In 'Soul Boy', a new film by Kenyan director Hawa Essuman, a young boy and girl race through the railway line slum of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya. Over the course of the magical realist story, they shelter a cell phone thief from informal street security enforcers, take part in a HIV/AIDS awareness play, and play a game of ‘chicken’ with the Kisumu Express, the train that runs through the heart of Kibera, one of the largest slums in Africa. It is all part of a mystical plan on the part of a witch doctor to cure their father’s alcoholism and neglect.

The film is a rare depiction of the lives of urban poor children as they see it. The universal mystery, wonder, and promise of childhood comes face to face with the specific realities of being a young child in an urban slum. The main character of Abi lives in a shack that doubles as his father’s corner store along a main dirt road in a neighborhood of Kibera known as Soweto. His mother, thoroughly unimpressed with his father’s philandering ways, works at a textile factory. Abi’s aunt is a maid and cooks for a family in a wealthy suburb on the other side of town.

Towards the end of the movie, as Abi lies on the rail in front of the oncoming Kisumu Express, his friend Shiku asks him, “Abi, what are you doing?”

His reply as the train rumbles ever closer, is delivered with eyes closed. It is strange. “I’m trying to understand.”

Shiku shakes her head knowingly. “That’s fine, but I don’t think this is a good place to do it”, she says. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

Where to go? Such is the question that often leads families to the rapidly growing cities of the Global South. The slums of these cities are home to many, and often the majority, of urban dwellers. They are characterized by poor or non-existent water, sanitation, and other basic services, as well as what is often referred to as “informality”, a lack of legal recognition of living spaces, economic, and even social livelihoods.

The bedrock: women-led, daily savings

Children in urban slums have an acute experience of the pressures of place and family. Crowded conditions deny them safe spaces for developmental growth. Domestic and economic demands on parents, and especially mothers, can force children into labor. Problems of health and sanitation in slums affect young people most.

At the same time, it is these pressures of place and family that are central to community organization aimed at upgrading lives and shelter in urban slums. In fact, it is not so surprising that SDI has always had a focus on women. Traditionally the ones responsible for the household, women are now regarded universally as the most reliable managers of finance. SDI federations are organized around the bedrock practice of women-led, daily savings. The fact that this is led by women is an acknowledgment of their capacity to manage money and to serve as the ‘glue’ for effective, organized communities. As Rose Molokoane, a leader of the Federation of the Urban Poor (FEDUP) in South Africa, and SDI deputy president, often says, “the word ‘women’ stands for ‘well organized men’.”

The process of SDI community organization in urban slums has always been tied to the developmental needs of the children who live there. As far back as the early 1980s, the SDI alliance in India began to organize the street children of Mumbai. At the time, most agencies involved in this work directed their energies to the rehabilitation of street children, with the primary aims being to provide them with a decent
education and to reunite them with their families. In contrast, the Indian alliance organized street children, all between the ages of 5 and 18, into a loose movement called Sadak Chaap – meaning the ‘Stamp of the Street’ – a term that Bollywood has now appropriated and popularized.

The Indian alliance of SDI made no effort to educate or rehabilitate the street kids. Instead they physically linked them to the women’s savings collectives by building dormitories, managed by the kids themselves, situated alongside the railway tracks and the pavement dwellings where the women held their meetings and conducted their daily lives. Without any external instruction the women began to provide emotional support and sustenance to the kids. Instead of directing them to training rooms, classrooms or to the households that they had left behind, the women simply gave them a safe passage to adulthood. Ever since this time, provision of a safe passage has been the defining characteristic of SDI’s work with children.
It has taken on a new resonance and meaning in Africa's slums where the AIDS epidemic has made households headed by young children a fairly common reality. In northern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, an organization allied to sdi, called Sizakuyenza, has organized dozens of these households into savings collectives. While these have intrinsic economic value, the main motivation for the sdi collectives is seen in this context to be about creating solidarities and providing safe space to those who are socially, politically and economically marginalized, including children.

Federations of savers have also helped create the space for children to develop their own initiatives for recreation and expressing their imagination. In Kibera and other slums throughout Nairobi, the Kenyan federation affiliated to sdi, known as Muungano wa wanavijiji, has been working with street children for the past seven years. These children, who call themselves Mwamko wa vijana or 'youth awakening', have led projects such as beauty pageants, reporting and editing an original slum newspaper, and regular neighborhood cleanups.

Facilitating chaos, with startling results

Over time these efforts to organize children have faced challenges common throughout the world when organizing kids as part of building communities: namely their propensity to change direction and interest. The strategy of Muungano and a group of support professionals known as the Muungano Support Trust (MUST) has been to facilitate this chaos and let the kids bring it to order themselves. The results have often been startling. At one point, 544 children from slums across the city participated in a month long soccer tournament, kitted and equipped by the Kenya's leading newspaper, the Daily Nation. The older kids negotiated to become newspaper vendors and a few got journalists and advertising agents from the paper to help them put together their own slum newspaper. This effort served as a basis for a new initiative of Muungano, the creation of its own community-led media wing, called Muungano Habari Mashinani.

Not only does sdi mobilize excluded communities into safe areas such as savings collectives, their affiliates in all countries get actively involved in the physical upgrading of informal settlements. In these situations children are frequently participants, playing a lead role in the mapping and surveying of these communities – essential preconditions for upgrading. And when design turns into implementation the construction of toilets is often a priority. Here, the Indian alliance has also set an important precedent, constructing toilet cubicles specifically for children so that they do not need to compete with adults for the use of these facilities and so that a public space becomes a safe space for children.

For children like Shiku and Abi, and the hundreds of thousands of children among the one billion people overall who live in urban slums throughout the world, the battle to learn and develop in safe spaces is ongoing. We don't know all the answers, but if we return to the Shikus and Abis of Kibera, and elsewhere, as they grow up, we can see how the basic unit of women's savings collectives can begin to provide such spaces. Individually, the real Abi may struggle to 'understand' his own hardship and struggle in Kibera. But as part of the kind of collective organization the sdi network has pioneered over the past two decades, he can begin to change these spaces in deceptively simple, practical ways.