

# GOVERNANCE & URBAN POOR

**A** policy watch on young children living in urban poverty  
**HUMARA BACHPAN CAMPAIGN** initiative



**PUBLIC SPACE**

## Abstract

Can we imagine our lives and our neighbourhood without any public space for recreation, play and various other outdoor activities? Then why children living in urban slums should be devoid of public spaces to play and enjoy? With 65 million people living in slums, as per the Census 2011, the basic priority of securing a living space pushes out other priorities especially a proper and a safe public space. Good quality of public space to play for children is as important as having a house to live. Playgrounds for children in slums are the garbage dumping yards, narrow lanes and streets outside their houses. This policy brief is an attempt to highlight the importance of play, safe playgrounds for children and urge the policymakers, urban planners to consider the recommendations to ensure holistic development of children.

## Introduction

The urban fabric of India is characterized by two forms of ad-hoc growth. One with increasing squatters who cannot afford formal housing and are compelled to live in self-built dilapidated settlements and are densely packed with under-served infrastructure facilities. The second is the increasing skyscraper, high rise buildings driven by private developer who are filling in the void left by lack of planning, with shopping malls, office plazas and gated communities. Though they are well-designed modules but there is hardly any regard for infrastructure or open spaces. These trends compromise the health and physical development of children especially living in urban slums.

Though the provision of public space may not seem to be a priority considering many informal settlements lack basic necessities like clear water, sanitation, closed drainage and health care. But various studies around the world demonstrate that recreation, play and sport are not only improving health- both mind and body but they are also teaching important life lessons about respect, leadership and cooperation. They are promoting equality for all and bridging divides between people. Hence, there is a pushing need for an adequate and safe public space for children.

## Importance of Play from Early Childhood to Adolescents

There is substantial research to show clear linkages between play and brain development, motor-skills, and social capabilities. Playgrounds provide a platform for children to play and are imperative for a child's cognitive, emotional, physical and social development.

During **early childhood**, infants begin to explore their surrounding not only with their eyes but also with hands, feet and mouth. Play gives children the stimulation and physical activity they need to develop their brains for future learning. However, the small dilapidated houses in slums do not give adequate space for children to play which not only harms their learning ability but also impedes their physical development and social skills.

**School-aged children** learn how to play in a team, develop their physical skills and practice cooperation, mutual understanding and logical thinking, sharing, respecting their peers and valuing rules. Though children going to school may have access to playgrounds which is also not necessary, there is hardly any space available for children in their neighbourhood or within their premises which compels them to play on the streets with heavy traffic, garbage dump

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yards, space between houses, which is not only dangerous but exposes children to diseases and accidents.

Physical recreational activities provide **adolescents** an opportunity for self-expression. Through play adolescents can develop their skills of communication, negotiation, leadership, and test and improve their abilities which increase their confidence. But unsafe public spaces, lack of street lights and the fear of being harassed prohibits children especially girls from participating in communal life, play and recreational activities.

#### **Key Recommendations**

- ▶ *Urban local bodies (ULBs) to address children's need and right to play in all the slum development projects*
- ▶ *Create multi-purpose, safe recreational grounds especially for adolescent girls*
- ▶ *Ensure proper provisioning of parks, playgrounds, open spaces and community halls for outdoor and indoor activities*
- ▶ *Maintenance of the quality of space for play is essential*
- ▶ *Consultations between the ULBs, urban planners, architects, engineers, contractors and children to strategically make the best possible use of the limited resources*

#### **Schemes and Policies that emphasize on playgrounds for children in India:**

**National Charter for Children, 2003:** Emphasizes Government of India's (GoI) commitment to children's right to survival, health and nutrition, standard of living, **play and leisure**, early childhood care, education, protection of the girl child, equality, life and liberty and freedom of expression.

**National Plan of Action for Children, 2005:** One of the objectives for adolescents is to promote physical, mental and emotional health through play, sports, recreation, artistic and cultural expression, personality development and character building. This objective would be achieved through developing adequate sports and recreational facilities such as libraries, gymnasiums, playing areas, cultural centres, fitness and yoga in the rural and urban community, neighbourhood areas, in schools and educational institutions as well. One of the goals under child and development is to ensure creation of appropriate means for play, recreation and cultural development for the all round development of the child and this goal would be achieved through creation of space and institutions for play, recreation and cultural activities for children in the neighborhood. Further, all schools to have **playgrounds** and other basic facilities, with special attention to disadvantaged children and this objective would be achieved by ensuring that all children in the 6-14 years of age group have **access to playground** with special attention to disadvantaged children.



**Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA):** In March 2010, guidelines for playground in school development was developed which emphasizes on the fact that a play area should be developed in such a manner that it is safe, rugged and provides play opportunities for all children including those with special needs. Design of play spaces should respond to the needs of a child and should provide opportunity for play and discussions among peer groups. These guidelines explicitly state that every school should have a playground for children and the minimum area for the school playground as per specifications in IS code 8827 is: pre-school 1000 m<sup>2</sup> and primary school 4000 m<sup>2</sup>. Despite a 137 percent increase in SSA infrastructure budget between 2009-10 and 2011-12, the proportion of schools with shortfall in the provision of playground facilities has remained more or less unchanged between the years of 2010-2011.

**Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM) and Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY):** Both these schemes mention about the provision of social amenities like community halls, child-care centres, parks and playgrounds for children in urban slums. But under JnNURM provision of parks and playgrounds did not receive importance as against the provision of basic services for urban poor. Providing a mere empty land for children to play is not a playground. It needs to be designed keeping in mind the needs of a child and incorporating their dreams and vision of a playground while designing. Even where the playgrounds has been provided the swings, see-saw are all in a dilapidated condition with no proper lights around the playground which makes children especially girls to either play indoors or not play at all.

Moreover, needs of children and adolescents are often sidelined and they are hardly given a chance to participate in discussions and bring their issues to the forefront. Children lose the joy of playing and having fun in their childhood because of lack of open space in their neighbourhood, lack

of proper planning and involving children in the community participation.

An evaluation of this commitment made by Gol is essential to analyze have they been successful in providing public spaces for children in urban slums, if not then what are the probable reasons and what should be the way forward for providing such services

### Is there dearth of financial resources?

Mandatory reform at the level of ULBs for Basic Services of Urban Poor (BSUP) under JnNURM specifies:

**Internal earmarking of funds, within local bodies, budgets for basic services to the urban poor to ensure adequate funds are available for undertaking developmental projects for the poor.** One of the main components of this mandatory reform is:

- ▶ Adoption of clear, affirmative policy at state and ULB level for earmarking certain amount (MHUPA recommended norm is 25% of municipal budget including funds flowing from higher level governments) of funds for urban poor by the State and each municipal body of the State.
- ▶ Constitution of 'Basic Services for Urban Poor Fund' and setting the rules/modifications for contribution and disbursement from funds
- ▶ Creation and operation of appropriate budgetary mechanism to ensure that funds allocated for urban poor get spent on urban poor

The BSUP internal funds can be allocated for welfare of children under budget head of Urban Poverty Alleviation and Social Welfare, provision/maintenance of parks, gardens, gardens and playgrounds under the budget head of Urban Forestry and Recreational Infrastructure.



This clearly indicates that inadequate financial resources cannot be cited as a reason for poor quality of open spaces and playgrounds for children. Rather it is the limited capacities of the ULBs to prioritize and give importance to the provision of open space and community halls for children. Lack of vision and knowledge about the importance of play amongst the ULBs does not compel them to take these projects on a priority basis.

### Key Recommendations

- ▶ *Capacity building and training session for ULBs to highlight the importance of play and how it affects the physical development of a child*
- ▶ *Allocate and spend budget judiciously for building parks, playgrounds and community centres*
- ▶ *Involve children while designing a playground, community centres etc to incorporate their suggestions in the design plan*
- ▶ *Prioritize the projects undertaken for slum development and ensure proper play spaces for children to give them the best start in their life*
- ▶ *Slides, see saws, swings and other outdoor games should be made with material which is child-friendly and safe for children and ensure regular maintenance of these rides*
- ▶ *Ensure children in urban slums have access to playgrounds which are safe and with sufficient lights*

### Learn through Play: Good practices

**Islamic Republic of Iran:** Slides and see saws, swings and outdoor games provided temporary relief for children traumatized by the massive earthquake in the city of Bam, Islamic Republic of Iran in December, 2003. The quake claimed the lives of over 45,000 people and orphaned more than 2000 children. Early childhood centres were quickly set up to provide physical and emotional support to affected children. An innovative combination of story-telling, arts, self-care education, relaxation, exercises and play assisted children in their healing and recovery.

**Zambia:** Nearly 5 million children between 6 months and 14 years of age were successfully vaccinated against measles in one of the biggest health campaigns in Zambia's history. UNICEF, working with a NGO Right to Play, recruited athlete ambassadors, including famous Zambian football player Kalusha Bwalya, to reinforce key health messages pasted on billboards and posters. In some areas play stations were set up at vaccination posts which brought children together to play games focusing on the importance of immunization. The local media aired radio jingles and television spots. The National Measles Campaign in Zambia, held in June 2003, was part of a larger global effort to halve the number of measles death by 2005.

## Conclusion

Globally the importance of play has been recognized and efforts are being made to encourage play, sports and recreational activities amongst children. Children growing in urban slums also have the right to play in safe public spaces and attempts should be made to provide playgrounds, open spaces and community centres for them. Play helps children to survive and thrive, provides quality education, prepares infants for future learning, strengthens the body and prevents diseases, improves self-confidence and self-esteem and improves learning and academic performance. These benefits would act as a sufficient proof for our ULBs to take immediate action to provide proper, safe and child-friendly open spaces.



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