

SOUTH AFRICA

PROMOTING CHILD ACTION

Children are indispensable partners in the creation of sustainable settlements. The Growing Up in Cities initiative provides ways of engaging their experience, vision and energies in improving urban environments.

Growing Up in Cities was initiated in eight countries in 1996 to implement the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Agenda 21 and the Habitat Agenda, and to emphasise that children have a right to a voice in decisions that affect their lives and their environment. First pioneered by UNESCO under the direction of the urban planner Kevin Lynch in the 1970s, Growing Up in Cities consisted of methods to engage young people to document their own perspectives on the places where they live, their concerns related to the urban environment, and their proposals for change. Young people then worked with project facilitators, municipal officials and other child and youth advocates, creating better communities in which to grow up. Today the project is spreading to a growing number of countries under the direction of the MOST (Management of Social Transformations) Programme of UNESCO, in cooperation with many other international, national and local organisations.

Growing Up in Cities is based on the principle that this phase of 'learning before doing' is a critical precondition for effective policy-making. This period of participatory research gives children themselves and other community members the time to develop relationships of trust. It also assists policy-makers in understanding communities' own goals and priorities. Invariably, the project reveals people's resourcefulness and commitment to self-development, which forms a foundation to build upon partnerships of community residents, urban government and other organisations.

One of the project's most dynamic locations is in Johannesburg, South Africa. Because one of the programme's goals is to gather useful information in formulating 'child friendly' policies for urban areas of special concern, the project in Johannesburg was first introduced in a squatter area on the edge of the city's central business district. Many South Africans live in shack settlements of this kind, and for families fleeing rural poverty or life on urban pavements, this self-made housing is often a first step to greater

stability. Therefore, a commitment was made to work with the children in this settlement as a way of introducing improvements for the community as a whole and as an insight into squatter families' lives that assist decision-making.

In the first phase of the project, 23 children from the ages of 10 to 14 took part in various participatory research activities. They drew their homes and areas where they lived and talked about their drawings and their lives in individual interviews. They also created time charts of their typical daily schedule and led the project facilitators on walks to show important features in their environment. They compared where they lived now with the places they had come from. They envisioned the characteristics of the 'best place to live' for children and families and then drew desired improvements on a large map of their settlement. These activities were undertaken during a series of Saturday workshops. At the same time, members of the project team prepared a map of the community to scale and carried out observations, with special attention to children's activities and interactions. From the beginning, the project was carefully explained to adult residents, some of whom became increasingly interested and involved.

At the culmination of the children's evaluation period, they presented their findings at a workshop hosted by the Mayor of Greater Johannesburg. Government officials and members of donor agencies with the power to help children to change the quality of their lives were present. Action plans were formulated with goals that the community could accomplish, including goals that required government action and goals that required external resources. Before improvements could be implemented the community was relocated to Thula Mntwana, a holding area for homeless people, 44 kilometres from the city centre, to enable low-cost housing to be built on the site that they had occupied illegally.

Various donors provided improvements requested by the children. For example, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund set up a short-term nutrition scheme and a recreation centre, financed by the Norwegian Children's Broadcasting Corporation and the Netherlands Embassy. Recently, Growing up in Cities made a documentary video of the lives of the children, entitled Hear Our Story: Children of Thula Mntwana, for international distribution. In the spirit of Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of

the Child they have planned and related their story in their own way.

Subsequent to these initiatives, the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council commissioned participatory evaluations by children from four varied socio-cultural urban environments through the office of the Child Friendly Cities Initiative. The evaluations will underpin child-focussed planning initiatives within the Municipal Plan of Action.

During the workshops that took place in the neighbourhood of the Canaansland squatter camp, the children drew some of their favourite places and the important feature of the neighbourhood. Some of their verbal comments have been recorded:

“These are two of our favourite places to be with friends but we are not allowed in because we do not belong there. We go when the other people are gone.”

“This shop sells very nice food and everything we need. It is also cheap. The toilets are at the railway station. We all use them because there are no toilets in the squatter camp.”

“I would like to live here in the flat on the top floor. It is beautiful and you can see far. It is close to the football field where I play soccer with my friends, also the netball field where my sister plays. We could go there from the flats. It would not be so far to walk as it is from the squatter camp.”

“This is my mother's house. I am fetching water from the tap so that we can wash the clothes. My Mother likes us to watch TV because she says that it will improve our English but most of the time we can't watch because the battery is dead.”

“This road is dangerous because it is always full of cars. It is very difficult to get across this road. We have to cross it when we walk to school and if we want to go to the toilets or to the shops at the Oriental Plaza. We have to watch that the small children do not go onto the

street because there are no fences around Canaansland.”

“Our shacks are very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter and they are wet inside when it rains. We like to sit under this tree to talk.”

“I like to go to the park to swing after school with my friends.”

“We are not supposed to go to the swimming pool. Our parents say that it is dangerous. Some children have almost drowned there. It is free. You don't have to pay to get in. We don't tell our parents when we go there.”

“This is the school for street children where we go in Mayfair. You don't have to pay school fees there and you don't wear the school uniform and they give you lunch. I walk there with my friends from Canaansland. It is important to have an education otherwise you will not get a good job and you must know how to read and write.”

“This is my house (shack) in Canaansland. I am fetching water to wash the dishes. Sometimes I even wash dishes here by the tap but there is only one tap for all of us. You have to come in the middle of the day when there are not too many people here.”

“These two shacks are empty. We play house-house here. They are owned by nobody. The chairman will sell them if people want to come and stay here in Canaansland.”

“This is the park where we play. I like to spend time here with my friends after school. Our parents don't like us to play here because they do not know where we are but they think we are still at school.”



Louise Chawla
International Coordinator
Growing Up in Cities
Chawla393@aol.com

Jill Swart-Kruger Frai
Director
Growing up in Cities
South Africa
PO Box 314
2006 AUCKLAND PARK
South Africa

tel/fax: +27 11 837 5089
jmkrug@global.co.za

for further information:
www.unesco.org/most
www2.deakin.edu.au/guic
www.iied.org