

# A changing urban context

*“We are living in an ever increasingly urban world, with more children growing up in cities than ever before. It is therefore imperative that we design and build cities that meet the needs of children: seeking their input during the design process, providing them with access to play and education, and facilitating their social and cultural interactions.”*

— Prof. Klaus Schwab, founder and Executive Chairman, World Economic Forum

By 2050 around 70% of the world’s population will live in cities.<sup>5</sup> The majority of these urban residents will be under the age of 18.<sup>4</sup> Today that number is already over one billion.<sup>5</sup> The things children want from an urban environment are fundamentally the same as everyone else: safe and clean streets, access to green space, clean air, things to do, the ability to get around, the freedom to see friends, and somewhere to call home.<sup>6</sup>

How children experience cities – and the specific motivations for child-friendly approaches – varies from place to place. Responses to their needs must be tailored to each city’s cultural, political, socioeconomic and environmental context.

While the response must be context specific, the underlying challenges are often the same. In some high-income countries, previous gains in life expectancy are beginning to reverse, with children predicted to live shorter and less healthy lives than their parents<sup>7</sup>; while in developing countries, changing lifestyles and societal norms including lower rates of physical activity and an increased consumption of processed food are also contributing to dramatic changes in child health.<sup>8</sup> Globally, the number of overweight children under five is expected to reach 70m by 2025, compared to 41m in 2016.<sup>9</sup> The rate of increase is particularly significant in developing countries, with 30% more children overweight compared to developed countries.<sup>10</sup> Rates of mental health

**+60m**

urban population

Every year the world’s urban population increases by about 60m.<sup>11</sup>

**1bn+**

children

live in urban settings around the world.<sup>12</sup>

**80%**

of the world’s adolescent population is insufficiently physically active as a result of urbanisation.<sup>13</sup>

problems among children are also on the rise, with the stresses of urban life and declining opportunities for play identified as contributing factors.<sup>14</sup>

### **The role of the built environment**

Many factors shape a child's prospects. Among these, the environment in which they live has to be considered a key determinant of their health, behaviour and development.<sup>15</sup> This affects not just their childhood but the rest of their adult life. Everyday activities such as walking, cycling and play can support a physically active population.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, high-density traffic, poor air quality and a lack of public space can directly discourage people from being physically active.<sup>17</sup>

As such, the dominance of cars in cities is considered one of the biggest barriers to child-friendliness and a key factor in preventing parents from granting children independent mobility.<sup>18</sup> The impact in the developing world is extreme, where environmental pollution and traffic accidents are at their highest.<sup>19</sup> With less independent mobility, children have a reduced ability to navigate and experience the city. This means fewer opportunities for social interaction, chance encounters, playful journeys and discovery.<sup>20</sup>

Arguably, urban planning has historically given insufficient consideration to vulnerable groups, including children. This was recognised at the United Nations 2016 Habitat III conference on sustainable urbanisation, where participants agreed upon the principle that cities should provide equal rights and opportunities for people of all ages.<sup>21</sup>

### **Children as agents of change**

The challenges outlined above can be overcome. The case studies featured in this publication show that children can be powerful agents in the design and implementation of better urban environments. Furthermore, this report argues that taking a child-friendly approach will allow us to tackle issues in a more holistic and integrated manner, leading to benefits and positive outcomes for all. These benefits are explored in more detail in the following chapter.

Early childhood experiences and development are determining factors in adulthood prospects and can lead to increased cost to society.<sup>22</sup>



### **Child-friendliness in a global context**

The actions that should be taken to achieve child-friendly cities vary across the globe. They depend on the specific local contexts, including climate, urban challenges and a city's current level of child-friendliness. While some cities will first need to address basic needs such as sanitation or housing, other cities may focus on traffic safety, environmental pollution or child-engagement in the urban agenda.

Image: © Catalytic Action

# The core challenges of urban childhoods



## Traffic and pollution

Traffic and pollution are global challenges, affecting children's physical and mental development and hindering independent mobility.<sup>23</sup> Safe roads, crossings and mixed-use neighbourhoods that support cycling and walking can reassure parents, reduce pollution and encourage social interaction.

Children from deprived regions are four times more likely to be hit by a car than those from more developed regions.<sup>19</sup>



## High-rise living and urban sprawl

Sprawling cities encourage car-dependency, increased traffic and pollution, and reduce trust.<sup>24</sup> While overly dense high-rise living can lead to isolation and cramped conditions, well-designed developments can enable lively communities and access to outdoor space.<sup>25</sup>

Density, a diverse land-use mix and well connected streets increase physical activity and decrease body mass index.<sup>26</sup>



## Crime, social fears and risk aversion

A parent's perception of risk in terms of accidents, crime, strangers and traffic determines a child's independent mobility and their access to space.<sup>27</sup> A balanced approach to safety and risk and natural surveillance can encourage exploration and play.

A 90% decrease in local anti-social behaviour, from 44 to 4 incidents was achieved through the creation of a play space in Merseyside, UK.<sup>28</sup>



## Inadequate and unequal access to the city

Poor quality green spaces, uneven distribution of playable public realm and a lack of safe access can exacerbate social inequality across the city, as can a shortage of free family activities.<sup>29</sup> The public realm can help to equalise social inequality if within reach, accessible to all and evenly distributed across the city.

Adverse early childhood experiences are associated with increased risk of adult disease and dysfunction.<sup>30</sup>



## Isolation and intolerance

Children's opportunities for discovery can be restricted by spaces and attitudes that discourage their presence.<sup>23</sup> Teenagers in particular are often perceived negatively and marginalised.<sup>31</sup> Better street and public space design, for example through co-creation, can encourage more interaction and trust.

Over 40% of Americans believe children up to the age of 12 should be legally required to be supervised when playing in a park.<sup>32</sup>