Urban Inequities; Urban Rights: A Conceptual Analysis and Review of Impacts on Children, and Policies to Address Them

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores current conceptual understanding of urban social, environmental, and health inequality and inequity, and looks at the impact of these processes on urban children and young people in the 21st century. This conceptual analysis was commissioned for a discussion paper for UNICEF's flagship publication: State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an Urban World. The aim of the paper is to examine evidence on the meaning of urban inequality and inequity for urban children and young people. It further looks at the controversial policies of targeting "vulnerable" young people, and policies to achieve the urban MDGs. Finally, the paper looks briefly at the potential of concepts such as environment justice and rights to change our understanding of urban inequality and inequity.*

KEYWORDS *Inequities, Child rights, Urban policy, Urban health, Urban inequality*

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores current conceptual understanding of urban social, environmental, and health inequality and inequity, and looks at the impact of these processes on urban children and young people in the 21st century. This conceptual analysis was commissioned for a discussion paper for UNICEF's flagship publication: *State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an Urban World*.¹ This paper is an edited version of the analysis and discussion paper for UNICEF. The aim of the paper is to examine evidence on the meaning of urban inequality and inequity for urban children and young people. It further looks at the controversial policies of targeting "vulnerable" young people, and policies to achieve the urban MDGs. Finally the paper looks briefly at the potential of concepts such as environment justice and rights to change our understanding of urban inequality and inequity.

At the outset we should recognise that our knowledge of urban inequalities and inequities is still limited to studies of the larger urban city regions and mega-cities internationally.² Even in the wealthiest countries, there is no urban specific monitoring of impacts of inequalities and inequities on children and their families. We know little about the health and well-being of the millions of children growing

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up in the small and medium urban centers where the majority of urban children will grow and live in the future.²⁻⁴

THE IMPORTANCE OF INEQUALITY AND INEQUITY FOR URBAN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Urban poverty is one of the major issues of the 21st century.⁵⁻⁷ We have passed the point when over half the world's population are "urban", and UN Habitat estimates that 30% of urban citizens internationally live in "slums".² This problem is considered so grave that Target 7 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is specific to urban "slums": *by 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers*.⁵ The language of urban poverty reveals our first challenge: the very word "slum" in the English language and its counterpart terms in other languages show us the relationship of urban "poverty" with those who control the discourse and policies of urbanization: almost all words to describe the low-income settlements which home the majority of urban peoples, are pejorative terms created and perpetuated by the urban policy elite. For example, the term "slum" has been used since at least the 19th century to stigmatize low-income urban communities, where living conditions are described as "squalid" and "degrading".⁸ At worst, urban citizens are culturally identified with their living conditions and negatively defined as "slum dwellers", as Dickens noted eloquently in his novel *Hard Times*,⁹ and as is still common in major international policy documents.²

The concept of urban inequality is now a routine topic of urban debate, but the terms urban poverty, differentials, inequality, and inequity are rarely disentangled.¹⁰ The first, and arguably most problematic, term is urban "poverty". Conceptually, this term is used to isolate groups of urban citizens, the "urban poor", usually based on assessment of a lack of economic means to fulfil "basic needs".^{11,12} Basic needs concepts are controversial, but generally, they include indicators of material want, including water and sanitation; shelter; and, where measurable, food security.⁵ The concept of a "lack of basic needs" is defined differently in different countries and, in some cases, different cities. Some countries use income measures, and in some cases education and health indicators, but in many situations these indicators are impossible to measure accurately. In many contexts, the simplest measures are housing quality indicators (roof and/or floor materials), which are then used as proxy indicators for identifying geographic areas of urban "poverty". Policymakers then attempt to address basic needs within the identified areas. Target 7 of the MDGs aims to improve "*lives of slum dwellers*". There are many problems with MDG 7, including controversial issues of measurement, but perhaps the biggest issue is that the urban "poverty" approach acts as if the "urban poor" existed in isolation of the overall structural and political processes of the city—processes that push and keep families in "urban poverty". The terms *differentials* and *inequalities* begin to unpack political processes within the city, and the two concepts are often treated in the same way.¹³ Another concept, urban *inequity*, is arguably the most important theme for young people and for the future for all towns and cities, but few authors distinguish between these concepts of urban differentials, inequality, and inequity.

The most complex distinction is between the concepts of inequality and inequity. This is not a simple academic division of terms. In definitional terms, an *inequality* is basically a "difference in size, degree or circumstance".⁸ This means that the terms

inequalities and *differentials* are conceptually interchangeable, and both are potentially *neutral* descriptions of variation in circumstance. The term *inequity* describes “a lack of fairness or justice”⁸, so when urban analysts use these expressions interchangeably they are mixing very different ideas. To use a simple theme, food: urban children and young people may have “unequal” or “different” daily food intakes, but this is not necessarily “inequitable” or unjust. Differences in daily food intakes between children can exist without injustice, as we find in cities where all children have sufficient food (*food security* in nutritional terms), and the difference—or inequality—is explained by differences in individual needs, or household and individual choices. An inequity would exist if some children do not have basic food security, or have lack of access to good nutrition, while others have more than they need in terms of food security and good nutrition every day.

Table 1 presents the concepts of urban poverty, differentials, inequality, and inequity as they relate to urban children and young people, and outlines repercussions for the development of child-health-equity urban policies.

Looking at an apparently clear-cut urban theme, urban transport, it is possible to look at urban inequality and inequity in both wealthier and poorer cities. In many cities of the world, road traffic crashes have become a major cause of injury and death, and urban air pollution related to transport has become a major hazard for many urban citizens.^{21–24} Urban policymakers tend to see urban air pollution and urban crashes as citywide air and road safety problems. Neither issue is generally unpacked to explore either inequality or inequity. However, when we do so, some fundamental issues of inequality and inequity emerge. At its most basic, there is a difference or inequality in the impacts of urban air and urban crashes between adults and children: both urban air pollution and road traffic crashes particularly affect children and young people.²⁵ But this most basic inequality is our first example of the difference between urban inequality and inequity: first, there is an inequality or difference in the *degree of impact* of urban air pollution and urban crashes on children and young people compared to adults. But urban transport issues also demonstrate a fundamental *inequity* or *injustice* between urban adults and children: put simply, adults manage and control urban transport, both at a policy level and at a household level, but children and young people experience the negative impacts of adult choices and have no decision-making power in transport choices.^{26,27} This introduces a more fundamental inequity or injustice that I will come back to: current generations of urban adults are creating an urban air and road safety environment that puts at risk current and *future* generations of children and young people in cities. Urban transport-related pollution is a key generator of climate change.²⁸ Urban adults, as a global social group, are putting at risk not only children in their own local towns and cities, but future generations internationally. This is termed intergenerational equity, and urban areas have a key role to play in securing intergenerational equity for future children.

Table 2 expands on Table 1 using selected urban themes of water and sanitation, food and food security, shelter, and urban air quality. This can also be explored in access to green space—which is an emerging theme in urban areas.²⁹ There is also substantial evidence of inequalities in access of children to educational opportunities^{30–33} and to health services.^{34–38}

In all aspects of urban life, evidence shows that particular groups of children are consistently at greater risk than others in both wealthier and poorer countries and in wealthier and poorer cities. This brings us to a controversial challenge for urban policymakers internationally. Who are the most vulnerable urban children and young people?

TABLE 1 Differing definitions of urban poverty, inequality, and inequity related to well-being of urban children and young people

Concept	Definition	Effects on children and young people	Policy issues
Urban poverty	Often used to describe communities, individual households, and individuals who are lacking in “basic needs” such as clean water, sanitation, and housing. In economically advanced countries and/or cities, this is more complicated, as urban “poverty” shows itself in lack of socio-cultural and well-being needs such as education, employment, and health services.	Lack of basic needs, such as clean water and sanitation, and adequate housing, particularly affects children under 5 who are at risk of infectious diseases, such as diarrheal disease and respiratory infections. ^{2,14} Vector-borne diseases, such as urban malaria and dengue, related to environmental conditions and housing, also affect this group and can affect older children and adolescents. ^{15–17} In wealthier cities socio-cultural urban “poverty” can affect both children and adolescents and particularly may impact on homeless children. ^{18,19}	Levels of urban poverty may rise or fall depending on definitions and measurement by different local governments. Policies to target young people according to deficiencies in basic or social needs are often highly controversial, linking to the complexity of identifying the “poor”. Governments may claim to have resolved problems of urban poverty through approaches to improve basic needs provision, but without tackling the complex social exclusion that creates and perpetuates the situation of the urban “poor”.
Urban differentials	An approach to explore, and often describe, through mapping, differences in levels of basic needs and access to social services such as health and education.	As urban children begin to notice “differences” between themselves and others, we shift from effects of “poverty” to effects related to difference and then to inequality. ²⁰ Differences may exist in many aspects of socio-environmental resource access. These differences may not relate to any notion of unfairness in distribution of resources: for example, poorer children might have higher levels of vaccination than children of richer families. But difference can also create social segregation with consequent negative impacts on urban children and adolescents.	Measuring differences in urban conditions and/or health outcomes can lead to some distributional policies to target areas or groups of children with lower levels of access to services and/or health needs. It has been used in some settings to target areas below a given cutoff point in terms of need or lack of service. In policy terms, describing difference between groups does not automatically infer an inequality.
Urban inequality	An approach that describes differences in access to services and/or health outcomes as an unequal	Many studies of urban inequalities group all differences in states of access to service and/or health	In policy terms, describing all aspects of difference in access to services and/or health outcomes as

TABLE 1 (continued)

Concept	Definition	Effects on children and young people	Policy issues
	state between one group and another within a city or town.	outcomes as a form of inequality. This does not infer automatically that such an inequality is unjust, but from a child rights perspective, any unequal state between children is harmful. But this approach might hide the issue of identifying who are really our most vulnerable urban children and how can we help them.	inequality is highly controversial. It infers, but often does not demonstrate directly, that a lower level of access to services for one group compared to another is unfair in policy terms.
Urban inequity	An approach that seeks to analyse injustice in the distribution of urban resources and/or health outcomes between one group and another within a city or town, and can include injustice in the decision-making process.	This links to an analysis of distribution of decision-making processes and/or allocation processes. The most complex concept to evaluate, inequity in urban areas, affects young people significantly through policy processes that systematically exclude specific groups of urban children from resources and opportunities. Groups of children may be excluded unfairly on the basis of income, race, religion, and gender.	The most controversial policy issue, since it often demonstrates the way in which policy elites unfairly distribute resources that affect health or ignore unjust distributions of power and/or resources with consequent health outcomes.

Adapted from Stephens²¹

TABLE 2 Summarising the evidence with selected urban social and environmental themes

Urban theme	Poverty	Difference	Inequality	Inequity	Rights
Water and sanitation	Urban children in low-income settlements are particularly affected by lack of access and poor-quality water. Homeless children are particularly at risk. Health impacts include diarrheal diseases and premature mortality particularly in under 5-year-olds. In richer and industrial cities, children, particularly children in poorer households might also be exposed to chemicals in water.	Children may have different levels of access to water, but this is not necessarily an inequality provided that all children have their basic needs for clean and sufficient quantities of water every day. This is true in most wealthy cities, but some street children may lack water for washing. In industrial towns and cities, water quality may be different in different parts of the city due to industrial contamination. This is not always an inequitable distribution but may become so if poorer people are unable to access uncontaminated water.	Unequal access to water may occur between social groups in cities, due to provision failures and/or water costs, which impact negatively on the poor. This inequality often expresses itself in lack of clean water and lack of plentiful supplies of water for children. Diarrheal diseases can result from both lack of quality and quantity of water. Inequity is strongly related to ability to access water. Water privatization may have negative impacts on poorer and street children.	Where poorer urban citizens pay more for water both in absolute and relative terms, an inequality can be seen as an inequity or injustice. This is particularly so when children bear the brunt of the health impacts of poor quality and limited access to water. Street children may be particularly affected by water privatization.	The Right to Water is recognized at international levels. As water becomes more scarce globally, rights to water of future urban children become a major policy issue particularly for future urban children. This raises the questions of current equity of use of urban water, but also intergenerational rights of children to plentiful clean water in cities.
Food	Food security is a major issue for children in low-income settlements in cities. This may be in lack of food or in the use of street foods—often convenient and low cost, but often contaminated and poor in nutrition. Under and malnutrition are problems in low-income	As with water, children may have different levels of access to foods but provided they all have the same access to a basic nutritious diet daily, this is not an inequality. A food-related health problem for many urban children at all levels of wealth is consumption of	In many cities, both in richer and poorer countries, areas of “food poverty” occur, where fresh foods are not available or are at a distance that makes costs of travelling to find fresh food higher. These food deserts are often in low-income areas and occur even in	Inequity in food access occurs when food prices are higher for poorer urban peoples, often in relative terms but also in absolute terms. Fresh and/or organic produce often costs more in absolute terms. Indigenous and migrant groups often are adversely affected by	Food security is a basic child right, and this means much more than adequate levels of calories. However, urban food is often not nutritious nor sustainably produced in a way that would support future urban food needs. Lower-income groups in cities are often faced with a

TABLE 2 (continued)

Urban theme	Poverty	Difference	Inequality	Inequity	Rights
	settlements in poorer cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Malnutrition is also a problem in cities in wealthier countries where poorer children and homeless children may have a very poor diet. Indigenous and ethnic minority children may be at risk of changed diet—moving to urban junk food. Macroeconomic changes may affect household food decisions very directly, with consequent impacts on child nutrition.	“junk” foods—which are easily available in urban areas and are related to rising trends of urban malnutrition and obesity. Levels of consumption of these foods are related to income, but also to individual family decisions and pressures, and school level policies. There may also be differences in access to uncontaminated foods, particularly in industrial towns and cities.	major wealthy cities like London. Consequent inequalities in access to fresh food may have impacts on nutritional status of children. Unequal access to food in cities may be due to historical planning decisions where large areas of housing were designed without space for food shops. Another inequality may occur when shops in poorer areas do not stock fresh or organic products and transport costs to access these foods can be expensive.	urban food access: they often move into marginalized urban areas and cannot access traditional foods.	double burden of under- and malnutrition for different age groups. Urban populations are also very vulnerable to macroeconomic trends, which affect food supplies, and rights to food security can be compromised severely. Urban contamination also affects food security for this and future generations of children.
Shelter	Shelter is one of the key determinants of urban health, partly because without basic shelter, it is difficult to access other needs such as water and sanitation. Homeless children and their mothers are the most important group focused on in cities internationally. There are also significant proportions of urban children living in insecure tenure situations.	Different levels of shelter quality and style may be income related but may also relate to culture. For example, high-density, high-rise dwelling might be considered an aspect of urban poverty in some cities and as a sign of wealth in another. Urban children in these settings might be considered disadvantaged (see green spaces) in some cities, and privileged in others.	Difference in urban shelter may become unequal when one group is located in an area that is disadvantaged environmentally (for example, easily flooded or unstable land). This may be a result of haphazard development patterns rather than deliberate exclusion or marginalization. A further aspect of inequality may occur between tenure status of different low-in-	Inequities in shelter provision can occur in cities when higher income groups “capture” the best areas of cities and the best resources. A more severe problem occurs when a local government targets a low-income area for improvement in an attempt to improve the lives of the urban “poor” only to find that the area “gentrifies” with higher income people buying out the poor and the	UN agencies outline the importance of the rights to housing and shelter, particularly for vulnerable groups in urban areas, but they continue to report and decry forced evictions. The evictions occur in many countries and often affect the most vulnerable groups of urban citizens. Children and their families are affected severely by forced evictions, not just in envi-

Air	The majority of slum improvement programs avoid work in insecure tenure situations.		come settlements. Insecure tenure status may put children at risk of homelessness and consequent risks.	poor re-locating into even worse conditions.	ronmental terms, but also in psychosocial terms by the trauma of these often violent government actions.
	To an extent, air pollution is a problem that affects the whole city. Many local governments treat urban air pollution as a city wide problem, but also focus on indoor air pollution of the poorest peoples. Fuel poverty affects poorer urban citizens and has different effects in different settings. In low-income settings, the poorest urban citizens are economically forced to use fuels that may expose them to indoor air pollution which can exacerbate some respiratory conditions and create risks for chronic conditions such as asthma, particularly for children.	People in different areas of a city may have different air quality due to proximity to major roads and/or industrial installations. But this might not be an unequal situation if the city, industry and roads have developed in an unplanned manner and both rich and poor families are exposed in different areas. Poorer groups might use fuels that contaminate their indoor air through choice or custom, and this might not be construed as an inequality or inequity.	Air quality in cities affects children's health disproportionately to adults. In this sense there is an inequality in every city between children and adults in their experience of air quality. Children of poorer families tend to live closer to busy roads and industries, and thus poorer air quality partly linked to lower housing costs and rents in those areas, and sometimes linked to work of the families.	Inequity can be seen in many aspects of air quality in cities. Road transport related air pollution is created in part by private transport, and the poor rarely have their own private transport, but live by the busy roads. Children of poorer urban families are most affected by this pollution, but have no part in creating it. Inequities are more stark for the most marginalized street children, who often live and work on busy, polluted streets. From an intergenerational perspective, all air pollution in cities is inequitable as effects will fall on future children, and air pollution is a major contributor to climate change.	Environmental Justice academics and activists, supported by the European Aarhus Convention put Rights to Clean Air as a key human and child right. Looked at from a child rights perspective, most urban children are deprived of their rights to clean air. From an intergenerational perspective, current urban air pollution is a major contributor to climate change and is a key concern in the search for a sustainable urban context. Urban children are affected today and will be affected in the future if urban air pollution is not reduced. Children working in industries and street children are the most extreme example of denial of the right to clean air.

THE PROBLEM OF URBAN VULNERABILITY

Many urban policymakers, faced with the challenge of extensive and seemingly unmanageable urban poverty and inequity, try to identify the most vulnerable urban children and citizens, often focusing on specific population groups within low-income settlements, for example, under 5-year-olds in low-income settlements, or social groups such as street children.^{71–74}

Focusing on specific groups of urban children is not necessarily a health-equity approach—it is a targeting approach, often employed to reach the “unreachable” urban children. Identifying “vulnerability” is highly controversial and disputed in many settings.^{75,76} Urban policies to reach urban vulnerable children are rarely based on a systematic analysis of urban *vulnerability*, but usually are based on a project-by-project approach, taking one urgent issue after another. One way of looking at this is to take a child-focused approach and see different vulnerabilities at different ages and which groups are then most vulnerable and to what risks. Children and young people have different vulnerabilities, depending on their age and gender. It should be noted that some academics would also express “spatial vulnerabilities” which would take all children in a certain area of risk in a city—for example, floodable areas, precarious landslide areas, or vector-prone areas.^{77,78} Table 3 explores the concept of urban child vulnerability by age group.

Table 3 describes the most vulnerable children from the perspective of age, but another way of looking at this is to see which social groups in a city are the most marginalized socially—perhaps on the basis of class, ethnicity, and religion. With this lens every town and city has its own pattern of social vulnerability, based on local contexts of historical and current trends of political and social prejudice. For example, Kolkata has deep social divides between communities of different religious backgrounds, and for the Hindu population, a further divide between castes.

TABLE 3 Looking at the most vulnerable urban children by age group

Age group	Most vulnerable urban children
> 5-year-olds	Very young children with homeless mothers are one of the most vulnerable groups in any city. ^{79–84} These children not only may be vulnerable themselves, but may be children of young mothers who are themselves very vulnerable. Children under 5 on the street of towns and cities are the hardest to reach vulnerable group and also most at risk of ill-health. These children are at risk from birth: they are often born to homeless mothers in the street and are low-birth weight, then are at risk of under and malnutrition and infectious diseases related to poor-quality water and food, and in some situations they are exposed to violence against them and their mothers. ^{85–87}
6–10-year-olds	As urban children age, they become very vulnerable to abuse by adults in both a physical sense and in terms of social and work life. Child labor remains a major risk for children from low-income families from this age until early adulthood. ^{20,88–94} Female children from this age onwards are at risk of sexual abuse and, in many contexts, sexual slavery. ^{95,96} Street children at this age are also highly at risk to drug abuse and to violence. ⁹⁷
10–18-year-olds	As urban children move into adolescence, they become increasingly vulnerable to social aspects of the urban environment. In some cities, drugs and alcohol abuse might affect large sections of the urban youth population. ^{98–100} However, the most vulnerable young people remain the children of the socially and environmentally marginalized groups in the urban setting. Again, street children are particularly at risk, and at this age young women are at particular risk of sexual violence and sexual exploitation by adults. ^{101–103}

Children in the most marginalized social groups in Kolkata experience extreme prejudice as they grow up and live in the most precarious housing and on the streets.^{45,104} In all major European cities today, there are historical divides between social “classes”, combined with more recent racial divides between existing urban citizens and migrant refugee groups.³⁷ Urban refugee children may be particularly vulnerable in that many children are refugees escaping wars and political conflict.^{105,106} They become more vulnerable as they find themselves and their families in the most marginalized urban settings in their new homes.¹⁰⁷ A particular group of refugees are indigenous children who, along with their families, often become residents of the most disadvantaged urban locations.^{108,109} Indigenous children are perhaps a particularly vulnerable group of migrant children, as they may come from a completely different world view and cultural background and may, with their families, find their new urban settings disorienting and threatening.¹⁰⁹ These children may also be very vulnerable to some of the most “unhealthy” social aspects of urban life—acculturating to poor urban diets, and in some settings, accessing drug and alcohol cultures within the city.^{110–114}

A fairly common approach to child and adolescent vulnerability is to look at personal vulnerability due to illness, disability or social situation. Street children, at any age and in any city, are amongst the most vulnerable social groups—they are at risk of many illnesses, under and malnutrition and social and personal violence (particularly for girls), and there is some evidence that “street” urban life can become a chronic intergenerational vulnerability—with generations of street young people growing up, and having their own children, who then become street children themselves.^{115,116} As a social group, urban child laborers are also particularly vulnerable: they may work to support their parents, but also often work for adults who exploit them. They experience not only the normal risks of childhood diseases related to urban poverty, but also have an early exposure to occupational diseases. They often labor in hazardous and arduous informal work situations without any protection.^{20,74,90,117,118}

Physical and mental disability can bring a very difficult vulnerability for children and young people in urban settings, often due to social discrimination, and disabled children from low-income families can be particularly vulnerable and very isolated.¹¹⁹ There is some evidence that mental disability, or mental illness, is a particular problem of current generations of urban children globally and may be particularly difficult in very inequitable urban settings where children may grow up in a very stressful, threatening, and disorienting environment with impacts on social coping, self-esteem, anxiety, and aggression.¹²⁰ In this sense, all children growing up in cities with great inequities between groups may be vulnerable to problems of emotional and psychosocial well-being.

POLICY RESPONSES TO URBAN INEQUITY: THE MDGS, TARGETING VULNERABILITY, AND FACING REALITY

If we look closely at the common urban strategies towards urban inequality and inequity, it becomes clear that most local governments adopt an approach that, at best, *targets* specific groups within the urban poor, using most often a spatial vulnerability or spatial poverty approach.^{2,121,122} UN Habitat credits this targeting approach with moving millions of urban citizens out of slum conditions: “between the year 2000 and 2010, a total 227 million people in the developing world will have moved out of slum conditions. In other words, governments have collectively

exceeded the slum target of Millennium Development Goal 7 by at least 2.2 times, and 10 years ahead of the agreed 2020 deadline”². Without decrying this potential achievement, it is important to note that this may be a difficult statistic to prove, either on the ground or over time, based on the difficulties of measurement of urban poverty. For very practical reasons, there has been an urban planning approach to MDG Goal 7, and it is difficult to say if MDG 7 has been achieved, either in the letter or the spirit of the goal—which was in fact to “achieve a significant improvement in the *lives* of at least 100 million slum dwellers”. So far initiatives to achieve MDG 7 seem to have interpreted the task as physical improvement of locations that could be described as “slums”. The problem with this is that the people who live in these “slums” often do not own the land, nor the structures they live in. There may be many levels of tenancy within these areas, and reaching the most disadvantaged families at the bottom of the tenancy ladder is very difficult. Often when “slum” conditions are improved, the poorest “slum dwellers” move or are forced out in a process known as gentrification.⁴⁵ Thus, although UN Habitat may be reporting on improvement of slum conditions it does not necessarily mean that these initiatives have improved the *lives* of the urban poor, particularly of the most vulnerable families. More fundamentally, and this is a problem of the original MDG 7 aspiration, there is little evidence that the initiatives so far have addressed the structural issues that keep the urban poor in poverty, and still less that they have addressed urban inequity.

This is not simply a problem of the MDGs and their delivery. Inequity is about power, and local governments have great political difficulty in addressing inequalities and differences in access to resources within cities, and still more difficulty addressing inequities. There are still few urban settings with strong re-distributional policies or more participatory governance, although as UN Habitat notes, initiatives such participatory decision-making and participatory budgeting have become more common.² If this participatory process is difficult for disadvantaged urban adults, it is more challenging for urban children.

It is important to realize that, while clarity with the concepts of urban inequality and inequity is critical for equity-sensitive urban policy-making, policymakers are faced with a bleak reality. We have passed the point when our urban future is a demographic certainty and are confronted by an urban world in which many children live without even their most basic substantive human rights in terms of access to physical well-being and access to resources.^{123,124} This is particularly clear in low-income regions of the world such as Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, and Latin America. In these areas, 30–70% or more of urban citizens may be living in precarious, low-income settlements.³ Within this, there may be differences in life chances due to the formality or non-formality of tenure status, and children living in non-formal settlements, or in temporary shelters, may be particularly at risk due to displacement and insecurity.^{18,61} To an extent, the urgency of this physical reality explains why so many urban policymakers focus on the immediate physical risks of urban poverty and do not deal with more complex equity issues of the urban poor.

There are far more examples of city policies addressing urban vulnerability, particularly for specific groups of urban citizens. In some senses, it is simpler for local governments to develop projects targeting “vulnerable” children, and much easier than developing “health-equity” approaches, which might threaten powerful urban citizens and may imply looking at the processes that make children more vulnerable. But there is a caveat to this also. Going back to Table 3, certain age

groups are much more difficult to help, in political terms, than others. It is notable that local governments have relatively little difficulty justifying projects to help *young* children in vulnerable situations.^{125,126} But as UNICEF noted in 2011, this situation changes when these vulnerable young people survive early childhood and reach adolescence.¹²⁷ Then, their vulnerable situation becomes a political and social marginalization, with young girls often forced into sex working and young boys into drugs and violence. These vulnerable young people are often criminalized, rather than supported by city governments.⁹⁷

If we look at urban child vulnerability by social context, we see an equally problematic policy approach. If we take street children as an example, at best there are projects to help and support these children, often implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in many cases supported by international child agencies and by some local governments.^{74,87,128} But street children are often made homeless for political reasons, and in many cities, whole families, with their children, may be made homeless by forced evictions, implemented by local governments of cities. UN Habitat in 2007 reported that, very worryingly, this process is increasing: “forced evictions over the last years have increased dramatically in frequency, in number, in level of violence and many times in scale, being outnumbered sometimes in hundreds of thousands and in millions. They are gradually becoming a massive common practice en lieu of urban planning and inclusive social policies. Existing information indicates that over the last three years evictions have been taking place or are to take place in at least 60 countries”.¹²⁹

As we look at the evidence on both problems and solutions, we see the most interesting examples emerging in collaborations of the urban “civil society” and its organizations with children and local governments.¹²⁹ When we talk of civil society in most cities and towns, we mean the plethora of the community groups and NGOs that have sprung up in response to the urban crisis, and the failure of local governments to address the major problems faced by their urban citizens.^{130,131}

Urban CSOs may have city, or town-wide concerns, with environmental issues such as air pollution, noise, or urban waste, and often with social issues such as urban violence or refuges for street children and sex workers. In many urban settings, particularly in poorer communities within cities, the majority of CSOs are concerned with very local issues of access to water, sanitation, housing, health, and education services, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable urban children. They are often concerned with major social and health problems facing their communities, such as community violence or teenage pregnancy or urban nutrition for young children. They often provide a platform for disenfranchised urban citizens to voice their concerns at a policy level,¹³² and they are often strong advocates for participation of young people in the urban policy process.

The collaboration and inclusion of disadvantaged young people, and the CSOs that support them, in the policy process can be very important in health-equity policy terms. Disadvantaged groups of children, and adults, within cities often have a strong sense of the upstream social context that keeps them trapped in material poverty, and they often argue for much more inter-sectoral and upstream interventions, which are particularly important for complex issues such as urban violence and drug use, and for inclusion of highly alienated groups such as street children.^{2,129,133–135}

Urban CSOs are very important, but they do not replace equitable local city governments, nor are they able to deliver alone on the massive urban equity agenda. The key role of urban CSOs is in bridging the communication gap between local

governments and the massive community of marginalized, and in some cases disenfranchised, urban citizens. Most importantly for child equity approaches, these civil society groups often reach the young people that most local governments cannot—or will not: the homeless, youth gangs, child laborers, young people trapped in drug circles and sex working, the lonely, and most excluded young people in our urban centers. They can provide access to urban information, they often support community-led evaluations of urban policy, and they can enable access to the policy process.^{37,136–140}

This takes us back to the initial discussion of conceptual clarity in understanding the ideas of urban equality and equity. Urban inequity is about injustice within cities. Very few local governments want to be seen as actively *unjust*, particularly to children. The problem is that cities are dense and complex political systems, and the groups who access local government decision forums with most ease are often wealthy groups of citizens, who argue that street children are thieves or that they do not want to live alongside “slums”—with their young sex workers, drug dealers, and risk of disease. The urban divide has become so great in some towns and cities that there is no social contact—other than “crime”—between the urban elites who control decision-making and the vast majority of urban citizens living and dying in “slums” and on the streets. This can create a very difficult cycle of intra-urban alienation, which CSOs and local governments alone cannot address and which is particularly problematic for children.

URBAN RIGHTS, CHILD RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

One promising approach has emerged from the rights community. If we look at urban poverty from a human rights perspective, there is considerable grounding in the idea that all urban poverty is unjust per se: for human rights specialists and for the major treaties signed on human rights, all human beings have a right to an adequate level of resources and services, and to health, defined very broadly. According to the UN Declaration on Human Rights, all peoples also have a right to *dignity* and four key freedoms: freedom of speech, belief, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.^{141–143} Then, if any group within a city is with want, and without an adequate level of resources, this group is being denied their basic human rights. But, more controversially, as Table 1 summarizes, it is possible to address the physical components of urban poverty—the so-called basic needs approach of “slum improvement”, without addressing the more complex rights to dignity and freedom of urban citizens.

Environmental Justice theories have relevance here.^{65,138} Importantly, the recent international treaties on environmental justice distinguish two types of right: substantive and procedural. *Substantive* rights include rights to adequate levels of environmental resources, services, and ultimately, the right to human well-being and health. In urban policy terms, this is the equivalent of the traditional urban poverty and slum upgrading approach, which focused on improving physical infrastructure services for the urban poor. *Procedural* rights include access to information and access to, and participation in, the decision-making process.¹³⁸ To an extent this simplifies the concept of “dignity” captured in the UN Declaration, but perhaps it also operationalizes this complex concept and identifies participation as a key aspect of the right to freedom. The idea of procedural rights is particularly important for discussions of urban equity, since this concept includes rights to participation in urban decision-making. This is critical in urban policy terms. Urban policies aimed

at the MDG “slum” target can interpret the task of “significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers” from a *substantive* perspective, with improvement of physical and perhaps some social conditions within low-income settlements. But interpreted from a broader rights perspective, which includes *procedural* justice, this is not enough.

The debate becomes more challenging for urban policymakers when we look at Child Rights. In international policy terms, children particularly have rights.¹⁴⁴ This centers on substantive rights to a healthy childhood, both in physical terms and in terms of opportunities and mental well-being.^{93,145–148} From this perspective, millions of children living in urban poverty are denied their substantive human and child rights. But there is a broader and more controversial child rights perspective, which includes procedural rights of children to *participation*.¹²⁸ The issue of child rights to participation has a major urban equity dimension. With a broad child rights lens, all urban conditions impact on children and young people in an inequitable and unjust way, in that *adults* are the urban decision makers, and *children* are rarely, if ever, given a significant decision-making role in their urban settings. In these terms, many urban settings are doubly unjust, as they deprive our youngest urban citizens of their rights to healthy growth and their rights to decision-making over their urban situation. Differences in both substantive and procedural rights *between* young urban people could be argued to create a further inequality and inequity—perhaps even in subtle indicators of social segregation between children on the basis of social or ethnic difference.

There is a final aspect of child rights which links to a key challenge of equitable urban development: urban sustainability. This concept has developed many meanings, but perhaps its most common sense is that urban areas should become environmentally self sufficient and that cities should reduce their negative impact on the global environment.²¹ Cities have the potential to be the key to sustainable development, where people live in higher density with a lower impact on the global environment, supported by sustainable technological advances. At the moment, we are nowhere near such an environmentally sustainable urban world. With a child-focused lens, social and intergenerational sustainability become important also. Social sustainability is profoundly linked to urban equity. Cities cannot be socially sustainable while urban children grow up without their rights to basic well-being and often lose their lives in cities of conflict, where youth violence is often related to social injustice. Both environmental and social sustainability raise again the issue of inter-generational equity and the rights of future urban children. Intergenerational equity means policymakers should consider the well-being of future children and their access to environmental and social resources, within current decision-making. The world’s towns and cities are *currently* the hub of social inequity and environmental unsustainability, and if they continue to stay this way, or even worsen, then the rights of future children may be even more threatened than those of urban children today. From this broad and intergenerational child rights perspective, there probably is no equitable urban society in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no ready solution for the urban inequities that we see today in urban settings internationally. There is no policy that will work in every setting, particularly in the context of the complex social processes that create these urban inequities in different settings. Working together, civil society groups and local

government, supported by international agencies such as UNICEF, can move towards linking disadvantaged young people with local government within cities, and creating policies that support the inclusion of disadvantaged urban children and their families in policy decisions. Refocusing our debate around justice and rights may help us move away from targeting. This takes us some way towards the UN Habitat call for the Right to the City² and the inclusion of all citizens in the running and future of the city.

Young people in urban areas internationally are perhaps the most important urban citizens to work with to change urban inequity. This is partly demographics: six out of ten children will be living in cities by 2025.⁶ It is also because young urban people represent our urban future in social and political terms. It is important to note that there is evidence that young children are very equity aware and that very young children do not see race or class difference as they play.¹⁴⁹ They *learn* how to live in inequity from adults. In many cities today, a child in a wealthy family will grow up in a private enclave and go to a private school and then a private university. They may sometimes see, but will have no social contact with, children growing up in poverty or vulnerability, other than, in many contexts, through violent confrontation. They will form their understanding of their fellow urban young citizens through this experience and through the often-negative media reports on these young people. Young people living on the streets and in low-income settlements, on the other hand, will grow up seeing their wealthier young fellow urbanites only as they emerge from the gates of their private enclaves, schools and universities, and they will learn from urban society that they have no access to those places and opportunities. They will learn that they are excluded. Local government and civil society can go some way to make towns and cities more equitable, and they can be supported to bring the voice of excluded urban children to the policy arena. But this is not enough. Urban equity for children means also that children in the same city need to be supported by urban adults to grow up together and learn from each other, not to live in fear and isolation of each other.

There is a final issue of intergenerational equity and the well-being of future urban children. The current children of our cities will grow up to decide if they will share their urban spaces equitably both now and in the future. Their children and future generations of children will learn either how to live sustainably and equitably, or to continue our pattern of unsustainable and inequitable urban development. It is the responsibility of current adults within cities internationally to support young people today to learn how to live in equity and sustainability. Local governments, CSOs and international agencies can support this process. But we should probably remember that the concept of citizenship originated in a city, and it is urban *citizens*, and particularly, our young *City-zens*, who will hold the key.

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