

# Growing up in cities: a report on research under way

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper describes the research under way in many cities to help understand how well urban communities function for adolescents from low-income families and how best to work with them in planning and implementing improvements.*

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## I. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

**THE UNITED NATIONS'** decade of global conferences in the 1990s can be seen as an attempt to consolidate agreement and move forward with an agenda that first took form in the 1970s, namely a recognition of the interdependence of the earth's nations, and of the corresponding need for international collaboration to resolve environmental problems, to strengthen the economies and the social welfare of the Third World and to promote popular democracy. In 1970, in the context of these goals, the urban planner Kevin Lynch initiated a UNESCO project to understand low-income adolescents' use and perception of their urban environments as a basis for enlisting their ideas and energies in creating more livable cities; a project to extend participatory processes to the young, with a focus on urban communities. Entitled Growing Up in Cities, the project has acquired new relevance in the 1990s and a new version therefore is currently underway.

According to Agenda 21 from the UN Conference on Environment and Development (also called Earth Summit) in 1992 and the Habitat Agenda coming out of the second UN Conference on Human Settlements in 1996 (also called the City Summit), children and youth are a major group who should be involved in participatory programmes to improve their environment, including the urban environment. For all nations which have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, these recommendations are legally binding because the convention specifies that children have a right to seek and impart information and to express their views on all matters that concern them, and the quality of the place where they live undeniably affects their lives.

## II. THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

**IN 1994, THE** Norwegian Centre for Child Research reinitiated

Growing Up in Cities and the project has been connected to the MOST Programme of UNESCO (Management of Social Transformations and the Environment). The current version of the project has returned to sites in Melbourne, Warsaw and Salta (Argentina) which had been in the original research in order to chart how city changes have affected children's lives, and it has added new locations in Buenos Aires, Bangalore, Johannesburg, Northampton (England), Trondheim (Norway) and Oakland (California). A series of workshops is currently being organized by the Averroes Foundation of Amsterdam to spread the project model to a widening circle of cities.

The project pursues a series of questions relating to urban children's well-being:

- How do young people use their local environment?
- How is their use of the environment integrated into the daily routines of their lives?
- How do they feel about the places and community life around them?
- Which places do they particularly value? Particularly avoid?
- What changes do they observe in their community?
- What changes do they anticipate?
- What are their own ideas for improving their environment?

The question of how children perceive urban space, which was important in the 1970s, has been superseded now by more practical interests. As well as understanding how young people use and evaluate the places where they live, and their ideas for improvements, the project is committed to taking the next step of engaging young people in actually realizing some of their ideas and in making this action-research process an on-going opportunity. Therefore, two additional critical questions are: what strategies most effectively enlist municipal and public support for children's ideas? And, how can children's participation in caring for the urban environment be integrated into on-going community functions?

The present project, like the last, is most effectively led by interdisciplinary teams who combine experience in social research with city planning or design. The project currently involves architects, planners, geographers, psychologists, anthropologists, educators, community organizers and social workers.

### III. FROM EVALUATION TO ACTION

**THE GROWING UP** in Cities project attempts to understand how well urban communities function for low-income adolescents, as a basis for planning and implementing improvements with the young people themselves. To this end, it has three phases: networking, research and action.

**Networking.** During the first phase, project leaders in each city identify a network of "child-friendly" municipal officials,

social service workers, educators, architects, non-government organization staff, grassroots activists, media people and anyone else who is willing to serve as an advocate for children's interests. During this process, communities where action-research projects with children are most likely to succeed are identified and a base of support is built up to ensure that, when children are engaged in evaluating their communities and envisioning improvements, at least some of their ideas will be realized.

**Research.** Once project leaders have chosen one or two communities in which to focus their efforts, they initiate the research phase to understand how these places currently function for the young people who live there. To do so, it is necessary to understand what currently exists in the community in terms of resources and risks, and how young people perceive these. Thus, this phase involves collecting maps, aerial photos and demographic data about each community; observations of community life and young people's activities in public places; and diverse techniques for understanding what young people know and feel about their environment. These techniques include having children draw and talk about the area where they live, small group discussions, child-led tours, child-taken photographs and commentary, and interviews with children who reflect their community's diversity in terms of age, gender, culture and ethnic background. It also includes interviews with parents to understand how children's use of the environment is negotiated within the family, and interviews with community leaders and city officials to understand their perception of children's needs and how their policies affect children's lives. In the past and present versions of the project, each site has agreed to maintain a common core of consistent methods and questions in order to allow comparisons but, around this core, they have been encouraged to improvise and share variations.

There is a tendency among development agencies and government offices to dismiss research as a costly diversion from the real work of providing basic services. *Growing Up in Cities* is based on the principle that this research phase is a necessary foundation that makes possible the third phase of children's participation in planning and improving their urban environments. Without a research based understanding of how a community works and how children and their parents perceive it, people who make decisions affecting children's lives are doomed to attitudes similar to those that existed in government offices in the 1970s and that still prevail today, namely that municipal and development authorities already know best what children need and therefore they have no need to listen to them.

**Children's participation in community action.** In the 1970s, the original version of *Growing Up in Cities* foundered under the dominant attitude among authorities that children's views were irrelevant. The project, therefore, never became the flexible basis for implementation that was intended. Kevin Lynch salvaged what had been done by collecting the research reports and synthesizing recommendations for child-sensitive urban planning in the book that carries the project's name.<sup>(1)</sup>

1. Lynch, Kevin (1977), *Growing Up in Cities*, MIT Press, Cambridge, USA.

Today, the new rhetoric of children's participation is fostering the third phase of the project which involves project members in the implementation of ideas for improving their local environments. Although project leaders are still busy synthesizing research results, some sites are already developing this phase. Young people in Buenos Aires, for example, are planning their own radio station from which they will broadcast on-going investigations into community issues. In a high-fear neighbourhood of Oakland, California, the children have created a model for improving the apartment courtyard where they play and which they will help to construct. In Melbourne, they are planning to re-open a community centre and will help plan a new public open space. In Johannesburg, the children in an inner-city squatter camp have already shared their research results and priorities with the mayor and leading planning officials, and hope to collaborate on a comprehensive community plan for the new site where they will be resettled.

#### IV. DYNAMICS OF ON-GOING CHANGE

**IF CITY GOVERNMENTS** and organizations that work with children are going to transform the rhetoric of participation into action, they need to invest in the training and facilitation that make participatory processes possible. In the current version of the project, work has been made possible by various national and international donor agencies, by contributions from volunteers, activist professors and students, and by its integration into existing jobs. In Buenos Aires, for example, the local office of social work decided to use these methods as an on-going way of empowering the community. The city of Johannesburg plans to redesign a staff position to incorporate facilitation. New school based versions of the project are being developed, including a programme to train secondary school students to carry out project activities with younger students.

The UNESCO MOST Programme has funded the international coordination and development of Growing Up in Cities until the end of 1999. The interdisciplinary, international sharing that has characterized the current version of the project has proved so successful that one of the major goals of the next two years is to start new international and regional networks through workshops to train new city teams. The first series of workshops is currently being organized by the Averroes Foundation of Amsterdam. A UNESCO manual, which will review Growing Up in Cities processes and methods in the format of a flexible "tool kit" that communities can adapt to local needs, is due for release during the first workshop. There are further plans underway for an academic book, a youth book and an urban environmental education curriculum based on the project.

For further information about the workshops, contact: Joyce Cordus, Averroes Foundation, Linnaeushof 6, 1098 KH Amsterdam, The Netherlands (tel: 31 20 5929 639; fax: 31 20 5929 677; e-mail: averroes@euronet.nl; internet: <http://www.euronet.nl/~averroes/>).

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