

Call to Action: Strengthening Urban Resilience and Sustainable Neighbourhoods for Children

This call to action is inspired and informed by the formative evaluation of UNICEF's work for children living in slums and informal settlements, and the work of the [PANEX-Youth](#) research project team¹. We came together to raise awareness about the high degree of need in urban areas globally and make broad recommendations on how to address them. Additional inputs were provided by a group of iNGOs and other UN agencies who are part of the Global Alliance - Cities4Children alliance; the call is also included as part of [UCL Grand Challenge of Inequalities](#) programme. This call to action aims to raise the attention of international, national and sub-national actors about the urgent need to strengthen children's urban resilience considering the ongoing challenges and crises affecting their everyday lives.

While urbanization can generate significant opportunities, it is often unplanned with unevenly distributed benefits and inadequate infrastructure, basic services and housing². For example, 350 - 500 million children live in slums and face 1.5 to 3 times higher mortality rates than children living in non-slums in urban areas³. As urbanization accelerates, a growing proportion of children are being raised in slums and informal settlements⁴ where overlapping deprivations—unsafe, inaccessible and insecure housing, inadequate water and sanitation, limited access to quality health, education, and protection services and weak local governance—conspire to entrench multidimensional poverty.

Strengthening urban resilience and building sustainable neighbourhoods for the most vulnerable and marginalised children across the globe (i.e. girls, migrants, IDPs, refugees, those with disabilities, etc), relies on ten core policy and programmatic recommendations about the provision of fundamental services and spaces at the local level. For each recommendation, the most relevant actors are listed in brackets. These recommendations focus on national and subnational actors but acknowledge that these entities rely on the technical support, resource mobilization and advocacy of international organizations, development partners and the private sector to accomplish their goals. These recommendations are broadly aligned with social and spatial sustainability (SDGs 1.1 & 1.4)

¹ PANEX-Youth was an international research project, funded by the Transatlantic Platform (ESRC in the UK; FAPESP in Brazil; NRF in South Africa). It examined the experiences of marginalised and monetary-poor young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team also has wider expertise in international research about children and young people's lives in urban places.

² United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2023*, United Nations, 2023.

³ UNICEF, *Formative Evaluation of UNICEF Work to Reduce Multidimensional Deprivations for Children Living in Slums and Informal Settlements*, 2025.

⁴NOTE: Slums are defined as 'households characterized by inadequate housing' with informal settlements being 'land occupied without legal claim or in violation of urban planning regulations.'

as outlined in the [New Urban Agenda](#) and [SDG 11](#), to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable”.

Recommendation 1: Use disaggregated localised data analysis in policy development and city planning [international organizations and donors, national governments, local and city governments]

Little data is available on the size, socio-economic and infrastructure profile of urban slums and informal settlements, with the statistics at the city-level often masking inequities due to a lack of disaggregated data. In collating and analysing available data, relevant actors should explicitly recognize children living in slums and informal settlements and prioritize them in strategic plans and frameworks, especially in countries with growing slums and high rates of urban deprivations. These actors can use localised disaggregated data and participatory assessments to identify the most affected slum areas and guide programming that reflects the complexities of urban deprivations and, ideally, further recognises intersectional differences between children living in slums (e.g. by gender). **Community-based knowledge and insights should be leveraged in concert with innovative data tools, such as community-led data collection, geospatial mapping and remote sensing.** National and sub-national governments should collaborate with specialized institutions with past success, as well as empower local partners, such as census authorities and local enumerators, to close data gaps. This data should inform both upstream strategic decision making and financing as well as downstream programming, monitoring and advocacy to feature this issue more visibly.

Recommendation 2: Promote and operationalize multisectoral area-based programming [national governments, local and city governments, private sector, community-based organizations]

Actors must prioritise multi-sectoral programming⁵ in urban contexts, specifically slums and informal settlements where children face concurrent, interlinked and overlapping deprivations across survival, learning, protection, identity and participation. No single organization can solve these issues. **Actors must build strong and functional partnerships with academia, think tanks, tech industry, construction sector, media, culture, and art organizations for impactful advocacy, programming, implementation, etc.** Conventional programs that coordinate between silos often fail to address the social and systemic complexities of their environments. Even the strongest single-sector interventions are insufficient to address the multiple deprivations of children in slums. Relevant actors must take a problem-oriented approach to programming, instead of a sector-oriented one, with high-leverage pragmatic entry points such as multisectoral response to [zero-dose children](#), birth registration, school attendance, youth engagement like the [Green Rising Initiative](#), and

⁵ NOTE: ‘Multisectoral’ is defined as different societal sectors working together and combining resources.

actions to address [climate change](#) and environmental health issues to initiate the convergence of different programmes. Programmes with entry points from other sectors can successfully incorporate sustainable livelihoods programmes based on community need assessments in slums and informal settlements. These programmes can include skills training, financial literacy and integration of youth into preexisting action plans.

Recommendation 3: Adopt community-led service delivery models building on community knowledge, assets and organization [international organizations and donors, national governments, local and city governments, community-based organizations]

By prioritizing community-led solutions and service delivery, city and local governments with technical and financial resource constraints can dramatically expand service coverage for children in informal settlements while building sustainable, culturally-appropriate systems rooted in community strengths. Many cities experiencing rapid urbanization face severe capacity and resource constraints. National and sub-national governments often lack adequate budgets, technical expertise, and staffing to deliver quality services at scale. Traditional top-down, capital-intensive interventions frequently fail to reach the most marginalised children, including those in slums, or prove unsustainable when external funding ends. However, local communities possess deep contextual knowledge, existing social networks, and proven resilience and organising mechanisms. Examples of community-led solutions and ‘services’ include: community health promoters providing basic health education, household visits, and immunization support; community-managed WASH services with neighbourhood water committees; [youth volunteer networks](#) as first responders during crises and community-based childcare with trained informal providers. Embracing, supporting and scaling such initiatives offer a viable future pathway.

City and local governments should map and formally recognize existing community-led services; create enabling policy and support frameworks with appropriate oversight; allocate budgets to support community initiatives among others with modest stipends; and, integrate community workers into municipal referral systems. **National governments should develop frameworks supporting locally-led approaches;** create dedicated funding streams with simplified application processes; establish training and supervision programs for community workers; and, integrate community-led approaches into national sectoral strategies. **International organizations and donors should shift funding models to directly support community organizations and local governments;** provide financial and technical assistance to build and sustain local capacities; support evidence-building around cost-effective models; and, facilitate peer learning between communities.

Recommendation 4: Place children at the core of crisis preparedness and management responses [international organizations and donors, community-based organizations]

Rapid-onset events, such as migration crises, pandemics, climate-related shocks and institutional crises often exacerbate the vulnerabilities of children in slum communities. Children need to be at the forefront of policy changes now and in the future. **Organizations who deal with crisis preparedness, such as national and local meteorological departments, school departments, youth volunteer networks as well as fire and police departments, must intentionally incorporate children and their needs into action plans.** For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, children were considered at lower risk of the direct medical effects but were severely directly impacted by lockdown measures. This cannot happen again, and [children need to be at the centre of preparedness efforts](#) and political processes of rights assurance in contexts of ongoing and future crises.

During all phases of crisis management response (i.e. prevention, preparedness, response, recovery), relevant actors need to provide support at the household level to ensure that children continue to maintain a safe lifestyle, remain active and continue to be educated as well as socially connected. Planning at the neighbourhood level is also essential to address the specific vulnerabilities of unplanned slums, such as garbage, pollutants and crime.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen services and create hubs as spaces of care and learning [local and city governments, community-based organizations]

Healthy and well-nourished children are better able to cope with shocks; however, many slums and informal settlements lack access to housing, water and sanitation, waste management, schools, childcare, internet and reliable information. Urban hubs that provide care, learning and other services can bridge current gaps as strengthening community resilience and access to universal services takes time, particularly in deprived and informal settings.

Relevant actors need to set up alternative places of [learning](#) (physical or virtual) in connection with other supporting bodies (schools, i/NGOs, community groups, faith institutions, etc) to address learning gaps. Learning occurs through schools, but when these are closed in times of emergency, or fail to deliver learning, mitigation measures need to be implemented immediately to anticipate the learning gaps which will emerge and impact children's life trajectories, specifically their transitions from child to teenager to young adult. However, learning, education, being in contact with others and seeking adequate information increasingly relies on access to the Internet. Distribution of internet bundles (i.e. WiFi hubs and/or data packages) and ways to connect (phone, tablets) should thus remain a priority for these actors. By doing so, children may – recursively – also be able to support their communities as well as being supported by them.

Hubs should also ensure that children have access to primary health care, including sexual and reproductive health through referrals and linkages to social service volunteers. Accessing food

is fundamental and urban food poverty is expanding in many countries. Actors ought to consider promoting initiatives like community kitchens and urban farming, to improve access to nutritious food. Such programmes often require piloting, community ownership, training and capacity building, linkages to broader plans, budgets and policies of national and local governments to ensure long-term sustainability.

Recommendations 6: Ensure housing as a gateway to basic services [national governments, local and city governments, community-based organizations]

The existence of slums is based on inadequate housing conditions and insecure land tenure. These conditions are the main drivers of poverty, especially for those moving to cities who have higher income expectations.

Housing is a cross-sectoral issue that determines children's ability to continue with schooling, receive health care, function socially, and meet their childhood development goals. Frequently, physical addresses are needed to attend school and promote accurate census data, which affects policy and programming. There are links between housing and poor health outcomes, specifically WASH⁶ and mental health. Housing also provides safe spaces for the preparation and consumption of food.

National and sub-national governments, as well as community-based organizations, need to promote the legal rights of families to housing and land tenure through legal services, specifically in slums and informal settlements, to address the lack of affordable land and housing. Although children do not own homes, they are greatly impacted when home ownership is made difficult. Parents who own homes also have greater financial assets to invest in their children, which creates wealth and breaks generational cycles of poverty.

Recommendation 7: Protect the right to play and socialize through child-friendly public spaces [national governments, local and city governments]

Studies demonstrate that children with access to public green spaces are less likely to develop mental health disorders in adulthood. **Relevant actors should plan neighbourhoods with public spaces aligned with national and sub-national standards for play, rest, leisure and recreation. These public spaces should also be intentionally designed to contribute to children's wellbeing and enjoyment of life.** Most public spaces negate children's varying scales, preferences and needs in their design and built features. Children's environmental perception of space and activities differs from that of adults, and children's scale (particularly young children's) is mostly ignored in the design process and implementation. Public spaces need to have a family-focused approach and child-friendly scalable design (e.g. signage and urban furniture that cater for children's size and height). These designs should take into account: 1) the different spatial scales where such spaces exist, i.e. housing, neighbourhood

⁶ NOTE: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

or city; 2) the specific categories of public spaces for children that can appear at these spatial scales, i.e. streets, public facilities, found or “liminal” spaces and public open space; and, 3) the context in which they are located, i.e. planned, informal as well as crisis and resilience-building contexts.

The creation and maintenance of public spaces should not be restricted to younger age groups but should facilitate [intergenerational interaction](#) across all ages, abilities and gender types. Making public spaces for young children and older young people-- e.g. with more challenging play opportunities and safe spaces for girls as well as LGBTQ+ young people to hang out is vital. For examples, girls and women, who are frequently the primary caregivers of young children, are often deterred from moving around cities on foot and face harassment when supervising them playing in public spaces. Accessibility and adaptability in how spaces are used and services are provided is key. Temporary installations using mobile materials can be considered by actors as ways to meet children’s rights in unplanned neighbourhoods, such as slums and informal settlements, creating spaces for play and socialising. Such temporary projects can be managed by local communities and faith institutions, supported by i/NGOs and without requiring significant financial investments. These can include pocket parks, mobile libraries, playgrounds (e.g. sandpits), temporary football pitches, etc. Adaptable design and regulations can also be developed by national and sub-national governments. For instance, streets can be closed temporarily to allow transformation into temporary playgrounds or be fitted with alternative urban design features facilitating play ‘on the move’ with street furniture and greening (e.g. small-scale gardens or wild plots).

Recommendation 8: Adopt a gender-inclusive urban resilience approach [international organizations and donors, national governments, city and local governments, community-based organizations]

Women and girls often suffer from additional intersectional burdens in slums and informal settlements, which become enhanced during times of severe disruptions when mobility is restricted (e.g. [pandemic lockdowns](#)). For example, adolescent girls often have poor menstrual hygiene, health and sexual health outcomes due to: lack of access to health insurance; affordability of menstrual products, knowledge and awareness; inadequate access to WASH; social norms; and insufficient sexual and reproductive health services (e.g. the distribution of contraception and emergency pills). The lack of affordable childcare can limit women’s employment options, perpetuate gender inequalities and hinder the economic stability of families and communities. **The need for actors to provide community-based childcare and child benefits is critical for mothers to care for their children despite the effects of urban poverty.** Pregnant women and young children are also particularly affected by heatwaves and flooding incidents. Their care and safety require more focused efforts and initiatives to cope with such events - especially as day labourers and/or outdoor workers.

Recommendation 9: Highlight practices of inclusion for people with disabilities and different migration statuses [international organizations and donors]

The accessibility of informal urban settlements for people with disabilities is limited due to the unplanned nature of development and the lack of infrastructure and services; moreover, societal stigmas often result in many persons with disabilities being severely restricted in their use of and movement around such settlements . [Evidence](#) suggests this also includes exclusion from the informal governance of these settlements, but good practice does exist, where community, or stated interventions have resulted in improvements to accessibility. For example, actors can include installations to allow physical and mental activities when playing together but also participate in making those spaces safer and more diverse. Actors could also consider global initiatives to promote good practice, such as those summarized in the [Global Disability Inclusion Report](#), in the design of inclusive and accessible urban spaces.

Migration status is also a source of vulnerability as it can impact access to housing, services, and livelihood opportunities. With rising average temperatures and an increase in global conflict, many communities find themselves displaced. Unaccompanied child migration is also increasing alongside global migration. Children migrating on their own are often left out of the conversation. The [New Urban Agenda](#) promotes the ‘Right to the City’ of migrants and universal design for disability inclusion. **Relevant actors should find, share and replicate, in context-relevant ways, successful examples of disability and migration inclusive urban action.**

Recommendation 10: Recognize children as influential community builders [community-based organizations]

Children are incredibly knowledgeable about their communities and built environments, about where they can find shelter, and about which places are safe or unsafe. Cities and local governments use a wide range of methods (such as creative workshops, child-led mapping, child-led research projects, intergenerational decision-making sessions) and technologies (such as mobile phone apps) that enable participation by diverse groups of children. Children already lead or join initiatives to support their community and build solidarity networks. Many are familiar with the range of tools (including the Internet and social media) required to search for relevant information, communicate, disseminate, and hence ensure that their voices and needs are expressed. In emergency contexts, community-based organizations have frequently empowered young people (through caring activities such as food provision or information programmes). **Modes of empowerment could include building capacity for children to recognise climate or other risks, to communicate how they affect them through journalism training and campaign accelerators, and creating institutional structures and platforms for children to communicate with policymakers and politicians to hold them accountable.**

Empowerment also provides an opportunity for children to cope with unprecedented challenges and crises.

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