens for treating wastewater; rest and relaxation areas for older people; and nature and community centres *(102)*.

Principle 5. **Equity and inclusion**

Rationale: Growing diversity in needs, rising inequalities, high population densities in planned and informal contexts, and limited resources and capacity at local level all challenge the inclusivity of public spaces *(103)*. Across the world, young children, girls, indigenous groups, low-income groups, minority ethnic groups, children with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced people are routinely unable to access public spaces because of exclusionary practices *(104, 105, 106)*, while formal public spaces are often absent in low-income or resilience-building settings.

The lack of access to public spaces for children stems from a combination of sociocultural norms and gender biases, car-dominated planning, stereotyping of youth and certain minority ethnic groups, public-space management practices, as well as lack of awareness of children's rights in various levels of government and institutions. Enabling inclusive public spaces is closely linked to realizing social, spatial, and environmental justice *(107, 108)* and addressing the needs of all children (from infants to adolescents) and all genders, backgrounds, and disabilities.

Research with adolescents in marginalized communities in India *(47)* and the Philippines *(109)* found that they highly valued green spaces with trees, parks, gardens and waterfronts. However, they were largely excluded from these spaces – this was especially true for girls. Low-income families and families from disadvantaged castes and ethnic groups are most likely to live in neighbourhoods devoid of nature. While widely used planning guidelines such as situating parks within a prescribed walking radius of residential neighbourhoods cannot fully address the negative perceptions, social norms and gatekeepers that prevent children from slums and low-income marginal neighbourhoods from accessing public spaces everyday, there are nevertheless examples of children from such neighbourhoods working with NGOs to make safe, green, and resilient common spaces (see city example 12).

City example 12. **Inclusive placemaking by children and adolescents as part of slum rehabilitation** (Mumbai, India)

Placemaking with children to transform neglected liminal spaces into vibrant green spaces in slum replacement housing in Mumbai. Photo credit: Shruti Maliwar/WRI India

The Mumbai Climate Action Plan *(110)* aims to increase the city's green cover to 40% by 2030, ensure equitable access to green open spaces and restore and enhance biodiversity. To realize this vision, collaborative efforts are underway among CSOs such as WRI India, YUVA, and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, working with the city's municipal corporation. These efforts involve mapping slums and informal settlements with the lowest vegetation index and highest heat stress to select intervention sites for greening actions. One pilot site is Lallubhai Compound, a slum resettlement in a deprived area of **Mumbai**.

A group of 16 apartment buildings at the southern tip of the compound had an unsafe central open space, known as Lal Maidan, and some neglected peripheral open spaces. These sites were chosen for the first pilot greening intervention. Placemaking

workshops were conducted with children and young people to make these open spaces greener and child-friendly. The children's designs primarily focused on planting more trees, brightly painting the long wall, and incorporating more lighting and seating. Children and the community took several actions to transform neglected areas into vibrant green spaces that encourage social interaction and sustainability. As a result of the intervention, the harassment, drug abuse, and fights that previously plagued these spaces declined and more girls and women started to visit and enjoy the new green public space. Encouraged by the success, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation has approved the greening of the larger Lal Maidan site, paving the way for even more positive community transformations *(111)*.

The different abilities and needs of children should be considered when planning and designing public spaces for children, and there are several guides for creating inclusive play spaces across the world. Many of these embrace the social model of disability which sees

disability as an expression not so much of a person's impairment, but of the social and environmental conditions that either restrict or support a person's capabilities. In terms of the physical, organizational and social barriers faced by children with disabilities in

public spaces, accessibility and universally designed play equipment are one way to ensure inclusivity and equity, alongside considering social factors such as opportunities to play together and promoting play value through choice, variety, and challenge. Some city plans incorporate the use of universal design, including through technical manuals for management and maintenance of new and renovated public spaces to maintain standards of hygiene and accessibility.

These spaces also need to be designed to enable satisfying play opportunities for all children without discrimination of any kind (see city example 13 and city example 14) *(112)*. Moreover, disabled children have an equal right to play freely without being unduly overprotected and perhaps have an even greater need for opportunities to take risks in play, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers *(113)*.

City example 13. **Inclusive play space within "Garbage City"** (Cairo, Egypt)

Inclusive play space, Cairo. Photo credit: Renet Korthals Altes

Manshiyat Naser is a large informal settlement near Mokattam Hill on the outskirts of **Cairo**. Its lower part is commonly known as Zabaleen, or Garbage City, as Cairo's trash collectors live here. Dutch architect Renet Korthals Altes, founder of Space for Play, had lived in Cairo for three years and worked as a volunteer community architect to design and construct an inclusive play space in the heart of this informal settlement. In consultation with the community, she chose a garbage-filled liminal space next to a school for children with disabilities – the *Markaz el Mahaba* ("Centre of Love") – that had no safe outdoor play space. To create a playground, the space was cleared of tons of garbage and had a sewage problem remedied – after which the placemaking activities took place.

Renet designed a wide range of multi-use play elements to accommodate different types of play. Physically challenging play elements were also included to make sure that each child – regardless of their disability – had an opportunity to take manageable risks and engage in a thrilling play experience. To make the play space environmentally sustainable and integrated, many upcycled elements were used, such as sewage pipes as planters and a water tank as a ball basket. Renet engaged with a local factory to produce nest swings, which had never been used in play spaces in Cairo before (but with her input, these are now part of the manufacturer's collection). The play space is also open to the siblings of the schoolchildren and to local older people for celebrations in the neighbourhood.

City example 14. **Advocating for and enabling inclusive city-wide playable spaces** (Dumfries, Scotland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

Inclusive play and gathering spaces in Catherine Street Park, Dumfries, Scotland. Photo credit: Include Us

Initiatives to make urban playgrounds and parks more inclusive and accessible spaces for children with disabilities can be forged by local groups. For example, in **Dumfries**, **Scotland** families of children with disabilities needed accessible public play spaces where children could play freely alongside their siblings and friends. In 2016, a working group was formed and led by the Parents' Inclusion Network, in partnership with other stakeholders, to campaign for inclusive and accessible play spaces in the town. As part of this initiative, Catherine Street Park was renovated to incorporate a new circular pathway, turfed grass areas, flower beds, raised growing beds, accessible seating, and sensory play opportunities. It also features a wheelchair swing, a wheelchair-accessible roundabout and trampoline, a slack line and a climbing frame.

Access to public spaces and green cover can also vary according to socioeconomic status. While New York City, as well as cities in China, have made concerted efforts to increase access to parks in poorer communities, there are concerns that approaches to greening in low-income areas leads to gentrification and the displacement of the intended recipients to worse-off areas *(87)*. To prevent this it is recommended that equitable policies need to be backed by bottom-up participatory processes to foster an increased sense of place ownership.

Equity and inclusion also mean addressing the needs of caregivers, including pregnant and breastfeeding women, and older caregivers *(114)*. A gender-sensitive lens enables urban policies and laws relevant to public spaces to consider the specific needs of girls by, for example, always securing and enhancing their safety in public spaces, especially at night *(7)*.

Inclusive public spaces for children can be achieved by:

- embracing the UNCRC at all levels of government;

- providing training and capacity building to decision-makers, law-makers, and planners and designers on the various needs of children, youth, and caregivers in different public spaces;

- mapping access to quality public spaces for different groups and enacting policies that ensure equitable access to public spaces;

- establishing laws and guidelines where necessary to promote and protect the interests of children (and recognizing mess, noise, and risk-taking as a part of children's play in public space);

- and involving children's voices and views (particularly of the most vulnerable) in the design, use and management of local public spaces and play areas (e.g. through co-creating with them) (see city example 15) *(115, 116)*.

Promoting and developing public spaces for children using an equitable and inclusive lens requires not just catering to the special needs of these groups but also ensuring *all* public spaces are inviting of these groups. For example, through incorporating universal design guidelines in creating public spaces for children; creating "pause and stay" places for young children on streets; accepting the presence of youth in public spaces; partnering with street children to transform unused/disused urban spaces into hubs for essential services, play and recreation; and ensuring public spaces are not excluding any group by charging entry fees or maintaining restrictive opening hours.

City example 15. **Safe parks for host and displaced communities** (Arsal, Lebanon)

Arsal child-friendly space as a safe park. Photo credit: Catalytic Action

In **Arsal**, **Lebanon**, the Arsal Child-Friendly Spaces project was launched in 2019 by UNICEF and NGOs such as Terre Des Hommes-Italy, Catalytic Action, and the Municipality of Arsal to support refugee Syrian children amid the ongoing crisis. Arsal, located near the Syrian border, saw a significant influx of refugees, prompting the need for a designated safe space after the demolition of their informal tented settlements. Catalytic Action led the design of an inclusive playground within an existing park, using a participatory approach that involved local children and stakeholders in the planning process. This collaboration ensured the park met the diverse needs of both refugee and host community children and included elements like interactive games and shaded seating for parents to supervise their toddlers. The upgraded public park has become the only safe public space in Arsal, serving as a vital resource for both Lebanese and refugee communities and representing a new way of conceptualizing child-friendly spaces in a resilience-building setting.

Principle 6. **Sustainability and resilience**

Rationale: Humanitarian crises and disasters are on the rise, with weather, climate and water-related hazards becoming more frequent and intense because of climate change *(117)*. In 2019, one in every 70 people was caught up in a crisis, natural or man-made, and on average, children comprise over 50% of people affected by disasters *(118)*. At the same time, urbanization places enormous pressure on cities' natural resources, with huge consequences for air, water, soil, local food systems and the climate itself *(119)*.

Sustainability is a broad term to describe policies, projects and investments that provide benefits today without sacrificing environmental, social and personal health in the future, and which are often described as "green" because they limit the impact of development on the environment. *Resilience* is another broad term that describes the ability of systems to bounce back and be adaptable to face future stresses and shocks, including climate-change related weather and water hazards, warfare and violence in urban areas, and outbreaks of infectious diseases and pandemics *(120)*.

Global organizations such as UNICEF, WHO, and UN-Habitat highlight the importance of public spaces for both enabling sustainable, resilient development, and fully realizing children's rights. This is because networks of public open spaces play a vital role in disaster recovery and resilience *(121, 122)*, including during earthquakes, flooding, and fires *(123)*. And appropriately designed urban spaces, particularly green spaces, help improve air quality; cool hot city temperatures; increase drainage and aquifer recharge for flood control; dampen noise; and encourage greater biodiversity and CO_2 absorption *(124)*. Additionally, public open spaces can accommodate nature-based solutions to erosion, heat, flooding and other environmental factors exacerbated by climate change.

Public spaces for children developed through a resilience lens not only mitigate climate change impacts but can also build children's social and physical reliance in vulnerable contexts *(34, 125)*. Children overall are more vulnerable to short and long-term hazards, but in informal settlements they suffer higher mortality rates and increased illness during times of disaster, high temperatures and flooding. In these settings in particular, increasing green spaces and incorporating nature-based solutions in public spaces for children to cool temperatures and mitigate flooding can reduce risks associated with climate change, as well as provide opportunities for children to engage and interact with nature in playful ways (see city example 16).

In 2019,

one in every 70 people

was caught up in a crisis, natural or man-made, and on average, children comprise over 50% of people affected by disasters.

City example 16. **Sustainability and resilience to improve child and community health** (Fiji and Indonesia)

Raised accessway providing flood resilience and opportunities for play and socialization in Makassar, Indonesia. Photo credit: RISE

Public spaces in informal settlements can be upgraded and revitalized using a "water-sensitive approach" that delivers decentralized, sustainable, nature-based water and sanitation solutions to improve the health and well-being of children and the broader community, and improve local ecological diversity.

One example is the multisectoral, consortium-led Revitalising Informal Settlements and their Environments (RISE) programme in **Fiji** and **Indonesia**, which sees the development of community open space as integral to settlement upgrading, redevelopment and resilience-building.

By integrating constructed wetlands, bio-filtration gardens, and decentralized sanitation systems into buildings and landscapes across 24 flood-prone informal settlements, the project has created a network of child-friendly spaces. This comprises paved green pathways, small open spaces overlooked by residences, and bio-diverse open green spaces that are aesthetically pleasing for communities while enriching the ecological diversity of the area. All of these features enhance children's play, socialization and mobility, as well as intergenerational socialization.

Bringing together local governments and NGOs, national government agencies in Australia and New Zealand, universities, and funding organizations including the Wellcome Trust and the Asian Development Bank, the programme has a key aim to safely remove sewage from homes and surrounding areas, and by extension, reduce for young children in particular the illness and disease related to such exposure in the environment.

Spending time in a safe green space, playing, creating, relaxing and reflecting is vital to children's optimum development *(25)*. Though the specific form and type of green space depends on the context, climate, culture, community preferences and budget (and can range from planting a single tree in a street to creating a public park), broadening the diversity of natural elements in a given space enables a richer set of experiences for children and a fuller range of physical and psychological benefits. This can help foster their awareness of, and concern for, nature as they grow up.

In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child released General Comment 26, focusing on children's rights in relation to the environment and climate change. This comment, binding for ratifying nations, requires States to implement measures to ensure all children can play and engage in activities in safe, clean environments such as parks and playgrounds. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of including children's views in the planning and design of these spaces. City example 17 shows how environmentally degraded liminal spaces can be transformed into public spaces for children through participatory approaches.

Social and recreational facilities for children can be created or improved in informal settlements when supported by multistakeholder civil society partnerships and driven by expert planning and design (see city example 17), while initiatives to "green" public open spaces such as schoolyards, asphalt playgrounds, disused open drainage channels, and environmentally degraded natural areas can help these spaces offer diverse, more natural settings for play.

Rapid urbanization, climate change and market-driven food production have increased challenges around food and nutrition security and food safety for children worldwide, and "food deserts" are especially common in urban areas *(126, 127)*. In response, numerous cities have unlocked the potential for urban farming and community gardens through various grants, policies, as well as zoning regulations. Research shows that promoting children's participation in community gardens and other gardening programmes can have a significant positive impact on their nutritional intake and support the development of healthy eating habits.

And sustainability can embrace issues around the legal status of open spaces to remain as parks, playgrounds, and urban green spaces. It can include quality-control standards to ensure the durability of all outdoor furniture and infrastructure (and that this is made from environmentally friendly materials); regular cleaning and maintenance of playgrounds; yearly safety audits; an annual budget for renovating, upgrading or even replacing old playgrounds based on periodic audits; asking parents to keep a watchful eye and write to the local authority if they find any issues; and ensuring any complaints are immediately addressed.

Park de los Deseos, Medellin. Photo credit: Jorge Lascar

City example 17. **Restoring ecological niches** (Mexico City, Mexico)

Participatory restoration of a ravine and creating places for children in Mexico City. Photo credit: MACIA Estudio

Tarango is the only natural canyon in western **Mexico City** that has survived urbanization. Declared an "Area of Environmental Value" in 2009 by the Ministry of the Environment, the canyon had faced neglect, garbage dumping, and antisocial activities. In 2018, the NGO Estudio Abierto began engaging local children through "eco-guard" summer camps and monthly programmes to explore the canyon's ecology and waste management. In 2020, MACIA Estudio collaborated with children and the community to create a masterplan for a section of Tarango Canyon.

Through participatory workshops, children helped identify potential places for placemaking and acted as co-designers of the masterplan.

Through carefully targeted design interventions, the project produced an urban garden, a play area for toddlers, a climbing zone for older children and teenagers, and several reflection and contemplation spaces integrated into the natural landscape for community use. After three years of collaborative effort involving children, the community, and various organizations, 125 tons of solid waste were removed from the ravine. These physical clean-up efforts allowed the neighbours to heal their relationship with the ravine's natural space. Older women formed a morning walking club, children began exploring deeper into the ravine, discovering new areas for improvement, and neighbours started using the urban garden as a knowledge-sharing and cultural platform.

High-level recommendations, by SPACES principle

Safety and protection

- Promote safety in public spaces through appropriate planning (including landscaping), policies, and regulations.

  - Design neighbourhoods to minimize the number of vehicular streets to be crossed when accessing parks and playgrounds and provide wide sidewalks and safe crossings.

  - Enable safe zones around schools and residential and play areas to regulate vehicular traffic, including redirecting or removing motorized traffic, traffic-calming measures around schools, and safe cycling infrastructure, refuge islands, kerb extensions etc.

  - Enable safe routes in neighbourhoods (e.g. short-cuts through alleys, back gardens, and greenways, passages with lighting) so children have quick and safe access to play spaces, neighbourhood amenities and friends, and can avoid traffic.

  - Prioritize visibility and accessibility by ensuring public spaces are well-lit, open, and visible from surrounding areas to enhance safety and allow children to move freely without fear, especially in high-density or informal settings.

  - Locate and design entrances, lobbies, corridors, stairwells, elevators and walkways in locations that maximize their visibility, including for amenities such as public sanitation facilities shared by males and females.

  - Undertake citywide safety audits on the state of parks, playgrounds, neighbourhood open spaces, pedestrian crossings, sidewalks, cycling facilities, green cover, speed limits in school zones and residential areas (children can be involved through school and local associations in auditing public spaces).

- Support and enable detailed mapping, audit and child-focused spatial assessment of public and common spaces to identify safety risks for children using participatory tools to assess how children and caregivers perceive safety in public spaces, and tailor interventions to address identified risks such as poor lighting, lack of surveillance, or unsafe infrastructure.

  - Help make liminal spaces safe for children and caregivers through multistakeholder engagement and participatory, cost-effective strategies.

  - Upgrade and implement redevelopment interventions that ensure safety from all hazards, including falls (e.g. from unprotected balconies and terraces), garbage, open water, open electrical wires, railway tracks, fires and other hazards for young children, by encouraging participatory approaches.

  - Ensure play spaces in schools and neighbourhoods are durable, safe and secure, including for all children in host locations with large refugee and internally displaced communities, and that sustainability is considered in situations where temporary spaces become long-term.

  - Ensure children from refugee and internally displaced communities are safe from threats, bullying, and other prejudices while using streets and open spaces in host settlements through participatory programmes to promote social cohesion between communities.

  - Plan for inclusive emergency preparedness by designing public spaces to serve as safe zones during crises, ensuring they can accommodate temporary shelters, health services, and child-friendly facilities that are accessible and secure.

Play, recreation and developmental needs

- Plan for play across all categories of public spaces with a particular focus on residential areas, school zones and public open spaces near cultural and historic sites, sports and recreational venues.

  ◦ Create quality standards and regulations for designing rich play environments in public spaces that are diverse, stimulating, and accessible to all children.

- Identify and protect liminal places that are used by children to play, involving children in the process.

- Implement temporary street closures and schemes for school streets and play streets around all neighbourhoods where possible – especially in neighbourhoods lacking open spaces, with apartment living, high child densities, and deprivation.

- Regulate privately owned public spaces such as large spaces outside apartment blocks or in the heart of large commercial mixed-use developments to incorporate gardens, courtyards, play spaces and playgrounds.

  ◦ Ensure outdoor spaces and amenities in residential developments or blocks promote play, active living, socialization and access to nature.

- Ensure that children's play is recognized and sustained during slum upgrading and redevelopment efforts.

- Within crisis and resilience-building contexts, upgrade and expand the scope of public facilities such as health centres and schools/training facilities to cater to refugee and displaced children and ensure they can access play areas.

Access where need is greatest

- Map existing spaces to understand the location, distribution, quantity, quality, and accessibility of public space for children to inform inclusive and equitable decision-making when improving existing (and advocating for new) public spaces for children (particularly in slums and informal settlements) (see Section 3, Activity 2 – map and document existing spaces).

- When planning citywide open public spaces, locate parks (including green and blue spaces and nature-based spaces), playgrounds, and playable areas within residential areas, near schools and public facilities frequented by children. Pay particular attention to ensuring that low-income neighbourhoods and/or areas with high child density and vulnerable populations are served.

- Advocate for school playgrounds to be open to the public after school hours and at weekends as community areas in neighbourhoods that lack open spaces to maximize the use of existing infrastructure.

- Ensure distribution of child-friendly places during upgrading and redevelopment efforts across informal settlements and co-locate children's play spaces with other functions where synergies exist (e.g. community facilities, market spaces, community gardens, etc.).

- Support development of innovative public spaces in crisis and resilience-building contexts by engaging with built environment and engineering experts as well local community groups, children's organizations and agencies.

Child health and well-being

- Ensure parks, playgrounds and informal play areas meet recommended environmental standards (e.g. for air quality and noise levels) and are free from soil contaminants and stagnant water, and ensure

adequate solid waste management etc., locating them as far as possible from sources of pollutants (e.g. highways, waste facilities etc.).

- Plan and design public spaces for children that consider the changing climate and protect children from risks such as overexposure to the sun, hot weather, and from burns from metal play equipment.

  ◦ Ensure direct supervision by caregivers is possible for play areas used by children under the age of 5 years, such as by placing shaded seating around them and ensuring access to water sources and toilets.

- Make sure access to public spaces (streets and public transport) are also universally accessible and allow for children of all ages and abilities to arrive there safely and comfortably.

- Ensure all community public spaces within crisis and resilience-building contexts are free from garbage, toxins, stagnant and other hazardous materials.

Equity and inclusion

- Consult with residents, including children, when redesigning shared open spaces in residential environments to ensure their active involvement in the design process (see Section 3, Activity 1 – conceptualize and engage).

- Plan and programme for age and gender-specific facilities, inclusive play opportunities, and rest and recreation areas for users and caregivers of all ages, gender, abilities and backgrounds in city-scale, neighbourhood and housing-level public spaces for children

- Apply universal design principles that can provide suitable equipment for older children and those with additional support needs in inclusive parks and playgrounds.

- Identify and work to eliminate social and other barriers that slum dwellers face in accessing safe and health-promoting public spaces.

- Transform the outdoor areas of institutional settings (such as schools, sports or recreation and health facilities) that are close to temporary settlements into multi-use neighbourhood spaces for everyone living in the community, including migrants, refugees, as well as the host population.

Sustainability and resilience

- Invest in green and blue infrastructure designed to work with local environmental and ecological systems.

- Revitalize large city-scale ecologically sensitive but abandoned/disused green spaces as mini forests and urban wilds for nature-based recreation.

- Reclaim, renovate and programme identified areas of public vacant land and appropriate liminal spaces in neighbourhoods (e.g. transforming spaces under flyovers into skateparks, play areas, and community parks).

- Introduce a diverse selection of local plants (with a variety of colour, scent, flowers and fruits) in public open spaces that promotes children's understanding of nature and biodiversity.

- Ensure play equipment in public spaces is durable and can withstand high use, is built from local materials, can be easily repaired, and is multifunctional.

- Enable and sustain community gardens, urban farms, and greenery in informal settlements in streets, open spaces, and liminal spaces such as roofs, walls, alleys, etc.

- Within crisis settings, in recovery and rebuilding efforts, promote the development of public spaces for children in large-scale regional and national multistakeholder refugee resilience plans and programmes, as well as local city-level resilience plans and programmes.

Section 3.
Implementing SPACES: pathways, activities and tools

Redesigned street as play infrastructure in Potgieterstraat, Amsterdam. Photo credit: Carve NL

Planning for and providing public spaces for children can be done as part of existing urban interventions or as programmes initiated specifically to generate and create child-friendly spaces. These interventions – whether new or part of existing programmes – can be initiated through mayoral visions and formal policies, plans and programmes; through catalytic inputs from global and civil society organizations; and through grassroots demand, among others. Whatever the origin, there are common activities for creating, managing, and encouraging the use of public spaces for children across all contexts, scales and categories in ways that embrace the SPACES principles described in Section 2.

Pathways for implementing public spaces for children

Public spaces for children can be created by a diverse range of stakeholders including government, NGOs, CBOs, developers, the private sector, residents, and parents and children themselves. Public spaces for children are mainly created via two main pathways: those promoted and led by the government using formal planning tools; and those led by diverse stakeholders working in partnership. While these pathways may differ in their objectives, it is important they work together. Ideally, governments should support the exploration and formation of partnerships that involve the public sector and other urban stakeholders (including those mentioned above).

Budgeting for children in urban contexts is not just a financial decision – it reflects a city's commitment to equity, inclusion, and long-term social investment.

Government-promoted pathways

All levels of national, subnational and local government promote and develop public spaces for children through formal policies, programming, planning, and legislative and regulatory tools; and by convening partners and facilitating joint action. Local government in particular plays a pivotal role in shaping urban environments that support the well-being and development of children. To achieve this, it is essential that they allocate dedicated and sustained budgets for child-responsive urban planning and design.

Budgeting for children in urban contexts is not just a financial decision – it reflects a city's commitment to equity, inclusion, and long-term social investment. Adequate funding ensures the creation of safe public spaces, accessible transport, inclusive housing, and essential social services tailored to children's needs (see city example 18). Moreover, participatory and transparent budgeting processes that incorporate child-focused data can help prioritize interventions where they are most needed.

Even where public spaces for children are owned and managed by the private sector, most public spaces used by children in cities – regardless of whether they have been exclusively planned for children or for all citizens – involve government intervention to some degree. Government initiatives occur in these contexts:

- **Planned contexts:** National, subnational and local plans, programmes, policies, strategies and legislation can help shape urbanization and urban spaces at city level, and many cities have used these tools to develop public spaces for children as planned environments.

- **Informal settlements:** Local government engagement with informal settlements to plan public spaces for children can help understanding of informal settlements not just as physical structures, but as a microcosm of informal activities, social relationships and networks to sustain livelihoods and community leadership *(128)*.

- **Crisis and resilience-building contexts:** In disaster risk-reduction efforts, government plans, policies, and programmes – such as national strategies for disaster risk reduction, climate action plans, and city resilience plans – can enable and support public space interventions.

City example 18. **Government-led upgrading through participatory initiatives** (Thailand)

Participatory slum upgrading is a common entry point for governments, NGOs, and grassroots organizations seeking to improve the quality of life in informal settlements and to lay the essential groundwork for creating sustainable, safe, and secure public spaces for children. Some slum upgrading policies and programmes have paid specific attention to the protection, preservation, and development of communal spaces.

Thailand's national-government supported Baan Mankong Community Upgrading Program, established in 2003 to address large housing shortages in the poorest urban areas, channels government funds (in the form of extremely flexible infrastructure subsidies and soft housing and land loans) directly to poor communities. These communities then collectively plan and carry out improvements to their housing and immediate environment, and their basic services and security of tenure, using budgets they manage themselves to benefit the whole community. This typically includes upgrading common spaces like roads, small open spaces, and shared spaces through paving and greening, upgrading sanitation facilities (individual and communal), and establishing community meeting spaces and community libraries, community gardens, and parks and playgrounds.

Partnership-based pathways

Partnerships involving private companies, NGOs, CBOs, and private citizens can create, manage, sustain and own public space. Such partnerships will differ depending on whether the initiative is rooted at city, regional/state or national-government level. Partners may play different roles – from technical inputs, funding, community mobilization; to implementation, management, and monitoring and evaluation. Partnership-based initiatives have helped to develop and maintain numerous public spaces for children across the world, many examples of which are described in the case studies in this guide. The three partnership-based models that have successfully produced public spaces for children across all three contexts in this guide include:

- **Civil society-led partnerships** that develop initiatives ranging from city-wide public spaces that provide ecosystem benefits, to small, site-specific, neighbourhood public spaces involving the community and local children.

- **Community-led partnerships** that typically involve innovative local practices for securing children's right to play in public space, involving parents, CBOs, and local government. CSO- and community-led models involving children and youth have produced many innovative common public spaces in slums, and though most remain one-off interventions, many projects have also been scaled up *(7, 129)*.

- **Private developer-based partnerships** between government and private sector entities that are typically funded by private companies, which leverage different financial instruments. Partnerships should build on outcome-based financing mechanisms (e.g. social, development, or environmental impact bonds), or may involve other incentives (e.g. subsidies) for private sector stakeholders *(130)*.

Partnership-based pathways are particularly relevant for informal contexts that need to rely on non-governmental support. In such instances, collaborations that connect national initiatives with diverse and extensive countrywide grassroots networks in urban poor areas working to improve community spaces can achieve scale and promote equity (see city example 19). They can also be helpful during and after disaster recovery, for example where community-based partnerships advocate for play to leverage free and adventurous spaces for children to support their well-being (see city example 20).

Back alley in slum resettlement housing in Mumbai, India. Photo credit: Paula Bronstein

City example 19. **The Changing Faces Competition** (Nairobi, Kenya)

The Model Street project that transformed the garbage-filled streets in Dandora, Nairobi. Photo credit: UN-Habitat

The citywide Changing Faces Competition in **Nairobi** is run by the Public Space Network (PSN), which comprises civil society, public and private stakeholders, and urban experts interested in creating a cleaner, greener, safer, and inclusive Nairobi through the transformation of its public spaces.

Over the years Nairobi has witnessed many youth-led public space improvement and development projects in different neighbourhoods where art- or sports-focused initiatives have catalysed many efforts. However, these localized social movements have failed to scale-up or connect with each other for greater impact. Given the limited resources of the Nairobi City County Government, the civil society-led pathway is crucial to developing public spaces at scale. PSN created the Changing Faces Competition to offer a common platform for Nairobi's different placemaking groups to work on public space improvements and development. Any formally registered civil society group, such as self-help groups, CBOs, and resident associations can participate.

The competition requires groups to identify a neglected space in their neighbourhood, and crowdsource resources for the transformation using locally available and donated materials and equipment. A jury of urban experts chooses the best projects and the winning teams receive a financial award. The idea of the competition came from the Dandora Transformation League, a founding member of PSN, that since 2014 had run three competitions in the Dandora neighbourhood, mobilizing over 3000 young people to transform 120 public spaces. The Changing Faces Competition has run four times since 2014, transformed more than 200 public spaces involving over 4000 participants; provided clean, green play spaces for children; reduced crime; and improved community safety. The teams are encouraged to identify new income-generating activities related to the maintenance and activation of the transformed spaces to ensure their sustainability.

City example 20. **Partnership-led initiatives to rebuild better for children after disasters** (Kobe, Japan)

One of the pocket parks created in Matsumoto neighbourhood in Kobe as part of disaster recovery. Photo credit: P. Allan

Actively integrating open space planning and management in disaster preparedness and recovery efforts can support children's everyday play and recreation, and build resilience to natural disasters. In **Kobe**, **Japan** after the 1995 earthquake, grassroots movements worked with local government to plan and rebuild open spaces in various neighbourhoods. In the Matsumoto neighbourhood, the community distributed 1 hectare of land, sanctioned by the government as part of post-recovery efforts, to 10 equally sized pocket parks. Each park is surrounded by housing and comprises play equipment, open space, large trees for shelter, vegetation and a gravel area, water pump, safety signage and a clock, and are the heart of each neighbourhood.

Activities and tools for implementing public spaces for children

Various stakeholders in different contexts will take on a range of roles and functions and use a variety of tools in the journey to providing better public spaces for children – be they building spaces where they do not exist, or making existing public spaces child-friendly and safe. The following activities and tools are intended as a broad guide for action for those working to create or sustain public spaces. They do not represent a stepwise guide to implementing public spaces for children but rather provide an overview of important considerations for each step. Fig. 1 outlines the activities, inputs and stakeholders needed to develop public spaces for children. These activities are explained in detail in the following sections.

Fig. 1. **Creating public spaces for children in planned contexts - activities, inputs and stakeholders**

PROCESS CYCLE

| Conceptualize, engage | Map, plan, budget |

STRATEGIC

OPERATIONAL

| Course correct/ replicate/scale-up/sustain | Manage and implement |

| Monitor and evaluate | Operate and maintain |

PROCESS INPUTS

| **Data/mapping** | **Planning and design,** including harmonization with municipal workplans | **Funding** | **Implementation** short, medium and long-term with interim steps | **Governance and management** |

ACTORS/STAKEHOLDERS

| **Government** national, regional, city, ward/district | **Private sector** | **Community** | **Children and adolescents** |

Activity 1. **Conceptualizing and engaging**

Understand and prioritize common needs:

It is essential to start by understanding communities' existing use of, and needs and priorities around, common spaces and facilities in planned or informal contexts. This can be done through participatory needs assessments conducted by or involving caregivers and children; groups of residents including women, older people, men, and youth; as well as community leaders and other stakeholders through transect walks, focus groups, surveys and interviews *(25, 131, 132)*. NGOs and academics can play a key role in facilitating this *(133)*. These efforts should be supported by clear policy and planning standards that mandate safe, inclusive, and accessible public spaces in all neighbourhoods, and particularly underserved areas.

Set up a core working group:

Establishing dialogue and partnerships across stakeholder groups, developing a plan of action, implementing the plan and overseeing the intervention to completion is essential. Once initiated, it is important to engage with strategic stakeholders (including children, see Box 7) who bring community buy-in, professional expertise, and the political and financial support required to get from concept to implementation. A working group should include children's input, particularly older children whose input should be recognized in appropriate ways. A specialist who can integrate children's concerns into the project should be part of the working group.

Build strategic partnerships with stakeholders:

Once the nature of intervention has been identified, connect with different stakeholders able to bring in the resources and expertise required to carry out the project, including government officials, funding organizations, built-environment professionals, NGOs, academia and think-tanks, and members of the local community. Coordinating mechanisms can be developed to ensure cross-sectoral coordination of people, agencies and organizations responsible for regulation, maintenance and resourcing of public spaces for children. City-level working groups for public space development may involve experts and organizations working with diverse groups of children (including the most vulnerable children); youth alumni of formal child-participation structures; and children and adolescents themselves in reviewing policies, plans, and programmes with direct impact on public spaces for children at all scales. When disasters occur that impact urban public spaces, efforts can be made to collaborate with relevant stakeholders to ensure that the city and neighbourhood resilience and recovery strategies include children's participation so that their needs are represented.

Promote and enable dedicated institutional structures to create public spaces for children:

This may involve setting up structures and positions within local government – as well as dedicated, arms-length institutions – designed to coordinate planning, implementation and place-management efforts. It may take several meetings to arrive at a shared consensus on the plan, design, programme and implementation.

Build capacity and empower the local community:

Building the financial, technical, and managerial capacities of community groups is essential for community-led upgrading, management of public spaces, and community governance (see city example 21). This might include enabling cooperative savings groups and community networks; raising awareness of the relationship between health environments and healthy outcomes in children; training community members to enumerate households, map physical structures, and identify assets; connecting community members to financial, political, social, technical, and information resources; providing skills training in effective construction methods; setting up systems for management and accountability; and integrating community groups in planning, designing, and building efforts.

Box 7. **Co-creating with children**

Children's participation and considering the differing needs of children are central to creating resilient cities with vibrant, age and gender-responsive, child-friendly intergenerational public spaces. But the power dynamics that inherently exist between children and adult stakeholders may curtail children's participation. In practice, children's interests remain insufficiently incorporated into planning processes, particularly in the design and allocation of public spaces.

Avoiding this means ensuring children are well informed; and use of engagement methods that cultivate a comfortable and inclusive environment where all children feel welcome to engage.

To this end, programmes should aim to:

• ensure children and caregivers have well-established and legitimate pathways for participating in planning, designing, creating, managing, monitoring, and caring for public spaces where their voices, opinions, and ideas are respected and considered, and reflected in policies, plans, designs, and practice;

• leverage existing child-participation structures in schools, youth centres, sports clubs etc.;

• ensure equal participation of children by gender, age and ensure representation from vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities, migrants and refugees;

• in disaster-prone areas, mark evacuation routes, develop warning systems, prepare a community disaster-response plan in participatory ways involving children and youth;

• ensure children are aware of and actively participate in disaster preparedness, resilience, and recovery strategies to protect, preserve and rebuild their habitual public spaces and help develop new ones during the reconstruction and rehabilitation stages after a disaster.

Ghazze open school yard, Lebanon. Photo credit: Catalytic Action

City example 21. **Urban regeneration programmes fostering community maintenance** (Fresnillo, Mexico)

A former drainage run in a social housing development in Fresnillo, repurposed as a play space. Photo credit: Sandra Pereznieto

Urban programmes to renew and regenerate social housing, streets and neglected communal spaces can reduce crime, increase social cohesion and community presence, improve safety in crime-prone and underserved locations and offer the chance to create or improve public spaces for children. Mexico's National Social Housing Renewal and Revitalization Programme (2014–2018) partnered with built-environment professionals, academia and local communities to revitalize and improve safety and social cohesion in run-down social housing developments, creating new, semi-public and communal spaces for children, youth, and other groups of residents.

One such space was Fresnillo Playground, which involved renovating and revitalizing a liminal, half-kilometre-long dry drainage canal running through a housing development, cutting the settlement in half. The architects observed the spontaneous ways that children played in the drainage run – such as sliding down on the sides on garbage can lids – and decided to retain and enhance the form of the canal with surfaces to slide or sit on that overlooked a resurfaced area at the bottom of the channel. The playground that has been developed out of the former canal is multi-purpose, well-overlooked and provides the community with a much-needed safe public space for play, celebrations, and social gatherings. It is well-loved and cared for by local communities – overcoming the common challenge of lack of attention to maintenance and upkeep, where responsibility largely falls upon local municipalities already running low on budgets.

Activity 2. **Mapping and documenting existing spaces**

This is a crucial step in all three contexts. Maps are essential for planning and upgrading settlements, benchmarking social and spatial indicators, and protecting child-friendly spaces *(133)*. Protecting children's play spaces often means actively resisting the deep-seated tendency for adult needs to take precedence over child needs. Planning city-wide interventions or neighbourhood-specific ones using GIS mapping tools – overlaid with land-use maps and sectoral data (on health, education, income etc), combined with child-friendly strategies such as child-led walking tours, using photographic methods, observing current behaviours in the space, surveys and interviews – allows for a critical understanding of the location, distribution, quantity, quality, and accessibility of public space for children and particular challenges within each area for child health and well-being (see city example 22). Conducting such mapping may also help identify challenges in existing public spaces (e.g. if they are near a waste-management site, or a landfill). This is vital information for inclusive and equitable advocacy and decision-making in relation to public spaces for children.

However, in low- and middle-income countries, mapping can be problematic and accessing land-use maps can be difficult. The lack of statistical and spatial data for city and neighbourhood scales is being addressed with innovative methods that use new data sources *(134, 135)*, for example using Early Observation data combined with more traditional methods. Efforts to develop low-cost mapping need to be explored (e.g. using artificial intelligence tools) to ensure that some urban contexts can access relevant data *(136)*.

In **planned environments**, involving children from different age groups and backgrounds, using mobile phones, apps, GIS technology and tools to create public space base maps and physically verify identified public spaces using different methodologies has enabled creation of citywide public spaces *(137)*. In **informal settlements** and **crisis and resilience-building contexts**, supporting and enabling detailed mapping and audits of public and common spaces verified by local communities have enabled identification and prioritization of locations of most need, as well as helped to develop a local vocabulary of formal and informal community public and common spaces used by children and other community groups *(138)*.

Methods and tools for mapping public spaces for and with children include:

- child-led citywide tours of local areas;
- photographic methods – photovoice, photogrid, photoframing etc.;
- participatory map-making workshops with children;
- app-based mapping and audit tools;
- participatory GIS possibly linking to data collected through handheld GPS devices;
- surveys and questionnaires among children, caregivers, teachers, etc.;
- structured and informal interviews with local children, adolescents and adults;
- focus group and other group discussions;
- behaviour mapping in local public spaces.

City example 22. **City-level assessment of open public spaces for children** (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates)

Exploratory walk with children in Sharjah using questionnaires and surveys. Photo credit: Sharjah Child-Friendly Office

The city of **Sharjah** in the **United Arab Emirates** undertook a city-wide assessment to evaluate the state of open public spaces for children's use as part of their work on child-friendly urban planning. UN-Habitat, in collaboration with UNICEF, has supported Sharjah to assess and plan its public spaces to promote children's well-being. This is done at the city level and at neighbourhood/site level. A GIS-based map was developed before data collection. At the city

level, UN-Habitat conducted a citywide public space inventory and assessment focusing on children's needs using a phone-based app. The city-wide public assessment evaluated 61 existing open public spaces within 13 suburbs, including neighbourhood parks, beaches and waterfronts. The assessment informed the development of a supplementary guide on the planning and design of open public spaces for children in the city.

Activity 3. **Planning and co-designing**

All public space planning exercises must define, identify and protect (existing) public space, and ensure this definition is clearly enshrined in urban legislation and has mechanisms to enforce its protection *(139)*. National, regional and local planning policies and regulations (Box 8) can help secure and protect sufficient public space for children's use; preserve natural landscapes, biodiversity and ecosystems; and ensure that a safe and networked system of public spaces – including streets, green spaces, and civic spaces – is accessible by children (see city example 23). Other useful planning and co-design considerations include:

Leveraging complementary plans, programmes and initiatives at local and national scales that have similar high-level goals as public space for children:

(e.g. initiatives relating to sustainability, climate change, education, human rights etc.). And as funds and resources available at national level in low- and middle-income countries are more substantial, these may sometimes be used to fund, resource and enable initiatives and interventions that cascade to city and local levels in both **planned** and **informal contexts**. For example, the Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge in India leverages the

national government's Smart Cities Mission to support neighbourhood-level planning in smaller cities to plan, implement, scale-up, and sustain play opportunities for young children by garnering funds from diverse government programmes.

Enabling regular input from communities – especially children – on plans and projects that concern them and ensuring their suggestions are acted upon:

Across the three contexts the involvement of communities, children, schools, and government departments in different stages of public space creation is crucial to the success of diverse public space for children (see city example 6, Regensburg) *(140)*.

Reviewing plans, projects and policies through a child-friendly lens:

While many urban policies and legislative frameworks emphasize public participation, they often overlook the specific mechanisms needed to ensure children's meaningful inclusion. Children are not an homogenous group; their capacities, interests, and modes of expression vary significantly by age, ability, gender, and context. Therefore, participation frameworks must be intentionally designed to accommodate these differences. This includes creating safe, accessible, and age-appropriate spaces for engagement; using participatory tools such as drawing, storytelling, and play; and ensuring that children's views are not only heard but also acted upon. The guidance emphasizes that child participation must be institutionalized within urban governance systems and embedded across all phases of policy and planning – from feasibility and situational analysis, to implementation

and monitoring. Only by tailoring participation mechanisms to children's diverse needs can cities truly uphold their commitment to inclusive and equitable urban development *(7)*.

Planning and designing public and community spaces for multi-functionality in informal settings:

This can help accommodate needs of all community members, including children, in limited and often contested space. In Rourkela, India, the Ruputola Slum (a marginalized community with a history of leprosy) has been transformed through public space interventions that offer play opportunities for children and support for women. The city established mobile libraries, children's play areas, and micro-community centres for women's self-help groups, funded by various government programmes, to enhance essential services in the heart of the community and renovate childcare centres.

Integrating resilience planning and design with public and common space development in crisis and resilience-building settings:

This can be done, for example, by identifying flood-prone locations and developing community public spaces in these locations that deter floods as well as serve as multifunctional spaces for community use (see city example 24).

Planning and designing for phased development of public and common spaces.

This can be helpful as initial budgets are seldom sufficient to address all needs identified by local communities.

City example 23. **Rotunda Linear Park as part of the Corridors of Freedom Initiative** (Johannesburg, South Africa)

The Rotunda Linear Park in Johannesburg. Photo credit: @ArtMyJozi

Johannesburg has successfully leveraged the city's Growth and Development Strategy 2040, the Metropolitan Integrated Development Plan, and the city-wide "Corridors of Freedom" initiative to undo the racially segregated planning directives of the apartheid era and create a more socially and economically inclusive and sustainable city. As part of this mission, the Rotunda Linear Park was created by renovating a 1.2 km stretch of a street leading to the Rotunda precinct as a thriving public space that would improve safety in the neighbourhoods, afford children healthier lifestyles, increase social and cultural activities, reduce crime, and attract private investment. Different local community groups, including children, were engaged in needs analysis and co-design workshops. Children below the age of 14 years (mostly boys), participated in the workshops and expressed needs for proximate play spaces, increased safety and protection,

play opportunities, splash pads, and a five-a-side football pitch. New facilities also included a dedicated outdoor gym, street furniture, artworks, and cycle lanes. Adjoining sidewalks were improved with better lighting and street furniture. With the support of the GIZ Violence and Crime Prevention Programme, UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme, and Sports for Social Change Network, the city started the Park Activators Activation Programme to experiment with how unsafe parks in the inner-city could be managed by both the city, local communities, and NGOs through bringing in relevant programmes centred around sports, arts, and culture. Preliminary evaluations show the park is well used and cared for by various groups in the community and that investments in the co-production process have resulted in an increased sense of community ownership and care for the newly created public space.

Box 8. **Formal instruments for developing public spaces for children**[1]

There are different pathways to developing public spaces for children (this guide looks at two of them – government-led, and partnership-led), and a range of tools can be used. These include policies, legislation, plans from different sectors, and investment plans. These instruments support action in both existing areas and in new developments and urban extensions. Below is a list of relevant policy, regulatory and legal tools that may be helpful for those involved in public spaces for children.

National scale:

- National urban policy – a tool used by governments to direct and manage the process of urbanization.

- Sectoral policies on transport, health and well-being, poverty, education, sport, play, outdoor recreation.

- National legislation concerning children.

- National strategies, programmes and grants for child well-being.

Regional scale:

- Metropolitan regional strategies and plans.

- Metropolitan development projects.

City/municipal scale:

- A comprehensive plan is also known as a general plan, masterplan, development plan or land-use plan.

- Strategic plans and action plans.

- Sectoral plans, such as housing, open space, and mobility.

- Capital improvements plans.

- Supplementary planning guidance.

Neighbourhood scale:

- Local area planning focused on city districts/wards.

- Neighbourhood-focused, programmes.

---

1 For more guidance on formal tools for developing public spaces for children see Child-responsive urban policies, laws and standards: a guidance (https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2023/09/final_guidance_unicef_un-habitat_clean_v12.pdf) as well as UN-Habitat's National Urban Policies Driving Public Space Led Urban Development: A Quick Thematic Guide for Mainstreaming Safe, Inclusive and Accessible Public Spaces into National Urban Policies (https://unhabitat.org/national-urban-policies-driving-public-space-led-urban-development-a-quick-thematic-guide-for), and UNICEF's Shaping urbanization for children handbook (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2018). Shaping urbanization for children: A handbook on child-responsive urban planning. 978-92-806-4960-4. UNICEF).

City example 24. **Flood-resilient infrastructure (Kibera, Nairobi)**

Kibera Public Space Project. Photo credit: KDI

The Kibera Public Space Project, started by the Konkuey Design Initiative (KDI), has enabled long-term collaborative initiatives with community groups and residents to develop a productive and resilient public space network. Interventions include retrofitting open areas around schools with common facilities, creating new play areas and flood-resilient infrastructure, co-creating and co-locating laundry and sanitation facilities with spaces for micro-enterprises and play areas, and increasing accessibility by building bridges and floodproofing sensitive areas creatively to include gathering and play spaces.

Activity 4. **Budgeting and financing**

Budgeting and ensuring interventions are aligned with available finances is crucial for seeing projects to completion and for long-term sustainability. Financing for public spaces for children can be leveraged through formal structures such as local authority funding, national government transfers, multiagency public sector funding, local tax initiatives, land value capture *(141)*, and revenue-based income (e.g. parking fees). It can also be garnered through private funders and collective community funds, planning regulations and development controls that require developers to set aside public space.

By embedding child-friendly priorities into municipal budgets and urban investment plans, local authorities can institutionalize support for children's rights and create cities where all children can thrive.

Shaping public budgets around an urban health goal – in this case, investment in public spaces – can be supported by:

- mapping and reviewing spending relevant to the urban health goal. This includes not only funds that are allocated through the health sector but also health-relevant policies in other sectors (e.g., housing, transport, and parks) to better understand the scope and scale of existing investments;

- estimating the costs attributable to the challenge (i.e., a lack of public spaces and the ensuing potential health and safety consequences), which can provide a basis for discussion among fiscal planners, as well as highlighting where there may be information gaps;

- conducting impact assessments of the potential health and equity benefits of having more public spaces for children and the co-benefits for other community goals;

- reviewing urban health budgets and ensuring that public spaces impact not only health but also

child well-being and equity. As part of this process, involving communities in participatory budgeting is a promising way to identify priorities *(142)*.

Activity 5. **Implementing the initiative**

A strategic action plan typically outlines how an initiative will be implemented. UN-Habitat's *City-wide Public Space Strategies (143)* suggests it should set out:

- who will implement and administer the actions – the most suitable departments or agencies, and external collaborators with clearly established roles and responsibilities;

- the timeframe for implementing each action – short, medium or long term, with start and end dates and interim steps indicated;

- estimated capital and revenue costs of each action to ensure adequate resources (funding, technical assistance or materials) and inform future capital budgets;

- harmonization with the municipal work plan, where appropriate.

These implementation steps also hold true for creating public space for children in informal settlements, which are often home to skilled labour and craftspeople

who can be employed in building public spaces. Considering cultural norms and values in the design and implementation of public spaces can foster community ownership of such spaces, while engaging local skills, materials and resources can keep costs low and improve quality of construction. This enables easier maintenance and management as well as providing employment opportunities for local workers.

In planned contexts, as well as in informal and crisis contexts, children and youth can also be engaged in creative ways such as artworks, building pop-up furniture, planting and tending to trees etc., thereby increasing their sense of ownership and their likelihood of using the space on a regular basis. In addition, engaging local communities can also lead to identifying community champions for public spaces as well as opportunities for training settlement dwellers – particularly youth – in new and innovative building methods that can increase their employment chances. Local municipalities should be involved where possible to leverage access to facilities and services.

Activity 6. **Maintaining and sustainably managing the space**

Sustaining and ensuring inclusive use of public space for children requires regular maintenance and upkeep as well as management, monitoring, and evaluation. Responsibility for maintenance depends on the type of public space and may be shared among stakeholders across public and private sectors. This includes the regulation of uses – and conflicts between uses – such as advocating for a more tolerant and respectful attitude towards children's use of public space and removing restrictive and exclusionary signage and rules; setting up regular maintenance routines and ensuring minimum

quality standards; and cross-sectoral coordination of interventions in public spaces. Successful projects that build the capacity of local groups (from the outset of the project) through routine care and maintenance and management structures are more likely to ensure a sense of ownership that leads to maintenance of the space, as well as ensuring that the design and materials used to create public spaces cater to durability and easy maintenance. It is also important to have financial support that will empower local people to give their time to maintain such spaces *(144)*.

In high-density and resource-poor settings, public and common spaces are extensively used by a variety of users and wear and tear are therefore inevitable. This calls for the use of durable materials and technologies and a maintenance plan. In many cases, income-generating initiatives are incorporated into public spaces to create revenue streams for maintenance and upkeep. Having standard operating procedures, community development funds, and allocating a community group to take ownership of the space can also enable maintenance and upkeep. For example, the Kibera Public Space Network, Nairobi, often uses local materials such as bamboo and wood that can be easily replaced. Further, for revenue generation, craft initiatives, childcare centres, shops and servicing agencies have been set up to generate revenue for maintenance and upkeep.

Activity 7. **Monitoring and evaluation**

Any public space strategy needs regular, open and transparent audits for the city to track progress, so it is crucial to include monitoring indicators in any strategic action plan. Indicators should align with the recommendations under the SPACES principles. They should include markers for health inequities and allow data to be disaggregated by different sociodemographic factors, allowing changes in different population groups to be monitored and equity issues to be addressed. For example, the Barcelona Plan for Play in public spaces has three main objectives and 10 milestones to achieve its objectives by 2030. The milestones are linked to 63 action areas that are monitored through clearly established indicators using a traffic light system, and progress against each of those indicators is reported annually (see city example 25).

City example 25. **Methods for maintaining and monitoring public spaces for children** (worldwide)

There are many ways in which cities monitor and evaluate all aspects of their public spaces for children. The city council of **Belfast** performs yearly, citywide audits of playgrounds through an independent agency as part of its Playground Improvement Programme, and a specific budget is set aside annually to improve physical infrastructure of playgrounds that do not meet the set standards. The city of **Regensburg** engages in weekly cleaning and maintenance of its playgrounds, and yearly safety audits. Parents also keep a watchful eye and write to the urban green department if they see any problems, and these are immediately addressed by the city.

However, app-based citizen inputs are becoming common and increasingly form the basis of government action in maintaining and repairing public spaces. **Tirana**, **Albania**, which is committed to making the public spaces child-friendly, built a smartphone application called *Tirana Ime* ("My Tirana") for people to report any maintenance issues such as uncollected trash, broken sidewalks, vandalism, and missing manhole covers, and then geotag locations where those conditions exist.

Public spaces in crisis and resilience-building settings require regular monitoring and evaluation of how visitors use the space to inform management routines and plans. Both cross-departmental communication and community outreach are essential for this. For example, site maintenance staff and public users can routinely alert relevant municipal authorities of malfunctioning systems or disrepair through mobile apps, while community outreach and activities also engage users to address maintenance issues and encourage them towards stewardship. In the case of developing child- and caregiver-friendly spaces outside public health centres in cities in **Egypt** (city example 2), a monitoring and evaluation officer is assigned to the project to be responsible for documenting the entire project via video and interviews. Participatory monitoring and evaluation tools from the United Nations Evaluation Group Handbook are used, including checklists, open-ended (semi-structured) interviews, community interviews/meetings, direct observation, focus group discussions and "most significant change" methods.

In other projects in emergency and humanitarian contexts that led to the development of public spaces for children in **Egypt** and **Lebanon**, local NGOs and municipal teams monitored the use of these spaces and discussed and addressed potential issues; citizen scientists were hired and trained in monitoring and evaluation methods; and programming activities for children in these spaces was used as a way to observe and track upkeep.

Urban Toys tactical installation in Loreto Plaza as part of Mexico City's Playful City initiative. Photo credit: Onnis Luque

Conclusion

Tactical urbanism interventions to claim public spaces for children in inaccessible hillside informal settlements in Recife, Brazil. Photo credit: Marcos Pastich

Promoting public spaces for children can help provide access to safe, clean, playful, active environments and green spaces at housing, neighbourhood and city levels, with multiple benefits for health, learning, play and recreation, all of which are all integral to child well-being. By leveraging government programmes, mayoral visions, community demands for change, international programmes and civil society advocacy, among others, public spaces for children have been created in diverse living contexts in low-, middle- and high-income countries.

The diversity of examples in this guide shows that there are many ways to develop quality public spaces for children, and that the best examples are those that are co-created with the community; prioritize local knowledge and children's direct experience, needs, and aspirations; and involve a wide range of stakeholders in mapping, planning, budgeting, implementing, operating, maintaining and monitoring the public spaces created within neighbourhoods.

This guide outlines two common approaches for place-based interventions for public spaces for children:

- Government-promoted pathways that have the potential for scaling up niche ideas to visibly transform cities and neighbourhoods through public space interventions using statutory, legal, policy, and budgetary support, and through the development of a clear accountability and coordinating framework.

- Partnership-based pathways that can result in targeted projects focused on solving immediate local problems such as insanitary living conditions, flood risk, degraded natural assets, and lack of safe play spaces within housing developments. The projects initially grow organically according to the needs and aspirations of the community but can tap into government policies and budgets for replication, scale-up, or sustainability. Multi-level partnerships anchored by CSOs using this approach can gradually transform the social and physical environments of children, including in slums and informal settlements and humanitarian and emergency contexts.

Play and recreation are a fundamental human right of children as well as a biological and developmental imperative. But in recent years, children's right to play has been threatened by increased traffic, loss of traditional play spaces, environmental degradation, climate change, and conflict. Investing in public spaces for children in cities can enhance spatial, temporal, and social conditions that support children's access to play and their "right to the city", enabling them to move safely and independently to claim diverse spaces for play, recreation, and socialization. Planning for play to promote citywide public spaces for children is an emerging practice and it aligns with broader urban policy goals such as improving air quality, road safety, urban greening, climate resilience, and mental and physical health *(145)*.

There are myriad ways in which public spaces for children – be it near the home, in the local neighbourhood, or at the city level – can be created or improved. The principles and guidance in this resource invite stakeholders in all sectors, be it health, social welfare, education, finance, construction or urban design, and across government, the private sector and civil society, to play a role. We hope SPACES will help governments (who are at the heart of creating such public spaces) to deliver better policies and programmes; allocate funding; and set up the systems for managing and maintaining public spaces for children.

Policy-makers and other duty bearers have the power to improve children's living conditions in cities by promoting safe, green, and resilient public spaces in line with the commitments in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the SDGs. The guidance and principles outlined in this resource aim to help them do it. Let us put them to work.

References

1   The necessity of urban green space for children's optimal development. [Discussion paper]. New York (NY): UNICEF; 2020 (https://www.unicef.org/media/102391/file/Necessity%20of%20Urban%20Green%20Space%20for%20Children%E2%80%99s%20Optimal%20Development.pdf, accessed 25 August 2025).

2   SDG Indicator 11.7.1 training module: public space. Nairobi: UN-Habitat; 2018 (https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/06/indicator_11.1.1_training_module_adequate_housing_and_slum_upgrading.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

3   Places and spaces: environments and children's well-being. New York (NY): UNICEF; 2022 (https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/places-and-spaces-environments-and-childrens-well-being#download, accessed 25 August 2025).

4   Woolley H. Being ourselves: children and young people sharing urban open spaces. In: Bishop K and Corkery L, editors. Designing for kids in the city: beyond playgrounds and skate parks. Oxford: Taylor and Francis; 2017:92–100.

5   Beunderman J. Seen and heard: reclaiming the public realm with children and young people. London: Demos; 2007.

6   Green C. Children's environmental identity development: negotiating inner and outer tensions in natural world socialization. Bristol, UK; Peter Lang; 2018.

7   Child-responsive urban policies, laws and standards: a guidance. Nairobi: UN-Habitat; 2023 (https://urbanpolicyplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/final_guidance_unicef_un-habitat_clean_v12-1.pdf, accessed 25 August 2025).

8   Kaw JK, Lee H, Wahba S, editors. The hidden wealth of cities: creating, financing, and managing public spaces. Washington (DC): World Bank; 2020.

9   The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024. New York (NY): United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; 2024 (https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/, accessed 13 September 2025).

10   Healthy and sustainable city indicators report: comparisons with 25 cities internationally. Melbourne: Global Healthy and Sustainable City-Indicators Collaboration; 2022.

11   Urban green spaces and health. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016.

12   Schüle SA, Hilz LK, Dreger S. Bolte G. Social inequalities in environmental resources of green and blue spaces: a review of evidence in the WHO European region. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health. 2019;16(7)1216.

13   Chen Y, Yue W, La Rosa D. Which communities have better accessibility to green space? An investigation into environmental inequality using big data. Landsc Urban Plan. 2020;204:103919.

14   Wüstemann H, Kalisch D, d Kolbe J. Access to urban green space and environmental inequalities in Germany. Landsc Urban Plan. 2017;164124–131.

15   Integrating health in urban and territorial planning: a sourcebook. Geneva: UN-Habitat and World Health Organization; 2020 (https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/05/1-final_highres_20002_integrating_health_in_urban_and_territorial_planning_a_sourcebook.pdf, accessed 25 August 2025).

16   Martinsson K, Gayle D, McIntyre N. Funding for England's parks down £330m a year in real terms since 2010. The Guardian. 23 August 2022 (https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/aug/23/funding-for-englands-parks-down-330m-a-year-in-real-terms-since-2010, accessed 24 August 2025).

17   Andres L, Moawad P, Kraftl P, Stevens SD, Marais L, Matamanda A et al. Children and young people's access to food, education, play and leisure in times of crisis: an international, integrative review of policy responses, impacts and adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children & Society. 2025;39(2)495–511.

18   Cortés-Morales S, Holt L, Acevedo-Rincón J, Aitken S, Ekman Ladru D, Joelsson T. Children living in pandemic times: a geographical, transnational and situated view. Child Geogr. 2022;20(4)381–391.

19   Wesley EJ, Mackres E, Shikman K, Anzilotti E, Palmieri M. Cities are heating up: better infrastructure can cool them down. In: The City Fix [website]. Washington (DC); World Resources Institute; 2025 (https://thecityfix.com/blog/cities-are-heating-up-better-infrastructure-can-cool-them-down/, accessed 14 September 2025).

20   Morgan P. Towards a developmental theory of place attachment. J Environ Psychol. 2010;30(1):11–22. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2009.07.001.

21   Chatterjee S. Children's friendship with place: a conceptual inquiry. Children, Youth and Environments, 2005;15(1):1–26

22   Jack G. Place matters: the significance of place attachments for children's well-being. Br J Soc Work. 2010;40(3):755–771. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcn142.

23   Magalhães E, Calheiros M. Psychometric properties of the Portuguese version of place attachment scale for youth in residential care. Psicothema. 2015;27(1):65–73.

24   Gill T. Widening the bandwidth of child-friendly urban planning in cities. Cities Heal. 2019;3(1-2):59–67 (https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2019.1660126, accessed 14 September 2025).

25 Hart, R. A. (2002). Containing children: Some lessons on planning for play from New York City. Environment and Urbanization, 14(2), 135–148. https://doi.org/10.1177/095624780201400211, accessed 4 November 2025.

26 Hadfield-Hill S, Zara C. Family experiences of urban transformation: entangled bodies, hopeful imaginations and embodied utopias. Urban Geogr. 2024;45(8)1478–1503.

27 Hadfield-Hill S, Zara C. Children and young people living through the monsoon: watery entanglements and fluid inequalities. Child Geogr. 2019;17(6)732–747.

28 Ward C, Golzen A. The child in the city. London: Architectural Press; 1978.

29 Moore RC. Childhood's domain: play and place in child development. London: Croom Helm; 1986.

30 Nabhan G, Trimble S. The geography of childhood: why children need wild places. Boston (MA): Beacon Press; 1994.

31 Wilson P. Beyond the gaudy fence. Int J Play. 2012;1:30–36 (https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2012.659860, accessed 14 September 2025).

32 Chawla L. Children's engagement with the natural world as a ground for healing. In: Tidball KG, Krasny ME, editors. Greening in the red zone: disaster, resilience and community greening. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands; 2014.

33 Kinoshita I, Woolley H. Children's play environment after a disaster: the Great East Japan earthquake. Children. 2015;2(1) 39–62.

34 Chatterjee S. Children's coping, adaptation and resilience through play in situations of crisis. Children, Youth and Environments. 2018;28(2)119–145 (https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.28.2.0119, accessed 14 September 2025).

35 Rasmussen K. Places for children – children's places. Childhood. 2004;11(2):155–173.

36 Chatterjee S. How has the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative promoted public spaces for children? Children, Youth and Environments. 2023:33(3)1–34 (https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/850, accessed 14 September 2025).

37 Chatterjee S. Children's friendship with place: a conceptual inquiry. Child Youth Environ. 2005;15(1):1–26.

38 Nabavi RT. Bandura's social learning theory and social cognitive learning theory. Theory of Developmental Psychology. 2012;(1)1–24.

39 Hadani HS, Winthrop R, Hirsh-Pasek K. Playful learning landscapes: convergence of education and city planning. In: Ra S, Jagannathan S, Maclean R, editors. Powering a learning society during an age of disruption. Singapore: Springer; 2021 (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0983-1, accessed 14 September 2025).

40 Jarvis CH, Kraftl P, Dickie J. (Re)Connecting spatial literacy with children's geographies: GPS, Google Earth and children's everyday lives. Geoforum. 2017;81:22–31.

41 Cloke P, Jones O. 'Unclaimed territory': childhood and disordered space(s). Soc Cult Geogr. 2005;6(3)311–333.

42 Chatterjee S, Nallari A. Reimagining urban liminal spaces as children's places to secure children's right to the city and fulfil rights of children. In: Bishop K, Dimoulias K, editors. The Routledge handbook on the influence of built environments on diverse childhoods. New York: Routledge; 2024.

43 Woolley H. Urban open spaces. Oxford: Taylor & Francis; 2003.

44 United Nations Human Settlement Programme. City-wide public space strategies – a guidebook for city leaders. Nairobi: UN-Habitat; 2020.

45 Chatterjee S, Dutta C. Healthy public spaces for children within neighbourhoods through urban transformations. Cities Health. 2024;8(4)800–815 (https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2024.2375857, accessed 14 September 2025).

46 Blanc N, Clauzel C, About C, Riché AL, Gippet M, Bortolamiol S. Schoolyards greening for connecting people and nature: an example of nature-based solutions? npj Urban Sustain. 2025;5:64 (https://doi.org/10.1038/s42949-025-00252-6, accessed 14 September 2025).

47 Definitions are derived from the Habitat III Issue Paper (see https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Habitat-III-Issue-Paper-22_Informal-Settlements-2.0.pdf).

48 Chatterjee S. Making children matter in slum transformations: lessons from India's National Urban Renewal Mission. J Urban Des. 2015;20(4)479–506 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2015.1044506, accessed 14 September 2025).

49 Chatterjee S. Analyzing the impact of JNNURM funded slum redevelopment on children across India. 2013.

50 Muggah R, Abdenur AE. Refugees and the city: the twenty-first-century front line. World Refugee Council Research Paper No. 2, 2018 (https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/documents/WRC%20Research%20Paper%20no.2.pdf, accessed 25 August 2025).

51 According to UNICEF, almost 50 million children had been displaced by conflict and violence globally by the end of 2024 (see https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/#notes).

52 Schonfeld DJ, Demaria T. Providing psychosocial support to children and families in the aftermath of disasters and crises. Pediatrics. 2015;136(4)e1120–e1130 (https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-2861, accessed 14 September 2025).

53 Rintoul MA. Access to play for children in situations of crisis play: rights and practice—a toolkit for staff, managers and policy makers. Children, Youth and Environments. 2018;28(2)187–90 (https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.28.2.0187, accessed 14 September 2025).

54 UN-Habitat helps unlock the hidden potential of Kenya's refugee camps through regeneration. New York (NY): UN-Habitat; 2021 (https://unhabitat.org/news/22-nov-2021/un-habitat-helps-unlock-the-hidden-potential-of-kenyas-refugee-camps-through, accessed 14 September 2025).

55 Bernstein J, Palmer B. Innovating for children in an urbanizing world: a use-case handbook. Helsinki: UNICEF Innovation; 2017.

56 Bartlett S. Children and the geography of violence: why space and place matter. London: Routledge, 2017.

57 South African Human Rights Commission/United Nations Children's Fund. Global goals for every child: progress and disparities among children in South Africa. Pretoria: UNICEF South Africa; 2016 (https://www.developmentpathways.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/UNICEF-Global-goals-for-every-child-progress-and-disparities-among-children-in-South-Africa.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

58 World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the future of cities. New York (NY): UN-Habitat; 2022 (https://unhabitat.org/wcr/2022/, accessed 14 September 2025).

59 Earle L. Urban crises and the new urban agenda. Environment and Urbanization. 2016;28:3–12 (https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/eaua/28/1 accessed 24 August 2025).

60 Chatterjee S. Access to play for children in situations of crisis: synthesis of research in six countries, International Play Association working paper. Oxford: International Play Association; 2017 (https://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IPA-APC-Research-Synthesis-Reportsinglepg.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

61 Gray P. The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents. A J Play. 2011;3(4)443–463.

62 Playground ideas for 0-3 years. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation; 2019 (https://issuu.com/bernardvanleerfoundation/docs/playground_ideas_eng, accessed 14 September 2025).

63 Bryant BK. The neighborhood walk: sources of support in middle childhood. In: Emde RA, editor. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development. 1985;50:3.

64 Bartlett S. Children's experience of the physical environment in poor urban settlements and the implications for policy, planning and practice. Environ Urban. 1999;11(2)63–73 (http://dx.doi.org/10.1630/095624799101285093, accessed 14 September 2025).

65 Lester S, Russell W. Turning the world upside down: playing as the deliberate creation of uncertainty. Children (Basel). 2014;1(2):241–60.

66 Santos MP, Pizarro AN, Mota J, Marques EA. Parental physical activity, safety perceptions and children's independent mobility. BMC public health. 2013;13(1)584 (https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/1471-2458-13-584, accessed 14 September 2025).

67 Karsten L. It all used to be better? Different generations on continuity and change in urban children's daily use of space. Child Geogr. 2005;3(3)275–290 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14733280500352912, accessed 14 September 2025).

68 Lester S, Russell W. Children's right to play: an examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide. Working Paper No. 17. The Hague: Bernard Van Leer Foundation, Netherlands; 2010.

69 Wridt PJ. A historical analysis of young people's use of public space, parks and playgrounds in New York City. Children, Youth and Environments. 2004;14(1)86–106.

70 Gupta, A, Yadav M, Nayak BK. A systematic literature review on inclusive public open spaces: accessibility standards and universal design principles. Urban Sci. 2025;9(6)181 (https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci9060181, accessed 14 September 2025).

71 Adolescent health in the Western Pacific [website]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021 (https://www.who.int/westernpacific/health-topics/adolescent-health, accessed 14 September 2025).

72 Prioritizing safe school zones to safeguard every child's journey to school. Vision Zero for Youth, Fia Foundation and Child Health Initiative; 2021 (https://www.visionzeroforyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/VZY_PleikuCityGaiLaiProvince.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

73 Child Friendly Cities Initiative [website]. New York (NY): UNICEF; (nd) (https://www.childfriendlycities.org/, accessed 14 September 2025).

74 Hadfield-Hill S, Kraftl P. Planning for intergenerational futures: conversations with professional stakeholders and residents of new build communities. Birmingham: University of Birmingham; 2024.

75 The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024. New York (NY): United Nations; 2024 https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf, accessed 25 August 2025).

76 Macedo J, Haddad M. Equitable distribution of open space: using spatial analysis to evaluate urban parks in Curitiba, Brazil. Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design. 2015;43(6).

77 Rigolon A, Browning M, Lee K, Shin S. Access to urban green space in cities of the global south: a systematic literature review. Urban Sci. 2018;2(3)67–91 (https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci2030067, accessed 14 September 2025).

78 Shukla J, Dhyani S, Chakraborty S, Dutta Purkayastha S, Janipella R, Pujari P et al. Shrinking urban green spaces, increasing vulnerability: solving the conundrum of the

demand-supply gap in an urbanizing city. In: Kumar A, Srivastava PK, Saikia P, Kumar Mall R, editors. Earth observation in urban monitoring. Amsterdam: Elsevier; 2024:359–374.

79 Global observatory of healthy and sustainable cities [online database]. St Louis (MO); Washington University (nd) (https://www.healthysustainablecities.org/, accessed 14 September 2025).

80 The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024. New York (NY): United Nations; 2024 https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf, accessed 25 August 2025).

81 Green-blue schoolyards: combining resources for child-friendliness and climate adaptation at neighbourhood scale. In: Early Years Starter Kit/Bernard van Leer Foundation [website]. The Hague: Van Leer Foundation; 2025 (https://brainbuilding.org/implementation/zoom-in/green-blue-schoolyards, accessed 25 August 2025).

82 Chawla L, Keena K, Pevec I, Stanley E. Green schoolyards as havens from stress and resources for resilience in childhood and adolescence. Health and Place. 2014;28:1–13.

83 Princeton University. Reducing inequality by focusing on the very young: Boa Vista, Brazil, deepens its investment in early childhood development, 2009–2016. In: Van Leer Foundation [website]. The Hague: Van Leer Foundation; 2019 (https://vanleerfoundation.org/publications-reports/reducing-inequality-by-focusing-on-the-very-young-boa-vista-brazil-deepens-its-investment-in-early-childhood-development-2009-2016/, accessed 14 September 2025).

84 Helldén D, Andersson C, Nilsson M, Ebi KL, Friberg P, Alfven T. Climate change and child health: a scoping review and an expanded conceptual framework. Planetary Health. 2021;5(3)e164–175 (https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30274-6/fulltext, accessed 14 September 2025).

85 Landrigan PJ, Rauh VA, Galvez MP. Environmental justice and the health of children. Mt Sinai J Med. 2010;77(2):178–87.

86 The climate crisis is a children's right crisis. New York (NY): UNICEF; 2021 (https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis, accessed 25 August 2025).

87 Wolch JR, Byrne J, Newell JP. Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: the challenge of making cities "just green enough." Landsc Urban Plan. 2014;125:234–244 (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0169204614000310?via%3Dihub, accessed 14 September 2025).

88 Lachowycz K, Jones AP. Greenspace and obesity: a systematic review of the evidence. Obes Rev. 2011;12(5):183–189. (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-789X.2010.00827.x, accessed 14 September 2025).

89 Guthold R, Stevens GA, Riley LM, Bull FC. Global trends in insufficient physical activity among adolescents: a pooled analysis of 298 population-based surveys with 1·6 million participants. Lancet Child Adolesc Health. 2020;4(1)23–35 (https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(19)30323-2, accessed 14 September 2025).

90 Gluckman PD, Hanson MA, Beedle AS. Early life events and their consequences for later disease: a life history and evolutionary perspective. Am J Hum Biol. 2007;19(1):1–19 (https://www.pinniped.net/gluckman2007.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

91 Shanahan DF, Bush R, Gaston KJ, Lin BB, Dean, J. Associations of types of green space across the life-course with health outcomes. Environmental International. 2020;143:105877.

92 Zare Sakhvidi MJ, Sprague A. Greenspace and health, wellbeing, physical activity, and development in children and adolescents: an overview of the systematic reviews. Env Sci Health. 2023;32:100445 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.coesh.2023.100445, accessed 14 September 2025).

93 Douglas O, Lennon M, Scott M. Green space benefits for health and well-being: a life-course approach for urban planning, design and management. Cities. 2017;66:53–62 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.03.011, accessed 14 September 2025).

94 Kabisch N, van den Bosch M, Lafortezza R. The health benefits of nature-based solutions to urbanization challenges for children and the elderly – a systematic review. Environ Res. 2017;159:362–373 (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28843167/, accessed 14 September 2025).

95 Aggio D, Smith L, Fisher A, Hamer M. Mothers' perceived proximity to green space is associated with TV viewing time in children: the Growing Up in Scotland study. Prev Med. 2015;70:46–49 (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743514004617?via%3Dihub, accessed 14 September 2025).

96 Kuo FE, Faber Taylor A. A potential natural treatment for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: evidence from a national study. Am J Public Health. 2004;94(9):1580–1586 (doi:10.2105/AJPH.94.9.1580, accessed 14 September 2025).

97 Schutte AR, Torquati JC, Beattie HL. Impact of urban nature on executive functioning in early and middle childhood. Environ Behav. 2017;49(1):3-30 (doi:10.1177/0013916515603095, accessed 14 September 2025).

98 Garcia MT, Ribeiro SM, Germani ACCG, Bógus CM. The impact of urban gardens on adequate and healthy food: a systematic review. Pub Health Nutr. 2018;21(2):416–425 (doi:10.1017/S1368980017002944, accessed 14 September 2025).

99 Strife SL, Downey L. Childhood development and access to nature: a new direction for environmental inequality

research. Environmental Justice. 2014;7(1)1–7 (https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3162362/, accessed 14 September 2025).

100 Rigolon A, Browning M, McAnirlin O, Yoon HV. Green space and health equity: a systematic review on the potential of green space to reduce health disparities. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2021;4;18(5):2563 (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33806546/, accessed 14 September 2025).

101 Britto PR, Lye SJ, Proulx K, Yousafzai A, Matthews SG, Vaivada T et al. Nurturing care: promoting early childhood development. Lancet. 2017;389:10064, 91–102.

102 Let's co-create our city. Co.Creation.Architects: Jhenaidah, Bangladesh; 2018.

103 Madanipour A, ed. Whose public space? International case studies in urban design and development. London: Routledge; 2010 (doi:10.4324/9780203860946, accessed 14 September 2025).

104 Dee M. Young people and urban public space in Australia: creating pathways to community, belonging and inclusion. Int J Soc Sci Res. 2015;3(2):138 (doi:10.5296/ijssr.v3i2.7403, accessed 14 September 2025).

105 Carmona M. Contemporary public space: critique and classification. Part One: Critique. J Urban Des. 2010;15(1):123–148.

106 Valentine G. Public space and the culture of childhood. London: Routledge; 2017 (doi:10.4324/9781315245638 accessed 14 September 2025).

107 Fainstein SS. Spatial justice and planning. In: Readings in planning theory. Bognor Regis: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2015:258–272.

108 Buchholz T. Seeking spatial justice – By Edward Soja. Tijdschr voor Econ en Soc Geogr. 2011;102(3):378–380.

109 Deaton L. The value of children's access to safe public space: building urban children's resilience against the shocks and threats of resettlement in Manila, Philippines. IOP Conference Series, Earth Environ. Sci. 2020;588:1.06–1.10 (https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1755-1315/588/3/032020, accessed 14 September 2025).

110 Mumbai Climate Action Plan. Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation: Mumbai; 2022. (https://heathealth.info/resources/mumbai-climate-action-plan-2022/, accessed 1 December 2025).

111 Children renature disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. Cities and Children Global Alliance; 2020 (https://cities4children.org/blog/children-renature-disadvantaged-urban-neighbourhoods/, accessed 14 September 2025).

112 Casey T, Foreword HH, Todd M. Free to play. A guide to creating accessible and inclusive public play spaces. Edinburgh: Inspiring Scotland; 2018.

113 Ball D, Gill T, Spiegal B. Managing risk in play provision: implementation guide. Bristol: Play England; nd (https://ltl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2022/08/managing-risk-in-play-provision-implementation-guide-vecjye.pdf, accessed 14 September 2014).

114 Infant, toddler, caregiver-friendly neighbourhood (ITCN) resources. The Hague: Van Leer Foundation; 2019 (https://bernardvanleer.org/publications-reports/infant-toddler-caregiver-friendly-neighbourhood-itcn-framework-and-guidelines/, accessed 14 September 2025).

115 Slingerland G, Lukosch S, Brazier F. Engaging children to co-create outdoor play activities for place-making. Proceedings of the 16th Participatory Design Conference 2020;(1):144–154 (https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3385010.3385017, accessed 14 September 2025).

116 Derr V, Tarantini E. Because we are all people: outcomes and reflections from young people's participation in the planning and design of child-friendly public spaces. Local Environment. 2016.

117 UN News. Water-related hazards dominate list of 10 most destructive disasters. 23 July 2021 (https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/07/1096302, accessed 14 September 2025).

118 Lai, B. S., & La Greca, A. (2020). Understanding the impacts of natural disasters on children (SRCD Child Evidence Brief No. 8). Society for Research in Child Development. https://www.srcd.org/research/understanding-impacts-natural-disasters-children, accessed 4 November 2025.

119 Firehock K. Strategic green infrastructure planning: a multi-scale approach. Washington(DC): Island Press; 2015.

120 Okware S, Omaswa F, Talisuna A, Amandua J, Amon J, Onek P et al. Managing Ebola from rural to urban slum settings: experiences from Uganda. African Health Sciences. 2015;15(1)312–321.

121 Allan P, Bryant M. The critical role of open space in earthquake recovery: A case study. [Paper Presentation]. 2010 NZSEE Conference (http://db.nzsee.org.nz/2010/Paper34.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

122 IJDRBE. 2020;12(5):471–483 (http://doi.org//10.1108/IJDRBE-06-2020-0058, accessed 14 September 2025).

123 Caro MS, Canales JA, Guéguen AE. Public space and urban resilience: children's perspectives. The case of the hills of Valparaíso, Chile. Child Geogr. 2021;1–14.

124 Groentool. (n.d.). Water management (https://groentool.antwerpen.be/themes.xhtml#lucht).

125 Athokpam V, CHamroy T, Ngairangbam H. The role of urban green spaces in mitigating climate change: an integrative review of ecological, social and health benefits. Environmental Reports. 2024;10–14 (https://doi.org/10.51470/ER.2024.6.1.10, accessed 14 September 2025).

126 W. Kimani-Murage E, Muthuri SK, Oti SO, Mutua MK, van de Vijver S, Kyobutungi C. Evidence of a double burden of malnutrition in urban poor settings in Nairobi, Kenya. PLOS ONE. 2015;10(6) (https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0129943, accessed 14 September 2025).

127 Children in South-East Asia face a "double burden" of obesity and undernutrition, new report finds [press release]. New York (NY): UNICEF; 2016 (https://www.unicef.org/png/press-releases/children-south-east-asia-face-double-burden-obesity-and-undernutrition-new-report, accessed 14 September 2025).

128 Qi J, Mazumdar S, Vasconcelos AC. Understanding the relationship between urban public space and social cohesion: a systematic review. Int J Community Well-Being. 2024;7(2)155–212 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s42413-024-00204-5, accessed 14 September 2025).

129 Children, cities, and housing: rights and priorities. New York (NY): UN-Habitat; 2022 (https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/08/children-cities-and-housing-rights-and-priorities.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

130 Governance and financing for urban health [policy brief]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 (https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/urban-health/policy-briefs, accessed August 25 2025).

131 Chatterjee S. Four examples of supporting children's play in low-income urban neighbourhoods. Cities4Children Global Alliance: 2024 (https://cities4children.org/blog/four-examples-of-supporting-childrens-play-in-low-income-urban-neighbourhoods/, accessed 14 September 2025).

132 Wolf E, French M, Ilhamsyah N, Sawailau MJ, Ramirez-Lovering D. Collaborating with communities: citizen science flood monitoring in urban informal settlements. Urban Planning. 2021;6(4) (https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v6i4.4648, accessed 14 September 2025).

133 Archer D, Luansang C, Boonmahathanakorn S. Facilitating community mapping and planning for citywide upgrading: the role of community architects. Environ Urban. 2012;24(1)115–129 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247812437132, accessed 14 September 2025).

134 Kuffer M, Thomson D, Boo G, Mahabir RS, Grippa T, Vanhuysse S et al. The role of Earth Observation in an integrated deprived area mapping "system" for low-to-middle income countries. Remote Sensing. 2020;12(12), 982 (https://doi.org/10.3390/rs12060982, accessed 14 September 2025).

135 United Nations Human Settlements Programme. City-wide public space assessment toolkit: A guide to community-led digital inventory and assessment of public spaces. New York (NY); UN-Habitat; 2020 (https://unhabitat.org/city-wide-public-space-assessment-toolkit-a-guide-to-community-led-digital-inventory-and-assessment, accessed 1 December 2025).

136 Domains of deprivation framework for mapping slums, informal settlements, and other deprived areas in LMICs to improve urban planning and policy: a scoping review. Comput, Environ and Urban Syst. 2022;93:101770 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compenvurbsys.2022.101770, accessed 14 September 2025).

137 Hoi An Public Spaces Master Plan: a public space success story. Ottawa: Healthbridge; 2022 (https://healthbridge.ca/dist/library/Hoi-An-Master-Plan-Project-Summary.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

138 Creating great public spaces in three African cities; Kampala project. UN-Habitat; 2018 (https://healthbridge.ca/dist/library/Creating_Great_Public_Spaces_Kampala_final.pdf, accessed 25 August 2025).

139 Global public space toolkit: from global principles to local policies and practice. New York (NY): UN-Habitat; 2016 (https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2019/05/global_public_space_toolkit.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

140 Chatterjee S, Truñó M, Schledorn A. Planning for play: how are Barcelona and Regensburg using the approach and what have they achieved? International Journal of Play. 2025;14:(2)216-241 (https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2025.2508645, accessed 14 September 2025).

141 Smolka MO. Implementing value capture in Latin America: policies and tools for urban development. Cambridge (MA): Lincoln Institute of Land Policy; 2013 (https://www.lincolninst.edu/app/uploads/legacy-files/pubfiles/implementing-value-capture-in-latin-america-full_1.pdf, accessed 14 September 2025).

142 Governance and financing for urban health [policy brief]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 (https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/373758/9789240;082892-eng.pdf?sequence=1, accessed 14 September 2025).

143 City-wide public space strategies: a guidebook for city leaders. New York (NY): UN-Habitat; 2020 (https://unhabitat.org/city-wide-public-space-strategies-a-guidebook-for-city-leaders, accessed 1 December 2025).

144 Myskow W. Finding a fix for playgrounds that are too hot to touch. Inside Climate News [website]. Brooklyn (NY): Inside Climate Change; 2024 (https://insideclimatenews.org/project/climate-swing/, accessed 14 September 2025).

145 Chatterjee, S., Truñó, M., & Schledorn, A. (2025). Planning for play: How are Barcelona and Regensburg using the approach and what have they achieved? International Journal of Play, 14(2), 216–241 (https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2025.2508645, accessed 18 December 2025).

Annexes

Annex 1. **Methodology**

This guide was developed using a comprehensive methodology that drew on both research and practice, examining the development of public spaces for children from conceptualization to implementation.

The choice of research methods was influenced by the aims and objectives of the guide:

1. Define and categorize public spaces for children.
2. Identify the key issues, challenges and drivers of public spaces for children.
3. Identify the pathways for creating public spaces for children in three key contexts: within formal planning systems, in slums and informal settlements, and in humanitarian contexts.
4. Develop guidance for public spaces for children through global principles, for implementation through planning and governance systems.

Qualitative research methodology involving mixed methods was used.

Consultations with children

Children's voices from nine countries were brought to this project by World Vision International, which conducted wide-ranging consultations with 118 children in October 2020. These consultations informed the subsequent design of the methodology and tools by the research team, and children's recommendations were taken into consideration in formulating the principles and guidance.

Literature review

A literature review of over 1000 documents was conducted to analyse current knowledge, practices, and discourse related to the physical, social, and political dimensions of public spaces for children with a focus on lower-income contexts, including academic articles, books, blogs by relevant professional organizations, grey literature, dissertations and theses, research reports and relevant publications

from WHO, UN-Habitat, and UNICEF. The review was comprehensive in nature with a view to mapping and bringing new information related to concepts, definitions, categorizations, perceptions, and drivers of and challenges to public spaces for children. It also aimed to deepen understanding of how public spaces contribute towards children's experience, health and well-being, safety and security, learning, and resilience in the context of cities across geographical contexts and income levels. The review also drew on a peer-reviewed framing paper published in an academic journal which helped shape the principles and guidance on which this resource is based *(45)*.

Survey with global experts

A detailed survey tool was developed to capture expert opinions on a diverse range of questions linked to drivers, definitions, categories and types of public spaces for children as well as aspects of mapping, planning and designing, monitoring and evaluation, governance and management, and sustainability. The tool was distributed to known global experts in the fields of urban planning and children's environments, as well as local government officials and relevant individuals in WHO, UNICEF, and UN-Habitat. The survey was further publicized and distributed in professional networks such as LinkedIn. The survey was designed as an online tool but was also made available as a Word document on request. It was translated into Chinese on request from the UNICEF China country office due to the significant interest on the topic in their country. A separate online survey in Chinese was created and the responses were translated into English by the research team. Seventy-two experts from 22 countries participated in the survey.

Review of existing guidance on public spaces for children

A total of 76 context-specific and global guidebooks and toolkits were mapped and reviewed with regard to developing different types of public spaces, as well as

understanding broad principles for planning, design, and programming of healthy, safe, secure, resilient and inclusive public spaces for children. Of the 39-context specific guides, the majority were from Europe (56%) and were typically promoted by government organizations (38%) including mayoral offices, departments of health, transport, planning, design and construction, children and youth, among others. The majority (60%) of the 37 global guides reviewed were issued by different United Nations agencies.

Review of city examples

Additionally, a large database of city examples was developed, with balanced representation from different regions of the world, to understand and explain how context influences the success of an intervention and learn about pathways for tailoring urban public space interventions in specific contexts to achieve intended outcomes, and to fulfil children's rights, in particular their right to play. The city examples, compiled by the research team, represent good practices in mapping, visioning, programming, planning and designing, monitoring and evaluation, governance and management, and sustainability of public spaces for children from across the world. A selection of 25 examples was included in the final document: these were chosen to best illustrate the particular principle or activity being described in the text. Annex 2 includes further city examples which provide illustrative examples of the normative content of the main text. City examples have not necessarily been reviewed by government counterparts.

Key informant interviews

These included follow-up with experts after the survey and 14 interviews with key experts to develop specific case studies in relation to the pathways identified for this guidance.

Consultations with children

Children's voices from nine countries across the world were brought to this project by World Vision International which conducted wide-ranging consultations with 118 children in October 2020. All girls and boys participating in the consultation signed a consent to participate form, along with their caregiver. World Vision staff observed strict child protection protocols during both face-to-face and virtual key informant interviews and focus group discussions.[1]

Peer reviews

The structure of the guidance, as well as all chapters, was reviewed by the coordinators from the three UN agencies. Additionally, individual chapters were reviewed by international experts drawn from academia and practice. The final version of the document was also reviewed by a selection of experts, including practitioners working on developing or maintaining public spaces in a range of urban settings, as well as academic experts.

Declaration of interest

All external experts mentioned completed a declaration of interest form in accordance with the WHO declaration of interests' policy for experts. No potential conflicts were identified.

Development of the key principles of SPACES

Governments and other stakeholders use different rationales for investing in public spaces for children. Based on literature review, city examples, and a global survey with experts, key rationales were extracted that have been used for developing public spaces for children.[2]

---

1 These consultations were published (see https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Public%20Spaces%20for%20 Children%27s%20Consultation%20Report%20%286%29.pdf).

2 See Framing papers: addressing children's physical and mental health as a rationale for urban transformations and the development of public spaces (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23748834.2024.2375857); addressing the drivers and nature of public space interventions in recognized child-friendly cities in 24 countries (https://doi.org/10.1353/cye.2023.a915425); analyzing the policies, processes, and solutions for community public spaces, social integration, and recreational facilities for urban children in poverty (https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802200430.00034 4); understanding liminal spaces as children's places (https://www.taylorfrancis. com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003284406-7/reimagining-urban-liminal-spaces-children-places-secure-children-right-city-fulfill-rights-children-sudeshna-chatterjee-anupama-nallari).

Annex 2. Creating and improving public spaces for children – city examples by context

This section presents additional examples of programmes and interventions to provide public spaces for children. These city examples are grouped according to the broad context in which the initiative or programme they describe has taken place.

Planned contexts

City example 26. Government-led child-friendly public space interventions (China)

Under China's National Program for Child Development (2011–2020), urban planners in China prioritized the inclusion of play, recreation, and mobility, creating public spaces for children that are safe, accessible, stimulating and tailored to developmental needs based on age, particularly in densely populated urban settings. Some cities have capitalized on large-scale planning projects to introduce new public spaces for children, such as Shanghai's Yangpu riverside redevelopment and Shenzhen's new park development plans, both of which incorporate children's spaces into the urban landscape.

In **Shenzhen**, city planners organized walks during which children annotated maps according to their feelings and perceptions. For example, the *Rongrong* (meaning "inclusive") Garden project invited children to co-design and build a rooftop community garden, turning an unused area into a valuable resource for the community. The city installed baby-care rooms at public locations and published maps to help families locate them. Plans in Shenzhen also include new cultural and sports facilities such as science and technology museums and marine and natural museums.

In **Shanghai**, children and the wider community contributed to initial research for a riverside regeneration project, and child councils were established to ensure children's direct participation in decision-making. Shanghai is also developing "Children Plus" activity zones catering to education, arts, science, sports, and amusement in riverside public areas, while families collaborated to build 24 colourful Lego wall murals in a public space reclaimed from an old warehouse along the Yangpu riverside, creating an inviting environment for children.

In **Changsha**, primary school children participated in workshops to assess the child-friendliness of their environments, highlighting issues such as limited independent mobility due to road safety concerns, insufficient public facilities, and a lack of spaces for wheeled and ball games. And in **Wuhan**, children identified open spaces, travel routes, and service facilities through activities such as walks, questionnaires, and surveys. This participatory

approach helped improve access to North-West Lake Park through facilities such as rooms for mothers with infants, children's restrooms, and a library.

A central focus in these cities has been the promotion of nature-based experiences, particularly in Shenzhen, where municipal-level authorities have spearheaded initiatives to turn vacant neighbourhood spaces, urban villages, school grounds, and rooftops into green areas accessible to all residents. Community gardens have become key venues for a range of nature-based activities for children. In 2020 alone, 120 such gardens were created, with another 120 planned, supporting Shenzhen's ambition to become a globally recognized Flora City by involving the public in creating and maintaining green spaces.

A child-friendly arts village in Longhua District of Shenzhen. Photo credit: Liang Xu

City example 27. **Civil-society led inclusive play spaces** (China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region)

The shortage of land in **China**, **Hong Kong Special Administrative Region** makes provision of public play spaces for children challenging – especially those living with disability. From 2012, Playright Hong Kong (an NGO) partnered with UNICEF's Hong Kong Committee to research the needs of children with disabilities playing in public play space. Subsequently they developed a local "Inclusive Play Space Guide"; trained students of architecture, landscape architecture, urban studies and product design to use the guide; and organized a design ideas competition for China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's first inclusive playground in Tuen Muen Park.

Playright collaborated with special schools, kindergartens, and community child centres to develop the playground using ideas from the competition. This led to the first barrier-free play space for children in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, incorporating sand and water as natural elements in the design and providing a diverse play experience for all, especially those with special needs and wheelchair users.

Playright also launched the Playable Space Project (2018–2020), which ran a Junior Playground Commissioner Incubation Programme. This programme invited children from a district with high child density to become Junior Playground Planners and undertake play space audits, participate in co-design workshops, visit construction sites and contribute to many innovative designs. As the nature of the journey changed from advocating for inclusive play spaces to transforming public spaces, Playright advocated for investing in public spaces for children in spaces beyond playgrounds, such as waterfront

promenades, rooftop gardens, country parks, streets, pedestrianized zones, staircases, footbridges, or accessible vacant land.

The Chief Executive's 2019 Policy address mentioned the success of the Tuen Mun Inclusive Playground and announced plans to modify more than 170 public play spaces managed by the Leisure & Cultural Services Department over the next five years. Seizing this opportunity, Playright facilitated the development of a Toolkit for Involving Children and the Community in Play Space Development to influence the design upgrades of citywide play spaces.

City example 28. **Partnership-led child-friendly neighbourhood initiatives** (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

Age-appropriate, easily accessible, equitable and well-connected city-wide play and recreation spaces including parks, playgrounds and green spaces have been created worldwide. Other strategies include making these spaces accessible by safe pedestrian and cycling routes, enchanting civic spaces through play installations, developing a city-wide plan for play, and integrating play spaces with other public facilities for children. In **Belfast**, creating child-friendly places has been a feature of the Belfast Healthy Cities Programme since 2014, leading to the development of iconic spaces for children such as Cathedral Gardens in the city centre through active participation of children and young people. And in East Belfast, concerns over regular flooding and increasing health and economic disparities in the district prompted the Connswater Community Greenway (CCG) project and the creation of C.S. Lewis Square. These initiatives leveraged national, regional, and local plans, strategies, and policies such as the Belfast Green and Blue Infrastructure Plan 2020, the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035, Belfast's Your City, Your Space (2005) and the current Belfast Open Space Strategy as well as multistakeholder partnerships. The greenway comprises a 9 km natural linear park, a 16 km long continuous foot and cycle path through enriched wildlife habitats, upgraded parks and playgrounds with walking and cycling routes to nearby schools, as well as a new civic square.

Connswater Community Greenway, Belfast. Photo credit: Paul Lindsay, Chris Hill Photographic

City example 29. **Community-led playstreets: global experiences**

Play streets that temporarily close to motorized traffic to allow children a safe space to play have a long history, beginning in the early 20th century in New York, followed by several UK and European cities. It is one of the best examples of claiming time and space for children's play in the public street outside their homes for 2–3 hours. Integrated street design models implemented by local authorities can further the concept of shared space to reinstate the street as a multi-dimensional public space and promote children's play in the heart of residential neighbourhoods.

The Hackney Play Streets project in **London** runs after school and during school holidays on local authority housing estates with a high incidence of child poverty and low access to green spaces. It uses tents and dens to shield from the elements and uses pavement chalks, skipping ropes and circus skills to engage the children living on the estate. The project also runs youth services on five nights a week and daily holiday playschemes during school holidays between 10am and 6pm. Hackney Play Streets also supports local residents to run their own "play street", which involves getting council permission to officially close a street to traffic for a few hours (usually on a Saturday or Sunday), so that children living on that street can play safely together outside.

In **Belgium**, Play Streets have been held since 1998 during school holidays, organized by residents who apply to the municipality and provide volunteers. The municipality supplies permissions, equipment, and insurance, while motorized traffic is restricted except for local cars at walking speed. Eligible streets must be residential, have low speed limits, minimal through-traffic, and accessible surroundings, with activities typically in the afternoons.

And in **Australia**, influenced by the UK's Playing Out project, Play Australia promotes community engagement through its 1000 Play Streets movement. Six pilot local government authorities helped launch the programme and subsequently created a toolkit that guides local authorities on planning and supporting Play Streets – only allowed on quiet roads with limited traffic and clear alternate routes. Evaluations of Play Street programmes show improved safety, physical activity, social connections, and positive feelings towards communities, indicating broader benefits beyond individual participation.

Hackney, London. Photo credit: Hackney Play Association

City example 30. **City-led urban regeneration of public spaces** (Amsterdam, the Kingdom of the Netherlands)

City agencies have worked with design and planning professionals with expertise in creating children's playful environments as part of urban regeneration and revitalization efforts, and efforts to strengthen local government structures to support innovation for children's play at all scales. These have resulted in the renovation and regeneration of traditional sports parks, and the appropriation of streets and parking infrastructures to create civic and community spaces supportive of play, recreation, leisure and socializing. For example, as part of the city of **Amsterdam**'s urban regeneration and renewal efforts, city authorities decided to construct an underground parking garage at the Van Beuningen square and an above-ground recreational multi-purpose space supporting social interaction, play, and sports activities in a primarily low-income neighbourhood with a largely immigrant population. This is an example of regenerating a decaying, disused and run-down inner-city space to become an "open" square and a vibrant public space previously hidden from neighbouring communities and public life by parked cars, fencing and poorly maintained greenery.

Van Beuningenplein, Amsterdam. Photo credit: Carve NL

City example 31. **Government strategies for open public spaces** (Melbourne, Australia)

National, regional and city strategies can support access to green spaces, preserve and protect blue-green networks, and transform under-used or disused infrastructural spaces, while integrating safe mobility and outdoor play. In **Melbourne**, the city's Plan Melbourne 2017–2050 strategy is guiding the city's growth for the next three decades. It includes "Open Spaces for Everyone" – an overarching framework and strategic direction for effective open space planning for the city's network of regional and local parks, gardens, laneways, civic areas, promenades, bays, waterways and trails across the 32 local government areas that make up the greater metropolitan area. Several open space projects provide access to green spaces for children in underserved communities. Innovative initiatives are transforming underutilized and derelict spaces such as the Greening the Pipeline project that transformed a heritage-listed sewer pipeline in the historically under-serviced western suburbs into a community parkland, and a decommissioned service reservoir was transformed into the Booran Reserve playground in Glen Eira City that lacked adequate open spaces.

Carlton Gardens Playground, Melbourne. Photo credit: Mindtrip

City example 32. **City-led gender inclusive policies** (Vienna, Austria)

Creating structures and policies at municipal level to ensure the needs of girls and women are met are central to urban policies, plans and programmes.

For example, in **Vienna**, **Austria**, between 1992 and 1998 the Women's Office and Coordination Office for Planning and Construction Geared to the requirements of Daily Life and Specific needs of Women were set up to bring a gender lens to urban development projects. In Einsidler Park, the first

gender-sensitive park, the aim was to reduce the dominance of boys and enable gender-neutral space. The redesign supported an unstructured layout with suitable seating arrangements, safety features, and multi-functional play equipment, which supported older people, girls, and young children and their caregivers to walk, play, sit, and socialize. This project has changed the attitude towards girls and children in the city's planning thinking.
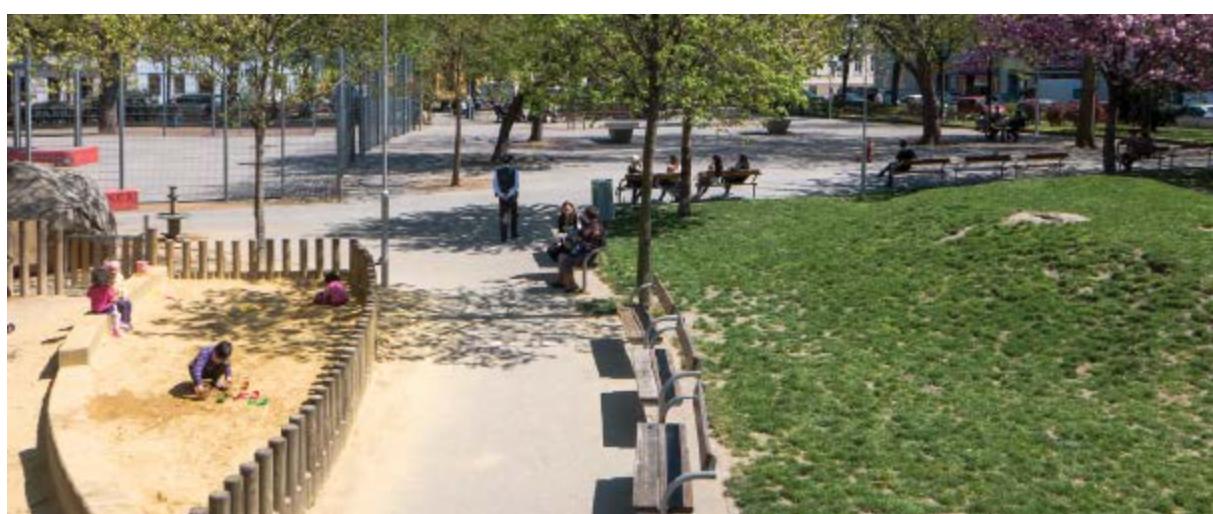
Spaces for young children and caregivers in Einsidler Park, Vienna. Photo credit: Peter Gugerell/Wikimedia Commons

City example 33. **Government-led multi-level play system (New Zealand)**

Concerns in **New Zealand** that pressure on free time, limited access to traditional play spaces, and a decrease in parental permission for children's independent mobility meant children were not experiencing play opportunities as much as they used to prompted Sport New Zealand to develop a comprehensive, multi-level "play system" that aligns with the government's child well-being strategy.

The play system incorporates "play champions" from various government sectors to ensure that play is included in legislation, policy, and budgets across sectors, spanning the national, regional, local, neighbourhood, and family level.

Play is prioritized at neighbourhood level by Sport New Zealand's Neighbourhood Play Systems (NPS) Model, designed to create a more sustainable approach to planning and managing local play systems. NPS does this by considering the roles of people, places, and

organizations by collaborating with policy leaders, developers, architects, designers, community groups, neighbourhood and building managers, caregivers, and parents. The model emphasizes that play is not confined to traditional designated areas, but includes the wider spatial fabric of the community, such as driveways, streets, parks, and alleys.

Development of the NPS began on 1 July 2021 and is currently in a planning phase, focusing on four key areas: the built environment (understanding the local context, including both built and natural surroundings); accessibility (evaluating the extent of children's independent mobility within their communities); awareness and agency (gauging the levels of awareness about play opportunities and spaces among children and their families); and enjoyment (assessing whether children and families enjoy the play opportunities available in accessible spaces).

Play is not restricted to only designated play spaces in New Zealand. Photo credit: Warchi

City example 34. **City-led child-friendly urban planning (Singapore and London)**

Cities worldwide are creating supplementary planning and design guidelines, as well as practical toolkits, to support child-friendly public spaces and guide the renovation and regeneration of areas for children's play and recreation. Such initiatives provide policy, design, participation, and management advice for a variety of public spaces – including streets, school zones, parks, public buildings, and residential areas (private and semi-private) – to enable doorstep and neighbourhood-level activities for children.

Singapore has made public housing a cornerstone of its national development since gaining independence in 1960. Modern estates built by Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB) are designed as safe, accessible, sustainable, and community-centred environments, catering to the diverse requirements of families, children, youth, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Since 2006, all HDB developments have adhered to universal design principles, ensuring barrier-free access to transport, amenities, and activity spaces at both precinct and neighbourhood levels.

Play areas with rubberized safety flooring, suitable for children of various ages, are now standard features in HDB developments. Landscaped social and seating spaces encourage residents to gather and interact. Recent projects have revitalized previously under-used areas through participatory co-creation, transforming them into multi-purpose courts, workshops, community gardens, intergenerational spaces, maker spaces, and temporary play streets. High-rise HDB buildings frequently include sky parks and rooftop gardens, improving access to recreational spaces. Furthermore, neighbourhood-level apps help foster community bonds by enabling residents to organize group activities and support social interaction, such as outings for mothers with young children or connecting youth with shared interests.

King's Crescent urban regeneration, London. Photo credit: Henley Halebrown architects

London has introduced a range of policies to make the city more supportive of children and young people. Key among these are the 2012 Shaping Neighbourhoods: Play and Informal Recreation Supplementary Planning Guidance and the more recent Making London Child-Friendly guidance, both of which support the Mayor's "Good Growth by Design" agenda. These documents set minimum standards for play spaces in residential and mixed-use neighbourhoods, promote children's safe and independent mobility, and work towards safer, healthier environments for children.

London's vision extends beyond the mere provision of play areas, focusing on placing children at the centre of urban design and planning. The guidance documents shape the design, management, and participatory processes for public and residential spaces – including streets, school zones, parks, public facilities, and private or semi-private spaces – to support children's daily experiences. Housing development in London is decentralized, with local boroughs often creating their own supplementary planning guidance for child-friendly environments. For example, Hackney's "Growing up in Hackney: child-friendly places" supplementary planning document, published in 2021, requires that all new developments include a child impact assessment as part of the planning validation process.

City example 35. Government-led, child-supportive street design: the Woonerf (Worldwide)

In 1969, the city of **Delft** implemented traffic-calming strategies to balance children's play with vehicle traffic. Targeting lower-income areas, the city integrated sidewalks and roadways into a shared surface, added landscaping and street furniture, and involved residents in street design. Standardized signage and integrated spaces improved traffic flow and supported both pedestrian and residential activities.

This Woonerf model inspired a nationwide movement towards residential shared streets. In 1976, the Dutch government granted the Woonerf legal status, introducing traffic guidelines and legislation to support the initiative. The principles of the Woonerf soon influenced street design across Europe, including projects such as Denmark's "Rest and Play," Germany's "Play Streets", and Switzerland's "Encounter Zone".

Lessons from global experiences with shared streets highlight the necessity for flexible and receptive design approval procedures. Achieving this often requires sustained engagement over many years to shift the way street design is perceived within local governments. Key factors in this process include advocacy, tactical urbanism projects to demonstrate behavioural change, positive evaluations of proof-of-concept pilots, political support, the allocation of funding, the introduction of local policies, and the establishment of guidance and design regulations that underpin new approaches to street design.

Home zone in Freiburg, Germany. Photo credit: Harry Schiffer

City example 36. **City government-led storm-resistant parks (New York)**

Since Hurricane Sandy caused record-high water levels along the **New York City** coastline in 2012, the city has ramped up efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate-related risks through comprehensive waterfront planning, incorporating decentralized green infrastructure in flood-sensitive areas, and designing playgrounds and other public spaces to act as storage containers.

One such development is the highly acclaimed Hunter's Point South Waterfront Park. This city-led, climate-resilient public space showcases innovative features and elements of resilient and sustainable water-edge development, and provides children from nearby schools, housing estates, and the wider city a place for rest, recreation, socialization and learning. The site of the park, which stretches along the East River, was previously an industrial wasteland that was rezoned in 2012 as a mixed-use development to include housing, retail, schools and public green spaces.

Phase I of the Hunter's Point South Waterfront Park includes a children's playground, basketball courts, dog run, multipurpose playing field and an urban beach, as well as elevated decks and shaded resting places. Phase 2 includes pedestrian and bicycle pathways, adult fitness equipment, a playground, picnic terraces with wooden seating areas, wetlands, a kayak launch, and a 30-foot-high cantilevered platform that offers views of the Manhattan skyline and East River.

The park's resilient features include 1.5 acres of constructed tidal marsh that protects against storm surges and sea-level rise, and shoreline erosion, and fosters native plants and an abundance of flora and fauna. Riprap, bioswales, and historic rail tracks converted to 1600 square feet of interpretive rain gardens are other resilient features. The multi-purpose oval lawn is ringed by a 30-foot high precast retaining wall that doubles as seating and an effective flood-control feature.

Active year-round programming makes the park vibrant and accessible. For children and youth, the conservancy partners with several local and low-income schools to provide ecological awareness and educational programmes. They also run gardening clubs to enable students and teachers to create gardens in their schools as well as work with NYC Parks gardeners in the Hunter's Point South Waterfront Park. Other programmes to appeal to all ages include watercolour sessions, fitness classes, open air cinema, and festivals.

Hunter's Point South Park, New York. Photo credit: Bill Tatham

City example 37. **Urban regeneration creates opportunities for children** (King's Cross, London)

In the latter half of the 20th century, the **King's Cross neighbourhood** in central **London** was a run-down inner-city area where efforts for regeneration had often stalled. In the early 2000s, however, the site became a much more viable and attractive location when it was connected to several local and regional rail and transit lines. Such use of transit-oriented development to regenerate a prime brownfield site through stable, long-term public-private partnerships has created a safe, vibrant, and thriving neighbourhood for young and old, with diverse green, blue, and grey public spaces comprising 40% of the total development.

The regeneration scheme developed a "play strategy" to ensure children and young people were provided with a range of age-appropriate play and recreation experiences, and safe, friendly and engaging streets and squares. A number of specialist play areas were included for young children, and for older children play spaces where they could skateboard or rollerblade without coming into contact with other space users.

Today the ongoing regeneration project has won a range of awards and has high environmental sustainability ratings. The 67-acre development

includes housing, shops, workplaces, and other buildings; 20 new streets, 10 new public parks and squares; and 26 acres of open space. Public spaces for children include small pocket parks and play areas nestled in between housing and shops equipped with swings, slides, sand, and water play features in Granary Square. This is a large square with 1058 synchronized water jets offering endless delight and surprise for young and old, plenty of seating and activities for caregivers, family-friendly amenities such as toilets and wash areas, walking access to existing natural reserves, a rejuvenated canal with walkways and cascading steps to observe nature and wildlife, and a large green open space perfect for flying kites and enjoying family picnics.

Recent additions include a 25-metre walking bridge that connects prime public spaces in the development, a new library with a children's and youth zone equipped with free Wi-Fi, a café, computers, and tablets and enlivened with regular activities, classes, and learning sessions. In 2021 the Granary Square was fully pedestrianized, increasing the size of the square by 25%.

City example 38. **Public-private development of Darling Harbour Children's Playground** (Sydney, Australia)

The Darling Harbour Children's Playground and its adjacent water play area in **Sydney** are considered the city's largest inner-city playground, serving the wider community's needs while providing play and recreation opportunities for children and adolescents.

The playground provides a barrier-free, safe, intergenerational space for play and socialization, designed to help children interact with nature and natural systems and take measured levels of risks through challenging play equipment and a range of physical play opportunities. It has 11 age-appropriate play areas, improved lighting, natural elements like water, mulch, sand, and porous

boundaries, sensory surfaces, indigenous varieties of trees, and open and shaded seating spaces, cafés and toilets.

The playground is the result of social responsibility driven public-private initiative. To make the mixed-use development more attractive to families and become a major draw for the development, the playground was designed to be one of the largest illuminated playgrounds in Australia and has become a regional attraction. It enables children to use the play spaces after dark and the whole family to have an evening leisure destination. With rainwater harvesting structures, energy-efficient lighting, and recycled

concrete used for drainage, the playground promotes sustainable design solutions.

While the playground offers a quality space for families, its popularity can result in overcrowding, long waits, and safety concerns as children become restless. The playground surfaces need frequent upkeep, and

costly imported equipment suffers significant wear and tear. Although retail sales benefit from increased visitors, only the lessee profits, while government agency Place Management New South Wales meets rising maintenance costs without variable revenue. A revenue-sharing rental model could offset these costs, but developers prefer fixed rents.

Darling Harbour, Sydney. Photo credit: Place Management NSW

City example 39. **Partnership-based development of Flyover Park** (Calgary, Canada)

In **Calgary**, **Canada**, nearly all residents live within a 5-minute walk of green space. One such space is the city's once-neglected 4th Avenue Flyover underpass in Bridgeland-Riverside, transformed into Flyover Park after volunteers launched a pop-up park, highlighting the area's community potential. Previously considered unsafe and prone to antisocial behaviour, the site now serves as a vibrant hub for events, education, and recreation.

The project began with volunteer efforts and grew into a collaborative initiative involving the Bridgeland-Riverside Community Association, Riverside School, University of Calgary, and Parks Foundation Calgary. Students actively participated in design and planning, learning about public space creation and community impact. Funding for the project came from various government levels and private grants, while numerous stakeholders contributed their expertise

and support. Parks Foundation managed the project, adhering to city procedures.

Flyover Park now stands out among Calgary's parks, offering a variety of amenities for all ages and serving as a welcoming space. The park accommodates children of all ages and features a wide range of amenities from slides to climbing structures and play elements for younger children, to ping pong tables and flexible spaces for teens. A flex space was designed with the intention of the nearby school using it for outdoor education and nature-focused learning. The park is adjacent to an immigrant settlement centre and serves as a positive, first park experience for many immigrant children arriving in Canada. Its success has inspired new perspectives on revitalizing underused urban areas, with reported declines in antisocial behaviour and improved community safety and inclusion since its opening.

Flyover Park, Calgary. Photo credit: City of Calgary

City example 40. **Civil society-led school zone to make streets safer** (Mumbai, India)

World Resources Institute India (WRI), as part of the Bloomberg Initiative for Global Road Safety, partnered with **Mumbai** authorities and Christ Church School to pilot a safer school zone project in Byculla, Mumbai. In 2019, a mobility study identified 73 schools in the area, leading to the selection of the Christ Church School precinct for targeted interventions. The school zone was designed through extensive mapping and surveys, revealing that although many children lived nearby, safety concerns deterred walking and cycling.

Students contributed ideas for a more engaging and secure journey. Key actions included defining a 200 m school zone, clearly marking traffic lanes, installing clear signage, painting vibrant pedestrian crossings and bulb-outs, implementing speed-

calming measures and enhancing sidewalks. Surveys showed motorist compliance at colourful crossings improved significantly, and most users felt safer and found the street more accessible. The project gained media attention, political support, and has inspired similar initiatives.

The pilot helped demonstrate how small changes in street design around schools can make streets safer for children and led the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai to permanently transform them into a child-friendly school zone. The success helped the state of Maharashtra think about scaling up and introducing safer school zones in cities across the state.

Please see methodology, .

City example 41. **Partnership-based child-friendly city initiative** (Colorado, USA)

Growing Up Boulder (GUB) began in 2009 as a child-friendly city initiative through the University's Center for Environmental Design and Research (CEDaR) before becoming an independent NGO. Formed via a partnership between the University of Colorado, City of Boulder, and Boulder Valley School District, GUB aims to empower young people in local decision-making,

foster inclusivity for children and marginalized groups, and share findings with wider communities.

Since its founding, GUB has involved over 7000 young people across more than 100 projects with more than 60 partners including city departments, schools, university students, non-profits, and community

groups to produce innovative solutions to benefit children. This has resulted in children helping to shape city planning documents and suggesting improvements such as compact neighbourhoods, better accessibility, park shade structures, habitat-protecting boardwalks, and bus signage.

A child-friendly city map, underpinned by values such as diversity and inclusion, health and sustainability, and collaboration and celebration, was created with inputs from over 700 children and caregivers from diverse backgrounds – 30 000 copies of these maps were distributed to local children and the community through schools, non-profits, and public kiosks. Public spaces were renovated to be more inclusive, safe and engaging. GUB's sustained work has fostered a culture of child participation in city projects, and university students are carrying these methods nationwide. GUB's work is shared through publications, media, and educational events.

Children and families enjoying public spaces in the renovated Boulder Creek area. Photo credit: Mara Mintzer

Planned and informal contexts

City example 42. **Government-led urban food programmes, urban farming and community gardens** (Thailand)

Rapid urbanization, climate change and market-driven food production have increased challenges around food and nutrition security and food safety for children worldwide, and "food deserts" are especially common in urban areas. In response, numerous cities have unlocked the potential for urban farming and community gardens through various grants, policies, as well as zoning regulations. Research shows that promoting children's participation in community gardens and other gardening programmes can have a significant positive impact on their nutritional intake and support the development of healthy eating habits. In **Thailand**, community gardens in informal settlements across cities called the Green and Healthy Community Program, supported by the Thai Health Promotion Board, support children in urban poor communities to actively participate in planning, creating, and maintaining green spaces for planting food alongside adult mentors and participants. City farms in informal settlements supported by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation have grown from 50 in 2010 (when the programme was initiated) to 267 in 2019.

City example 43. **City-government promoted tactical urbanism to innovate play spaces** (Mexico City, Mexico)

Tactical urbanism includes citizen movements repairing and revitalizing neighbourhood parks and squares for children's play; and city departments working with schools, colleges, built-environment experts and NGOs to reimagine derelict infrastructural spaces. It involves transforming unused or disused spaces into usable and people-friendly places using low-cost, simple, flexible, and participatory approaches, and can be initiated by a range of actors such as NGOs, citizens, and local governments. In **Mexico City**, an experimental and creative department set up within the city government – called the *Laboratorio para la Ciudad*

– which reported directly to the mayor – triggered tactical urbanism-led public spaces for children in key locations. The interventions reactivated underused public spaces such as squares, parks and vacant lots in areas with high child population density and deprivation, with children participating in these design efforts. These interventions ran for a limited time only and could not be scaled up due to political transition in the city government – which highlights the challenges of implementing initiatives for public space for children that have not been formally passed by city councils.

Play area, Mexico City. Photo credit: Onnis Luque

City example 44. **Civil society-led partnership to revitalize degraded green-blue spaces** (India)

In **Wazirabad Bund**, **Gurugram**, **India**, the 5.2 km-long Chakkarpur-Wazirabad Bund channel had become derelict and prone to illegal sewage dumping. In 2016, a CSO called "I am Gurgaon" – comprising concerned citizens of Gurugram – joined hands with the Haryana Forest Department, a state government body, private design firms, and private capital to ecologically restore the Chakkarpur-Wazirabad Bund.

The project has created an inclusive, linear, green corridor for walking, cycling, playing, leisure, and educational activities and also provides a safe corridor for commuting to work by cutting across the city on foot or cycle.

Informal contexts

City example 45. **Participatory upgrading linked to government initiatives** (India)

Participatory slum upgrading is a common entry point for governments, NGOs, and grassroots organizations seeking to improve the quality of life in informal settlements and to lay the essential groundwork for creating sustainable, safe, and secure public spaces for children. Some slum upgrading policies and programmes have paid specific attention to the protection, preservation, and development of communal spaces. In **Odisha**, **India**, the state (and not national or local government) controls the planning and development of urban land. A new regional land rights act, which granted secure tenure to all slum dwellers in the state, was leveraged by JAGA Mission,

the state government's slum upgrading programme. JAGA Mission set up local institutional structures to coordinate with other national and regional-level sectoral missions to address basic services as well as to explicitly focus on mapping, protecting and developing common spaces in the community. This three-pronged approach which secured basic rights and addressed core needs of urban-poor residents also enabled a focus on upgrading streets, lanes, open spaces, and common facilities such as early childhood and community centres at scale.

Please see methodology, .

Child play area created through JAGA Mission in Bhubaneswar. Photo credit: JAGA Mission

City example 46. **City-led, integrated urban planning for health and well-being** (Colombia)

Urban planning that integrates land use and transport and leverages landscape and urban design to create public spaces can enhance child health and well-being. It can do this by promoting high-quality, well-located, well-connected and accessible public open spaces for children's formal and informal play and recreation, and promoting safe mobility for children and adults by encouraging walking and cycling and sustainable

transport. In **Medellin**, **Colombia**, a new strategic planning model for integrated urban development in five areas of the city with high levels of social exclusion, poverty and violence has supported the creation of numerous city-, neighbourhood- and housing-level public spaces for children. Called *Proyecto Urbano Integral* (PUI) and aligned with the innovative Metro Cable project that used aerial cable

cars as mass transit to integrate inaccessible hillside communities, PUI helped to improve physical and social infrastructure in marginalized neighbourhoods near to cable car stations. This resulted in new parks, plazas, and public facilities such as a sports centre, community centre, library, medical centre, and pedestrian lanes and bridges, in addition to new housing and improvements in existing housing. Spaces near the escalators were further improved by enchanting them as play spaces for children.

City example 47. Partnership-led participatory upgrading of a community playground (Kampala, Uganda)

Children in **Kampala**'s slums, especially Makindye, which contains numerous informal settlements with poor sanitation and frequent flooding, face significant poverty, lack of safe play spaces, and are exposed to anti-social behaviours. Public open spaces are under threat, leaving children to play in unsafe areas. To address this, UN-Habitat, HealthBridge, Advocate of Public Spaces (APS), and Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) collaborated to upgrade the Lukuli Community Playground, aiming to improve access to communal spaces. Surveys by HealthBridge and APS found most public playgrounds in Makindye were low quality and hard to reach, unlike private or paid-for facilities elsewhere. To build trust and ownership, the project used participatory planning involving diverse stakeholders, local materials and labour, and advocated to protect informal community spaces.

Upgrades included land levelling, flood mitigation, natural play features, gender-sensitive toilets (incomplete at the time of writing), a parents' corner, and tree planting. The formerly male-dominated field is now multi-purpose and more inclusive. Community members actively maintain the playground, which hosts girls' netball teams, school events, and municipal activities, and future plans include a book corner and a medical centre. The Lukuli project illustrates the value of collaboration by governments, CSOs, communities, and international partners in developing urban play spaces for children.

City example 48. Community and civil society-led building of youth-focused facilities (San Jose, Costa Rica)

La Carpio, a neighbourhood in **San Jose**, **Costa Rica**, is home to many Nicaraguans who fled hardship in their country. Home to around 51 000 residents, the area faces poverty, violence, and limited access to basic services. In response, an NGO called Integrated System of Art Education for Social Inclusion (SIFAIS) set out to foster social inclusion and transformation by engaging children and youth through arts, athletics, and education programmes. The foundation began with a youth orchestra and has expanded to offer skills training, legal support, and microenterprise opportunities.

SIFAIS later collaborated with Entre Nos Atelier to build the Cave of Light, a four-floor community arts centre featuring flexible spaces for various activities. The result is a four-level structure of around 10 000 square feet area where levels are connected by ramps and transitional spaces. The ground floor has public recreational areas, an amphitheatre, exhibition hall and administrative facilities and the upper three floors contain open-plan multifunctional spaces. The structure itself was designed to be low-cost and constructed with community members using modular wooden frames.

SIFIAS is seen to promote personal growth and social integration within the community, keep children safer and more engaged, and support income generation. The foundation has more than 350 collaborators, including the Ministry of Public Education and the Ministry of Justice. It hosts

more than 130 workshops engaging 150 volunteer tutors and has over 900 community members (most of whom are children and youth) as regular attendees. Since the foundation started its work in the community, SIFAS has seen incremental positive changes such as more cooperation between community members, increased self-respect amongst residents as well as renovation of homes.

Crisis and resilience-building contexts

City example 49. Civil society and community-led pop-up play in crisis situations (Hanoi, Viet Nam)

More attention is called for within humanitarian action and post-disaster reconstruction work to support children's play after disasters by different organizations. This can include distributing component parts for pop-up play spaces through mobile play applications, supporting adventure playgrounds and pop-up play schemes, incorporating play opportunities in temporary shelters, and ensuring children's play spaces and schools are not disrupted in disaster-risk reduction efforts by being redesignated as evacuation centres. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of its Global Public Space Programme, UN-Habitat worked with local partners, municipal governments, and local communities to facilitate mobile and pop-up playgrounds in some low-income neighbourhoods in **Hanoi**, **Viet Nam**. As part of this initiative, 10 pop-up play sessions were enabled in five low-income neighbourhoods where children lived in cramped housing and had few opportunities for safe play. In the play sessions together with playworkers, children used ropes, beams, and tyres to make traditional play equipment like see-saws and climbing frames. They also played creatively with wooden blocks and foam tubes, making houses and other structures. Ropes were used to play tug-of-war and make zip-lines which children enjoyed.

Pop-up play in low-income communities in Hanoi during COVID-19. Photo credit: HealthBridge

City example 50. Community-led, child-sensitive urban planning and design for equity and inclusion (Beirut, Lebanon)

Community architects can use local and global networks to support public space planning and development in cities and informal settlements that have no municipal-level capacities to do this work. For example, in **Beirut**, **Lebanon**, in 2020, the port blast that occurred just 600 m from the Karantina neighbourhood resulted in significant damage to houses, streets, as well as the only public park. Catalytic Action (CA), a UK-based charity with extensive experience in co-creating play spaces with children and communities in situations of crisis across Lebanon, had previously renovated the park. In December 2021, CA returned to the Karantina neighbourhood to embark on a neighbourhood

spatial intervention to support the rehabilitation efforts after the blast. The outcome was the creation of "Makani" – My Place/Street that claimed a liminal space owned by the city and officially registered as a sidewalk, for developing a vibrant public space for children. This site was chosen by children and community members as it was close to where many children lived. Participatory design workshops with local community groups, including children, revealed the community wanted a place that nurtured children's play, offered a safe shaded place for resting, and provided an aesthetically pleasing space in the neighbourhood.

Redesign of a derelict sidewalk as 'Makani' – My Place/Street in Beirut, Lebanon. Photo credit: Catalytic Action

City example 51. **National, regional and city disaster preparedness plans, policies, and strategies** (Indonesia)

In cities prone to natural disasters such as floods, public spaces play an important role in mitigation and adaptation strategies for building climate-resilient cities. In **Jakarta**, **Indonesia** – a flood-prone megacity with 13 rivers flowing through it – urbanization has eroded green spaces and reduced the capacity for stormwater drainage. Between 2017

and 2022, Jakarta's governor introduced the *Taman Maju Bersama* (Together Forward Parks) concept to collaboratively create green public spaces with communities and develop parks that will serve as sponges through nature-based solutions and make Jakarta a climate-resilient city.

Aerial view of Tebet Eco Garden, south Jakarta. Photo credit: ANTARA FOTO/Galih Pradipta/aa

City example 52. **Plans and interventions to mitigate and adapt to climate change** (Kingdom of the Netherlands and France)

Plans and interventions to mitigate and adapt to climate-related risks include re-zoning sites as climate-resilient, mixed-use developments with integrated public spaces to support climate-resilience as well as children's outdoor play, learning and socialization; city resilience plans that enable the greening of schoolyards; and city-wide and municipal interventions such as container squares that integrate public spaces for children with flood-resilience-building. For example, the Waterplaza in inner-city **Benthemplein**, **Rotterdam**, successfully combines the city's need for flood-resilient infrastructure with the need for quality public spaces for young people. It transformed stormwater drainage from being hidden in underground pipes and tanks to a being part of a visible, vibrant public space that is explicit about its

utilitarian function but also rich in play and leisure opportunities for young people and the public.

And in **Paris**, municipal departments of environment, technical works, education, and health have been involved in Paris's "greening schoolyards" initiative, as Paris is prone to overheating and flooding and ranks poorly in access to green space. There are 760 schoolyards in Paris with over 73 hectares of asphalted surface and every Parisian is within a 200 m distance of a schoolyard. The Openness, Adaptation, Sensitisation, Innovation and Social ties (OASIS) initiative started by the city of Paris aims to green all schoolyards and open them up to communities to address climate change impacts, improve educational experiences, and build social cohesion.

Water Plaza, Benthemplein, Rotterdam. Photo credit: Urbanisten.nl

City example 53. Civil society-led initiative to build inclusive Kaniashkan adventure playground (Halabja, Iraq)

Halabja, a Kurdish town in northern **Iraq**, has faced decades of hardship including chemical attacks, war, poverty, and limited infrastructure. The 1988 Halabja chemical attack killed thousands and caused long-term health implications such as an increased rates of cancer and birth defects. In 2009, spurred by the lack of safe play spaces for children, human rights photographer Thomas Carrigan helped launch the Halabja Community Play Project (HCPP) to create a public playground, aiming to support children's well-being through play.

HCPP worked with children, town officials, and the Shepherd's Gift Foundation to design a unique play space using land, trees and materials donated by the town's mayor. In 2016, the finished site, named Halabja Kaniashkan Adventure Playground, was handed to the local community to manage.

The playground provides a creative outlet in a region where war has left few facilities for children. It features swings, earth mounds, climbing areas, and family seating constructed from local materials. Unlike standardized playgrounds, this project empowered the community and increased access to play, with positive changes observed in children's behaviour as they work through trauma. HCPP received an international award in 2014 for supporting children's right to play during crises.

Limited municipal resources mean the playground relies on ongoing voluntary support and fundraising. Without sustained external support or a long-term sustainability plan, the playground now serves as a general play area rather than a true adventure playground. The case highlights the need for major humanitarian organizations to support sustainable play initiatives for children in crisis zones.

City example 54. **Civil society-led creation of safe spaces for children in crises** (Bosnia and Herzegovina, South Sudan, Jordan)

Child-friendly Spaces (CFS) are a key approach to ensuring children's and caregivers' immediate safety and well-being during disasters and emergencies. CFS provide safe environments where trained staff help children regain routine through structured play, learning, and social activities. Many also offer basic health, nutrition, emotional, and psychological support. Typically set up in temporary or available community spaces, CFS are run by organizations including government and UN agencies, and NGOs.

In 2014, nearly 60% of children in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** were impacted by severe floods that damaged vital infrastructure. In response, organizations like World Vision, UNICEF, Save the Children, and local partners set up 18 CFS in safe areas, serving about 3800 vulnerable children with psychosocial support and engaging activities. Established in schools and community buildings, these spaces provided workshops in drama, music, and art, while caregivers rebuilt their lives. Trained coordinators and volunteers ran the CFS, which became valued community assets and promoted children's rights and social inclusion; some continue to serve children after school.

And In 2013, when internal conflict displaced hundreds of thousands in **South Sudan**, the International Federation of Red Cross created three CFS in Bor, Malakal, and Juba, offering psychosocial support and protection. An assessment by the Red Cross at these sites showed children were experiencing sadness, fear, hopelessness, and a sense of loss, were at risk of physical and sexual violence, and had limited activities for play and recreation. Volunteers offered sports, arts, storytelling, and theatre to address these needs. By 2015, over 9000 children accessed CFS, using them to process trauma, advocate for their needs, and raise awareness about violence and abuse.

And in **Za'atari Camp**, **Jordan**, which is home to the largest number of Syrian refugees, UNICEF and Mercycorps established four playgrounds to provide inclusive play spaces for children. These are located close to CFS or other community facilities and are sheltered structures fully supervised by staff, equipped with play equipment such as seesaws, slides, sandpits and beanbags.

Inclusive playground in Za'atari Refugee Camp, Jordan. Photo credit: UNICEF