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Practice note on including children in spatial planning and design development processes

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PRACTICE NOTE ON

INCLUDING CHILDREN IN SPATIAL PLANNING

AND DESIGN DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES



There is much work required in Africa to bring the child's voice into civic processes, and many contextual considerations to take account of, especially in relation to the poverty, vulnerability, and environmental deprivation of many children on the continent. There are some indications, however, of a growing awareness in places of the value of engaging children. By 2022, Child Friendly Cities Initiative programmes have been launched in Mozambique, Senegal, and Guinea, with involvement of UNICEF, national municipal networks, local universities, and civil society, with programmes in the process of setting up in Nigeria and Malawi. The Nairobi headquartered UN-Habitat has also supported child-responsive planning on the continent including through the Future Cities Challenge which encourages children to creatively re-imagine the cities they live in. In Southern Africa, Save the Children has undertaken a broad assessment of children's participation across the region.

South Africa has a National Plan of Action for Children in South Africa which was coordinated by the Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, and approved by Cabinet in 2013. It is an important document indicating South Africa's acceptance of international treaties including the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child but does not address in detail the question of children's participation in public policy and planning.

However, the National Planning Commission, which prepared a National Development Plan (or NDP) in 2012, has launched an initiative called the Children's NDP. This is an innovative initiative aimed at affirming children's citizenship and agency. With its play-based experiential and learning method it has taken children through an engaging process of needs analysis and plan making, addressing the lived realities of children in South Africa.

The case for children's participation relates to all forms of future-oriented policy making and planning. This Practice Note however deals specifically with the children's participation in spatial planning and design development processes that help shape the future form of our towns and cities and is targeted at government officials and private sector professionals in the built environment sector. The Note provides a bit of theory, an introduction to some precedent on engaging children, and some guidance on the process and content of child-friendly planning and design.





PRACTICE NOTE ON INCLUDING CHILDREN IN
SPATIAL PLANNING AND DESIGN DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

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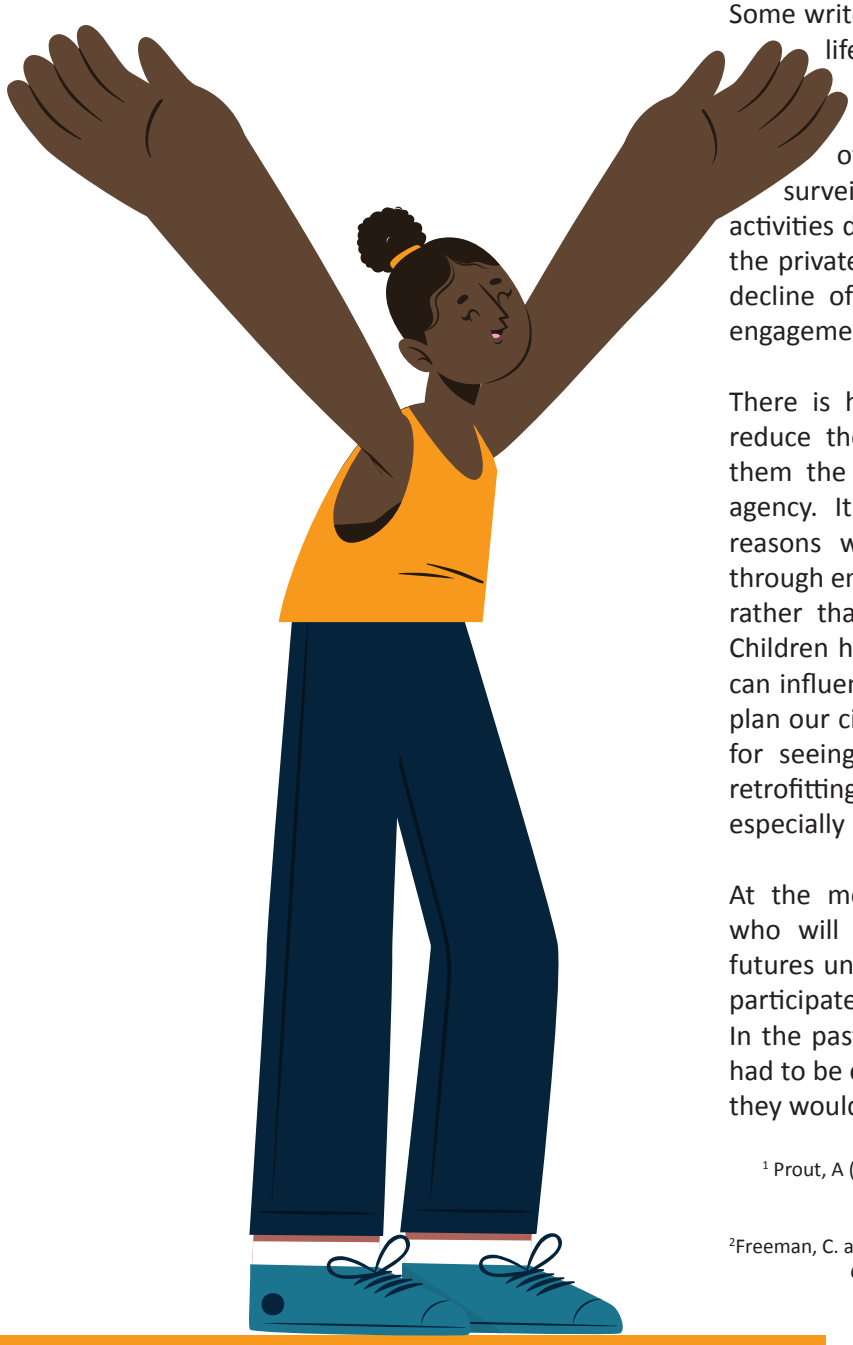
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THE CASE FOR ENGAGING CHILDREN IN PLANNING AND DESIGN

Article 12 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) affirms the right of children to participate in public life. Most countries have ratified the Convention but decades later children's participation remains 'local, scattered, ad hoc, fragile… seemingly invisible on the landscape'[1]. With notable exceptions, children are still not seen as citizens. Their voices and perspectives are still not taken seriously in policymaking, planning, and design processes.



The South African Constitution specifically provides for certain special rights for children, over and above the other rights available to people in South Africa. One of the most important rights for children in the Constitution, is the right to have their best interests taken into account in every matter that concerns that child. The Children's Act was written after the government accepted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Act also says that children are allowed to have their say and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Some writers suggest that the role of children in civic life may in fact be lessening as they become more insulated within home and school. Studies suggest that with increasing anxiety over safety, there is greater regulation and surveillance over the lives of children, with their activities directed away from the neighbourhood into the private sphere. Freemen and Tranter refer to the decline of childhood 'as a time of freedom, social engagement and environmental adventure'[2].

There is however precedent to show that we can reduce the vulnerability of children while allowing them the space for civic engagement and creative agency. It is not either-or. There are many good reasons why children should be 'future shapers', through engagement with policy, planning and design, rather than 'passive recipients' of what adults do. Children have the ability to be naturally creative and can influence the policy and design realm of how we plan our cities and towns. They have greater capacity for seeing things through unbiased eyes. Without retrofitting what could be they see rather what is, especially in terms of society's injustices.

At the most fundamental level, it is our children who will be most affected by the way in which futures unfold, and so they have a legitimate right to participate in processes that may shape these futures. In the past children were seen as citizens-to-be who had to be educated into the rights and responsibilities they would take up as adults.

[1] Prout, A (2000) Children's participation: control and self-realisation in British late modernity, *Children and Society*, 14(4), p. 6.

[2]Freeman, C. and Tranter, P. (2011) *Children and Their Urban Environment: Changing Worlds*, London and Washington: Earthscan, p. 17.

However, as the harmful consequences of adult decision-making for our shared future become increasingly apparent, there is a gradual acknowledgement that if children and young people have a voice, decisions with future impact might be different. Consider, for example, the impact of the young Swedish activist, Greta Thunberg on climate change response.

Accepting children as citizens in the here-and-now does not naively imply that decision making is left to children. Influencing the future should be understood as a process of co-construction in which the skills and life experience of older people combine creatively with the skills, energy, sensibilities, and ways of seeing of children and youth. It is not a utopian exercise but a practical process of improving the quality of decision making as children bring their contributions which have been recognised in recent studies as including an environmental awareness, attention to detail, a sense of fairness, and, increasingly also, skills in relation to the use of new technologies. This engagement has the added benefit of strengthening the learning process for children – of building understanding, problem-solving skills, a sense of responsibility, and leadership qualities, with positive benefits for society as children become youth and then adults. Involving children in planning and design processes reignites the 'All of Society' Approach that we daily advocate for in our various functions in everyday life.

As before, there are the big arguments around children's citizenships – urban citizenship in this case – the extension of democracy, and the legitimate right of children to influence the future world they will live in. There are however also strong pragmatic reasons for engaging children in built environment processes. Rojas (2013) argues that 'children are natural born planners'[3] because of their intuitive sense of the environment. Built environment professionals have however generally not been trained to tap into this value and so it is necessary to begin with some guidance on how to approach this domain.



[3]Rojas, J. (2013) Children Are Natural-Born Urban Planners!, *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*, 4(2), article 22.

DEFINING THE CHILD

In terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is any human being under the age of eighteen, unless the age of majority is attained earlier under national legislation which includes, for example, Indonesia (age 15), Cuba (age 16), and Scotland as a territory within the UK (age 16). There are however popular (and dictionary) definitions which refer to a child as an individual between infancy and puberty, with the term 'youth' referring to individuals from the age of puberty until adulthood. UNICEF has defined a 'Young Person' as being between the ages of 15 and 24, and this is therefore a category which overlaps with 'Child'. In this Practice Note we follow the definition in the UN Convention but emphasise the need to adopt approaches that recognise the significance of age differences among children.

A BIT OF THEORY

There is now a wide literature on children's participation in planning and design development processes, and the bibliography at the end of this Practice Note provides some guidance on what to read. For our purposes here, we provide a brief outline of an article produced by Mark Francis and Ray Lorenzo entitled '**Seven Realms of Children's Participation**' which was published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* in 2002[3]. Since then, of course, there have been other helpful publications, but this article remains important for the way in which it has outlined and reflected on the different approaches to children's participation in scholarly works. We outline below each of the seven realms:

First, there is the ***Romantic Realm*** **in which the children are the planners**. They define and make their future without much adult involvement. This approach often produces creative and energising output but the downside is that adult experience and opinion, offered in sensitive ways, is important, and that plans produced without this input may ultimately be vetoed as unrealistic.

Secondly, there is the ***Advocacy Realm*** **in which adults advocate for the needs of children**, and plan for children, as they may do in advocating for 'the poor' for example. There is, of course, much to be said for adults who take children's needs seriously in their professional work. The downside, however, is that children are often not part of the process, and the perspectives that children bring are often overlooked. Also, advocacy, is often single-issue oriented, while planning and design inevitably require the accommodation and negotiation of diverse needs and interests. Children's needs exist with the needs of others.

Thirdly, there is the ***Needs Realm*** **which is also referred to as 'Social Science for Children'**. This approach draws heavily on Social Sciences such as Behavioural Psychology and Environmental Psychology, which inform approaches within Geography, Architecture and Urban Planning, for example. It is a research-based approach which has produced important findings on what constitutes a good environment for children. However, the approach is expert led and does not always recognise the importance of children's perception, and of their active participation in planning and design.

[3]Francis, M. and Lorenzo, R. (2002), Seven Realms of Children's Participation, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 22(1-2), pp. 157-169.





A BIT OF THEORY (cont.)

Fourthly, there is the ***Learning Realm*** **in which children's participation** is valued because of the learning it produces. Through participation children develop spatial-visual literacies, an understanding of citizenship, environmental knowledge, and more. In this sense, children's participation is a contribution to an ongoing educational and socialisation process. The learning dimension is of course immensely important but this approach may underplay the innate qualities that children's participation brings to a planning or design process, and the benefit it offers to the work of adults.

Fifthly, there is the ***Rights Realm*** **in which children are understood as citizens with civic rights**. It is an approach which is promoted by international agencies and conventions and has played an important role in highlighting societal obligations to children. However, a rights-based approach has served to protect children, it does not necessarily lead to active participation by children in civic processes. As we have indicated, Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) does affirm the right of children to participate in public life but this has happened patchily and only where there has been societal and political will.

Sixthly, there is the ***Realm of Institutionalisation*** **where children's participation in policymaking and planning is mandated or required by legislation or regulation**. In this realm children are considered to have the capacity to engage in civic processes together with adults. Institutionalisation is of course often a victory for one or other of the previously mentioned realms of engagement and ensures that children's participation is not left to the whim of politicians, officials, or professionals. However, vitality and creative originality may be lost through a process of institutionalisation, and without commitment and skilled facilitation, the mandates involving children may not lead to desired products.

Finally, there is the ***Proactive Realm*****, also referred to as 'Participation with Vision'**. In this approach participation happens, not because it is legally required, but because of what must be achieved. The focus is on combining the involvement of children, youth, and adults, in negotiating vision, research, policymaking, planning, design, and action, with a strong emphasis on building the skills, and developing the sensitivities needed to achieve this. There is an understanding that the same level and form of participation is not always possible in all projects.

While Francis and Lorenza do orient towards the proactive realm, they acknowledge the benefits of each realm. Implicitly, at least, they understand these as overlapping realms which need to be combined creatively to ensure full benefits and reduce downsides.

SOME PRECEDENT



Much of our learning comes from practice, and we should engage with prior experience, internationally, nationally, and locally. It is impossible here to provide a comprehensive outline of precedent but it is worth noting the range of prior initiatives for further exploration.

The largest and most influential international programme is UNICEF's **Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI)**. Launched in 1996 to give effect to the UN Convention on Children's Rights it supports initiatives across the world which promote child-friendly cities (CFCs) with a CFC defined as "a city, town or community in which the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes and decisions". There are many participating municipalities with more than 180 Mayors and local leaders who signed the *Cologne Mayors' Declaration for Child Friendly Cities* at a summit in 2019.



Initiatives supported by the CFCI include: the enactment of child-friendly laws, regulations, and policies; the development of action plans for CFCs; mainstreaming budgets to ensure that children get their fair share of resources; awareness building and advocacy; data, indicators, scoreboards, and other monitoring systems, to improve accountability; participatory mechanisms to bring children into policy, planning, and budgeting; and the development of strategic partnerships.

The CFCI website provides useful links to multiple national- and city-level initiatives. Some of these include:

- *Act 35 of 2014* in Indonesia which mandates 'child-friendly urban development'.

- The *Kawasaki Ordinance on the Rights of Children* passed by the Kawasaki City Council in Japan in 2000 requiring children's participation in civic processes.

- *The Nepal Local Government Act* which requires municipalities to make every ward child friendly, to include child consultation processes known as bal bhelas, and to allocate at least 10% of received capital grants to concerns related to children.

- The Council of Europe's Child Participation Assessment Tool which provides indicators for measuring progress towards children's participation.



SOME PRECEDENT (cont.)

- Child rights education for municipal staff in municipalities in the Republic of Korea.

- The Children's Office in Regensburg, Germany.

- *Children and Young People's Strategic Action Plan* in the City of Auckland, New Zealand, developed jointly by the Auckland Council and the Youth Advisory Panel.

- A policy on children's priorities which requires allocations in annual budgets for child-friendly policies and plans, in the Greater Amman Municipality in Jordan.

- A local government in Khuvsgul, Mongolia, which spends more than 20% of its Local Development Fund on the well-being of children.

- A youth observatory in the child-friendly city of Sion, Switzerland, to coordinate youth policies and to detect and address emerging issues affecting children and youth.

- Child and youth Municipal Councils and Assemblies in countries including France, Turkey and Spain.

- The *Child Friendliness Index* in Belarus which includes a measure for child participation in decision making.

- *Child Advisory Bodies* in municipalities in Belize which provide children and youth with a consultative space, and an opportunity to review municipal plans and budgets.

- *The Child Wellbeing Dashboard* for the Waterloo Region in Ontario, Canada.



The CFCI supported initiatives are of course not the only ones promoting child participation in civic processes. There are other global or regional networks, and some innovative local partnerships. In the USA, for example, there is a recent history of partnerships involving universities including, for example:

- The *Our Town* program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh to introduce built environment awareness and planning skills among children in public schools.

- *The Urban Plan Project* at the University of California, Berkeley, with role-playing through a full development and planning process.

- *Children are Citizens* at Harvard's Graduate School of Education which works with educators across Washington D.C to support children's inquiry into the city.

- *Growing Up Boulder,* a programme initiated by the University of Colorado, Boulder's Community Design and Engagement Centre to use innovative participatory methods to include children in local policy and planning processes.



SOME PRECEDENT (cont.)

There are many initiatives too, led by other agencies in civil society including, for example, the KIDS (Kids Involved Doing Service-Learning) Consortium in Maine, which adopts a model of service-learning in engaging children in complex issues in their communities, and the Sydney-based Cities for Play.

These examples are far from comprehensive but hopefully give a sense of the diversity and creativity of initiatives to empower children within civic processes. While significant, and an important resource for further initiative, they still represent a scattered response to the requirements of the UN Convention. Our hope is that this document might promote a more comprehensive inclusion of children in South African planning and design development processes.

As it stands, putting into action the UN Convention is as equally scattered in South Africa as it globally and perhaps less substantial.





In an initiative that bridges from the international to the local and draws together universities and civil society, South Africa was part of the UNESCO-Most endorsed GUIC (Growing Up In Cities) project led by Louise Chawla from 1996-2006, with other core sites in Australia, Argentina, England, India, Norway, Poland, South Africa and the United States. The GUIC programme capacitated children and adolescents to evaluate their local environments and identify priorities for improvement. Techniques included children drawing their locations and identifying problem areas with coloured stickers, taking photographs, engaging in small-group discussions to prioritise problems, and undertaking transect walks with researchers or officials. This approach was found to be particularly beneficial in low-income areas of concern for urban policy-makers. In GUIC III currently, researchers are examining adolescents' perceptions of urban space in terms of key questions that were not part of earlier GUIC projects, considering questions like: what is urban life like for a technology generation? And how do smart phones and other technological devices impact their knowledge, understanding and experience of the urban environment. Beau Beza of Deakin University in the USA is leading GUIC III and the South African branch is held by Katherine Hall, a senior researcher at the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute.

There is not much local experience to draw on from within the municipal sphere. Around 2009, the City of Johannesburg's planning department initiated the preparation of Children's Plans through participatory processes involving geography students in local schools. In the township and informal settlement of Ivory Park this process led to a proposal for municipal investments which was included within the city's Urban Development Framework (UDF) for the area, and in its capital budgeting. However, this initiative was not sustained due to a lack of political interest across political parties in the Metropolitan Council at the time.

There have been pioneering initiatives from within civil society facilitated by government action. For example, the public art policy of the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA), which requires up to one percent of the capital budget to be allocated to art, enabling a series of art-related initiatives which engages the participation of children in urban development projects. Initiatives led by *The Trinity Session*, a contemporary art production team, use creative art practices to engage children in the JDA's development projects in sites across the city.

Also in Johannesburg, *Play Africa*, an organisation developing a pioneering Children's Museum on Constitution Hill aims to 'positively influence the development of more 'child-friendly, safe and playful urban environments, with a focus on African cities and towns'. Following a 'Designing with Children' workshop, it was developed as an open-source toolkit to support initiatives using play to imagine an improved community.



GUIDANCE ON PROCESS AND CONTENT

SOME SOURCES OF GUIDANCE

Professionals concerned with meaningfully engaging children in planning and design processes can now draw on several valuable guiding documents, although the advice given may have to be carefully tailored to context.

Among the important documents are the following:

1. *Shaping urbanization for children: A handbook on child-responsive urban planning*. This UNICEF publication may be the most influential report internationally in promoting child-responsive urban planning. Produced in 2018, it takes a rights-based approach to child-friendly cities, with a text that ranges from motivating the importance of a child-centred approach, to normative principles, and to method and techniques. It offers comprehensive coverage of debates on children's welfare and urbanization globally. The downside of the report is its complexity and length (192 pages).

https://www.unicef.org/reports/shaping-urbanization-children

2. *Child Friendly Cities and Communities Handbook, 2018*. This is a publication of the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative which focusses largely on the CFCI process and how cities can achieve child-friendly status.

https://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/child-friendly-cities-and-communities-handbook

3. *Children and Town Planning: Creating Places to Grow, 2021*. This recent report of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is framed by British context, legislation, and policy, but offers a helpful template for providing professional guidance in other countries.

https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/8848/children-and-town-planning-july-2021.pdf

4. *Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods*. This report prepared by the global professional services firm, Arup, which provides an accessible account of child-friendly urban policies with a succinct set of recommendations.

https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/cities-alive-designing-for-urban-childhoods

5. *Children's Participation in Governance: Lessons from the Children's NDP initiative*. The Children's NDP initiative launched by South Africa's National Planning Commission provides an innovative national example of a contextually relevant planning approach. The challenge is to translate this approach into locally tailored programmes.

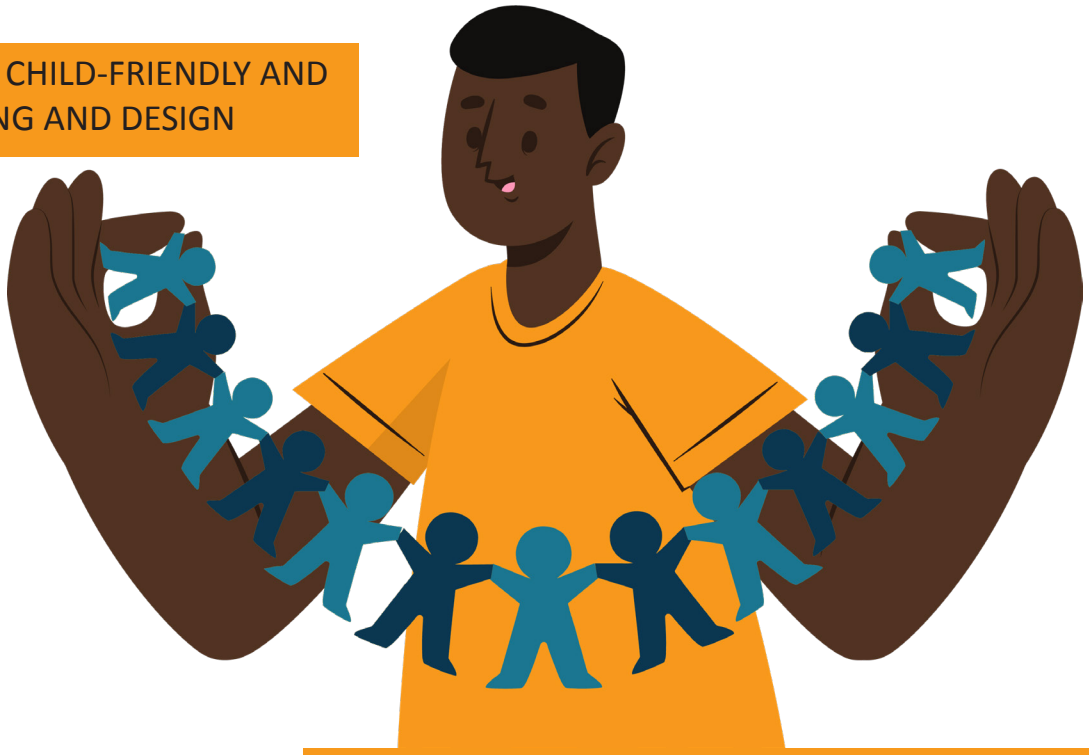
https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/Childrens%20NDP%20Analysis.pdf

6. *Designing with Children: A Creative Approach to Re-imagining Cities and Communities*. This site provides links to Play Africa's Toolkit for using play to imagine a better community. The toolkit emerges from an engagement with South Africa's urban context.

https://playafrica.org.za/toolkit/



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD-FRIENDLY AND CHILD-INCLUSIVE PLANNING AND DESIGN



It is however possible to get lost in this volume of guidance and so we distil key elements below.

There are different approaches to child responsive planning and design. They include:

1. A comprehensive attempt to create a positive urban environment for children by dealing in a multifaceted way with all aspects of urban development – as in the report *Shaping Urbanization for Children*.

2. Co-producing with children through a more targeted and process-driven approach– as in the report *Child Friendly Cities and Communities Handbook, 2018*.

3. Focussing on a specific but critical aspect of children's lives such as, for example, play – as in the toolkit *Designing with Children: A Creative Approach to Re-imagining Cities and Communities*.

In our view, we can usefully take aspects of all three approaches in designing ways to mainstream children and their concerns within planning and design processes in South Africa. Following 1) above we recommend incorporating child-friendly criteria into all relevant policies, programmes, and funded projects, of government. Following 2) we propose the use of the CFCI approach which emphasizes matters including budget allocations for children, children's action plans, participatory mechanisms for children, and capacity development for engaging children. And, following 3) we recommend the use of play, and of creative expression through art, as key mechanisms to engage children.

Our specific recommendations for national and provincial government are the following:

1. National government should put in place mandates (or at least, strong recommendations) that require all national departments and agencies, as well as provinces and municipalities to give attention to children's needs and participation in strategic and spatial planning. This could be achieved through amended regulations to the Municipal Systems Act, and Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act, and to the guidelines for preparing Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs).

2. Add the requirement for children's participation to be consulted and allow them to engage on spatial planning and design specific projects under the programmes such as the District Development Model (DDM), Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), Cities Support Programme (CSP), Intermediate Cities Municipalities (ICM), Small Town Regeneration (STR), Safer Cities, and Smart Cities.

3. National government should incorporate capacity building for facilitating child friendly and inclusive planning within support programmes for municipalities.

4. Build on the pioneering initiative by the National Planning Commission on a Children's NDP, extending this approach to other planning processes in national government.

5. Provincial governments should also take the child-friendly and child-inclusive agenda seriously within its own programmes, complementing measures at national levels with their own initiatives in relation to legislation, policies, programmes, and capacity building.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD-FRIENDLY AND CHILD-INCLUSIVE PLANNING AND DESIGN (cont.)

Our recommendations for the municipal sphere are the following:

1. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA), and other agencies supporting municipal government such as the South African Cities Network (SACN) should collaborate in developing guidelines for municipalities, drawing on resources such as UNICEF's CFCI.

2. Municipalities should develop by-laws or policies that require their departments and agencies to adopt child-friendly and child-inclusive approaches and should build child-friendly criteria into the assessment of new and amended policies, programmes, and funded projects. These by-laws should be an expression of the principles of SPLUMA and must be done in a child-friendly, fun and educational manner. The spatial planning department would be best suited to house the exploration, policy research and development however this would need to be in collaboration with expertise which are based outside the built environment (such as the child health and child development experts).

3. Municipalities should introduce indicators for children's empowerment into municipal monitoring systems and develop the data collection mechanisms for measuring against the indicators.

4. Municipalities should identify champions for child-friendly and child-inclusive approaches among councillors and senior officials and mandate them to profile and promote the needs and participation of children in planning and design projects and initiatives.

5. IDPs and municipal spatial plans should give explicit attention to concerns of children dealing, for example, with child safety, child health, child well-being, play spaces, children with special needs, children's mobility needs (such as trips to school), and children in spaces such as informal settlements, the inner city and rural areas. This should be in a form of a Precinct Plan incorporated in the SDF.

6. Create context appropriate participation mechanisms for children, that would bring them directly into policy, planning and design processes (see guidance on participation below).

7. Consider the preparation of Children's Plans, that could be incorporated into plans such as the IDP and SDF and/or innovative processes for Children's Visioning of the Future Municipality.

8. Include the needs of children within municipal communication and awareness programmes.

9. Ensure that key officials are trained in engaging with children.

10. Consider children in the annual and medium-term budgeting processes, with consideration to setting aside a stated percentage of the budget to address children's needs, and to introducing children's participatory budgeting as a process.

11. Ensure that children's needs and participation cascade down through all scales, including especially urban precinct planning and design. In doing so, make sure that children's lived experience is accommodated, including, for example, provision for safe and creative play space. [Consider the approach taken by the JDA in allocating a percentage of the capital budget to public art which successfully catalysed creative engagement with children.]

12. To remain cognisant of how we in Africa and South Africa see and relate to children. The roles of mothers and fathers should also be taken into account in order to create policy and progammes that realistically address the social challenges of the country and the continent.





Our recommendations for the professional and educational sphere are the following:

1. All professional bodies in the built environment, regulatory and voluntary[4], should consider ways in which they can promote child-friendly and child-inclusive plans and processes (using, for example, guidance notes, event hosting, and capacity development).

2. Educators in professional built environment programmes (architecture, planning, housing, civil engineering included) should consider ways to integrate children friendly policy, planning and design into the curriculum.

3. Academics should be encouraged to direct research into the children in the built environment, subject to university ethics processes designed to protect vulnerable groups.

4. Schools should incorporate this into curricula where the children engage from school on planning and design projects for their participation. This way you can monitor that information is shared with children and the school becomes accountable to ensure children are included in the participation processes and their ideas are indeed factored in. Children can develop guidance notes, models, illustrations.

5. The private sector should be encouraged to develop children outreach initiatives particularly in spatial planning and design.

Finally, as a cross-cutting initiative:

1. A network of professionals across government, private practice, and academia, and across the various built environment disciples, could be formed to support child-friendly and child-inclusive built environment processes.

2. Professionals should collaborate with various practitioners outside of the built environment sector who work with the development of children (e.g. the Health profession – occupational therapists, child psychologists, teachers, etc.) in order to ensure that the spaces developed contribute to the emotional and social aspects of the children and their communities.

[4]This includes, but is not exclusive to, the Council for the Built Environment (CBE), the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN), the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA), and the South African Institute for Planners (SAPI).

GUIDANCE ON PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation

- Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults
- Child-initiated
- Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children
- Consulted and informed
- Assigned but informed
- Tokenism
- Decoration
- Manipulation



The participation of children in built environment processes in South Africa has been very rare to date, and professional skills in facilitating this participation are still inadequately developed. There is no true way to engage children, and so experimentation and learning from practice, is critical. However, we can also learn from international and local precedent, with pointers drawing from the practice indicated below:

- In the South African context, begin with a consideration of our deeply unequal society, tailoring participation in response. We cannot separate the mainstreaming of children into built environment processes from dealing with issues of poverty, deprivation, and vulnerability.

- Participation must take account of the immense diversity of children's circumstance and identity including race, class, family income, gender, family life, and more. The concept of 'intersectionality' makes us aware that children's lives are shaped by many more factors than just the fact that they are children.

- Rather than segmenting children's participation off into its own domain, we should encourage processes of co-production, bringing children and adults together in 'inter-generational' processes.[5]

- Don't engage children only as individuals. Where appropriate engage also with children within the context of their families and schools, for example.

- Support the development of appropriate forums for participation. In addition to traditional structures such as Children and Youth Councils, encourage children to create their own platforms such as local pressure groups, informal networks, and social media groups, which go beyond fitting children into conventionally adult ways of participating.[6]

When children are invited into mainstream participation processes – for example, council committees, public meetings, and hearings – careful facilitation is required to ensure that children express their views without intimidation or inhibition.

[5]See, for example, an inter-generational inner city regeneration process that deliberately encouraged the joint participation of children and the aged - https://lemosandcrane.co.uk/resources/ICRRDS%20intergenerationalrelations.pdf

[6]Recent research points to the limitations of traditional approaches. Youth Councils, for example, are often manipulated by adults and generally involve the participation of small, favoured groups of children. The downside of more experimental and flexible processes however are their unpredictability which some municipalities and funders may find difficult.

- Prepare children for participation with some age-appropriate basic training, although recognising that much of the learning will come from the process. Elements of training may include visual literacy skills (such as identifying paths, edges, and landmarks), an introduction to infrastructure and land use, and an introductory understanding of planning and design processes.[7]

- Prepare adult professionals with the sensibilities and skills to facilitate children's participation in planning and design processes.

- Children from pre-school upwards can be brought into planning processes, although using age adjusted techniques such as robotics, science, projects to enable them to express their visual thinking.

- Learn about, and experiment with different methods of participation. These methods could include, for example, walking the neighbourhood, use of experiential journals, mental mapping, drawing, photography, designing alternative realities using Lego, theatre, puppetry, model-building, video-making, model-making, design charades, problem-solving teams, focus groups, surveys, facilitated dialogues, games, and more.

- Recognise the importance of virtual space for children, creatively using social media and online applications, such as urban planning simulation games, to support participation.[8]

- Use children's play as a means of participation (see the Box below).

- Where possible, engage children in the full process of planning, from process design, to research, and plan-making.

- Build resources to support children's engagement, for children and professionals. Use schools, libraries, civic offices, neighbourhood resource centres, and online platforms, for archiving these resources.

- We should not seek children's opinions and then disregard them – mechanisms for dialogue and feedback are important.

- The outcomes of participation are important. If participation does bring about change, it may produce disillusionment, with enduring negative consequence in the lives of children. Municipalities should consider, for example, a children's budget so that action can follow participation.

- Ensure that children's participation meets full ethical requirements – children must be in a safe space, and participation must be voluntary, respectful, sensitive, and transparent. A child must never be placed in a vulnerable position during a participation process.

- Children's participation must be sustained and this does require a degree of institutionalisation. Over time, normalise children's participation so that it is no longer viewed as exceptional.

Finally, and most importantly, build the confidence of children, by showing them that they are heard and their views are valued.

[7]In a previous City of Johannesburg initiative, municipal officials engaged children through their Geography classes at schools.

[8]Minecraft has, for example, been successfully used as a game-based platform for engaging children in urban planning in Brazil.



GUIDANCE ON PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

LEARNING AND PARTICIPATING THROUGH PLAY

Play is a central element in children's lives, central to their happiness, well-being, socialisation, and learning. The Right to Play is in fact recognised in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Importantly, play is not the same as sports and recreation, as play is a free and creative process that is not directed by adults. Play is the safe space within which children develop a wide repertoire of skills that are needed to thrive in the world including physical agility; self-protection; establishing social roles; creative thought; cooperation, sharing and negotiation; and the development of emotions such as empathy, caring, and self-awareness.

For built environment practitioners, there are at least two key considerations in relation to play. First, play is a tool that may be deployed in engaging children in built environment processes, and in engaging children on complex issues from the local to the global. There are guidelines on the use of play including, for example, Play Africa's toolkit, *Designing with Children*.



The second issue, of course, is in ensuring that children in all neighbourhoods have safe spaces in which they can express themselves through creative play. Here, built environment practitioners should be aware of significant shifts internationally in thinking about spaces for play. Spaces for children have also been termed Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL) - https://playfullearninglandscapes.com/ and https://www.brookings.edu/product/learning-landscapes/.

In the early twentieth century, the playground movement was a response to the risks of children playing in increasingly busy and unhygienic streets. Children at play were segregated off in playgrounds, with the classic swings, seesaws, and merry go rounds, protected from the perceived dangers of the world around. This may have been a positive response at the time, but current research shows that only a fraction of children's play happens in these spaces. Children generally prefer space that is more integrated into family and neighbourhood, where they can adapt space through their imagination and develop their own games.

There are now more diverse approaches to play space including, for example, modifying streets for greater safety, creating small pocket parks that can bring children's play closer to their homes, providing play space within malls, adventure parks, and ensuring that natural and informal spaces within neighbourhoods (including undeveloped sites, open fields, grass verges, alley ways, and riverbanks) are as safe as possible for children without being sterilised.

The focus is increasingly on supporting flexible spaces that allow children to use their imaginations and create their own environments. There is also a growing recognition that play cannot be separated off in any clearcut sense from other parts of children's lives, including education, household chores, and family gatherings, and that the possibilities for play must be built in at all levels. Research from India, for example, recognises the importance of everyday spaces in children's play, including paths, riverbanks, wells, beaches, public taps, and fallow lands.

One of the major challenges of the contemporary world is the shift from outdoor play to screen time and virtual play. More work is needed to understand

the implications of this for children, and for approaches to supporting play. Pragmatically, we need to accept the reality of the virtual world and find meaningful ways to engage the virtual world for play. However, more than before we need to entice children into the outdoors, and this requires greater attention to ensuring that they have safe and exciting outdoor play spaces.

Some of the pointers to take account of include:

- The need to contextualise the growing international literature to our context considering where and how children play in townships, informal settlements, suburbs, inner cities, small towns, and rural areas, and intervening in contextually appropriate ways.

- Recognise the diversity of spaces that children use for play, and work with this diversity. While traditional format may still play a role, consider more flexible spaces where children can be adventurous.

- Where possible, integrate play space into other forms of space rather than segregating off.

- Focus on removing the dangers and obstacles to play, rather than shaping environments for children. These may include, in various contexts, traffic calming, removing environmental hazards from open spaces, replacing manhole covers, and creating safe crossings of streams and culverts.

- Allow children to adapt spaces for their creative purpose but provide the enabling infrastructure and environment. As Roger Hart put it, 'establish the conditions within which they can find and create their own play'.

- Where more formal spaces are planned, such as public parks and playgrounds, make sure that children are brought into the design processes.

- Find the correct balance between the need for some form of adult supervision, especially for younger children, and the need for children to be free of continual adult direction (recognising the adults often spoil the game when they attempt to control).

- Take account of the changing patterns and needs of play across age groups. For example, just hanging out with friends is a form of play across some age groups.

- Ensure that play opportunities for girls are not overlooked (but be careful not to gender stereotype play).

- Ensure that the play needs of children with disabilities are considered.

- In designing for play consider a variety of play surfaces but, where possible, ensure a connection with nature.

- Be innovative in thinking about children's play spaces – for example, the introduction of children's gardens.

- While continuing to emphasise the benefits of outdoor play, also take account of (urban) digital play, proactively channelling this form of play in support of planning and design.



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