

## **Shaping Urbanization for Children: A Handbook on Child-Responsive Urban Planning**

Jens Aert (2018)

UNICEF, 188 pages

Available for free: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/shaping-urbanization-children>

ISBN: 978-92-806-4960-4

---

Nearly a third of the 4 billion people living in urban areas today are children. According to global trends, by 2030, 60 percent of the world's population will live in cities. In recent years, two major United Nations declarations aim to address the challenges of the growing urbanization of the world. The necessity to think about city building and management in a different way is one of the pillars of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) and especially of the Sustainable Development Goal 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable." During the Habitat III Conference (Quito, 2016), UN member states also established a "New Urban Agenda," which focuses particularly on urban planning as a way to achieve sustainable urban development.

*Shaping Urbanization for Children: A Handbook on Child-Responsive Urban Planning* could be seen as part of UNICEF's response to the Habitat III Conference.<sup>2</sup> It seeks to show how the built environment can support children's rights, and how children's rights and urban planning are a way to achieve several of the Sustainable Development Goals. Although the book focuses on children, it starts with the idea that shaping urbanization for children is not only necessary for them: it is the means to build sustainable cities for all.

The manual, authored by UNICEF urban planning specialist Jens Aerts, is the result of a collaborative process that engaged a reference group composed of urban planning and cities experts of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP), the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), and other institutions.

The handbook targets "everyone involved in planning, designing, transforming, building and managing the built environment" (p. 6), including urban planning professionals, city governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations. Its objective is as large as its intended audience: it aims to call urban stakeholders to bring children to the foreground of urban planning and to present concepts, evidence, and technical strategies on why and how to do this. As set out in the book, those different stakeholders can use it for a large range of purposes, including "to promote planning better cities for children," "to support the process towards child-responsive cities," "to build evidence for child-responsive cities," and "to influence stakeholders" (p. 8).

---

<sup>2</sup>After the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), in 1996, UNICEF and UN-Habitat launched the Child Friendly Cities Initiatives, with the objective of including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child at a municipal level.

The manual has two parts. The first (chapters 1, 2, and 3) sets the bases for child-responsive cities: Why plan cities for children? What can be planned for children? How can cities be better planned for children? These chapters are mainly conceptual and present a dense synthesis of concepts and typologies. The ten “children’s rights and urban planning principles” “all cities should commit to” (p. 5) are the core of the handbook. Principle 1 (investments) “outlines three preconditions for urban planning to be beneficial for children and involve their participation—to be area-based (promoting people design and spatial planning), to be process-oriented (supporting children’s participation in local stakeholder engagement), and to be evidence-driven (addressing spatial equity and people-centred decision-making)” (p. 44). The remaining nine principles are based on the components of child-responsive urban settings previously defined: housing and land tenure, public amenities, public spaces, transportation systems, integrated urban water and sanitation management systems, food systems, waste cycle systems, energy networks, and data and information technology networks. The first part of the manual ends with a checklist on “Children’s Rights and Urban Planning Principles” (pp. 62-65), which is intended to evaluate, step by step, child-responsive urban planning at different scales and by different actors.

The second part of the handbook (chapter 4) aims to provide technical support for urban planning stakeholders in order to implement “children’s rights and urban principles.” The handbook examines, for each principle:

- Why should we invest? (current challenges; the benefits for children and their community)
- What should we plan? (definitions and concepts; promising practices; supporting international frameworks)
- How should we plan? (planning the space; designing the process; using evidence, including a list of possible indicators)

Each section also contains a list of bibliographic resources. Children’s rights to non-discrimination and to participation are cross-cutting principles.

*Shaping Urbanization for Children* is a good tool with which to advocate for the necessity of including urban planning in children’s rights agendas and, at the same time, to consider children’s rights within urban planning agendas. In this sense, the book reaches its main purpose and manages to synthesize a huge number of concepts and issues. However, because of its wide intended audience and broad purposes, the handbook may be a better starting point to approach the complex issues of shaping cities for children and their communities instead of a technical tool. To go more deeply in this issue would imply, among other things, taking into account the context of the cities: their scale and existing urban fabric, as well as their geographical and cultural specificities. One interesting challenge would be to think about child-responsive urban planning without making cities and children uniform.

Review by Tuline Gülgönen

**Tuline Gülgönen** received her master's degrees in Philosophy (Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne) and Political Sciences (Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris "Sciences po") and wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on the child rights approach in Mexican NGOs (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM). She is currently a research associate at the Centro de Estudios Mexicanos y Centroamericanos (CEMCA) and an independent consultant on children's rights and participation. Her research interests focus on the relation between children, urban public space, and public policies.

### **Author's Response**

As rightly commented in the book review, the knowledge, concept and tools elaborated in the handbook need to be translated into the local context of a specific city and its geographical and cultural specificities. This remark touches upon two strategic objectives we envisioned and discussed many times amongst contributors.

It has been a conscious choice to focus in the first chapters on developing a rationale that resonates globally and aims to fill a gap we felt present in international literature and practice around child rights, child development and cities for all. By listing major vulnerabilities of children related to spatial inequity and environmental degradation, we wanted to emphasize that a commitment to child rights implies the need to invest in urban planning and urban design and consequently to increase the impact of child-friendly cities initiatives that usually focus on children's participation and access to basic services. Equally, the structure of the handbook, based on nine built environment components and three families of urban planning dimensions that can be instrumentalized to make urban settings child-responsive, helps to identify entry points in the daily professional practice of the reader and provides a tool to urban planning stakeholders to contribute to making cities child-friendly. Although chapter 4 uses a more technical language that should be familiar to built environment specialists and most urban policy makers, it is meant to be a starter for further translation into specific contexts or urban programs. For these reasons the publication is a handbook with a global aspiration, not a toolkit. Neither is it a compendium that accumulates various concepts, theories and examples of application; rather, the handbook aims to aspire and give guidance to reach that aspiration.

The handbook and its call to cities to commit to 10 child rights and urban planning principles also came with a dissemination strategy that sought to spur local interest and application in specific urban contexts. A free on-line version of the handbook and uptake in professional media generated various activities such as dialogues, debates, workshops and trainings with local partners. In the course of the 18 months since its original publication, more than 3500 downloads were registered, and 500 hardcopies were sent out to partners. The Urban Planning Society of China facilitated the translation of the handbook into Chinese and a Spanish version will be launched soon. In collaboration with academic partners, professional groups and local public authorities, experts from various technical NGOs and myself conducted

trainings, seminars and workshops in 17 countries, reaching approximately 1400 professionals directly. UNICEF Philippines, Paraguay and South Africa set up a training-of-trainers program to capacitate more than 70 urban planning experts, who will set up further courses and trainings on child rights and urban planning, based on a workshop script, a syllabus and a checklist for an individual action plan. Knowing that many participants are affiliated with key institutions, the training gives them an opportunity to think how to mainstream a child rights approach within their organization.