The physical environments of slums present many challenges to residents, particularly children. Even so, there are thriving communities in slums with strong social and economic networks. This article looks at the reality of growing up in slums in Delhi, and explores how well-intentioned slum improvement efforts can fail children. It concludes by identifying ways in which India’s policy environment could support efforts to make slum improvement programmes more child-friendly.

Children growing up in slums experience a childhood that often defies the imagination of both the ‘innocent childhood’ proponents and the ‘universal childhood’ advocates. The slums typically lack proper sanitation, safe drinking water, or systematic garbage collection; there is usually a severe shortage of space inside the houses where the children live, and no public spaces dedicated to their use. But that does not mean that these children have no childhood, only a different kind of childhood that sees them playing on rough, uneven ground, taking on multiple roles in everyday life, and sharing responsibilities with adults in domestic and public spaces in the community.

Some years ago I spent a year working closely with and observing children in Nizamuddin Basti, an 800-year-old historic settlement in the heart of central New Delhi best known for its famous Sufi shrine, the Nizamuddin Dargah. This internationally renowned spiritual centre is also a prominent cultural and philanthropic institution for the community and the city. The Basti is now considered an urban village with a historic core and layers of slums on its periphery. A predominantly Muslim community, Nizamuddin Basti and its slums together comprise ten notional precincts. These precincts were first delineated by children who worked with the local ngo, the Hope Project, in a community mapping exercise; the ngo is using the map to develop strategies for the different precincts of the Basti, given the different profiles of their residents (long-term residents vs. new migrants, regional origin, language and customs, and professions).

Children were to be seen everywhere as one entered the Basti. They played in the parks that wrapped the Basti on the western side to hide it from the gaze of the city. They played on the rough ground and vacant lots dotted with graves, in the open spaces in the centre where garbage was manually sorted. The parked rickshaws, vending carts, cars and bikes all served as play props in the streets. As soon as they could walk, children could be seen outdoors walking around mostly barefoot, climbing on debris and petting goats that freely roamed around. Girls as young as 5 carried infants and toddlers on their hip and moved around freely in the narrow pedestrian bylanes of the village, visiting shops for sweets and the houses of friends down the street. Many houses open out directly onto the street through a doorway that often is nothing more than a 5-foot-high opening in a wall. Infants reach out of these holes in the wall and interact with passers-by.

The Basti has an approximate population of 15,000, based on the counting done by the Hope Project 3 years ago. Since a major focus of the Hope Project’s admirable work was on health and education, I looked up the data on child health as recorded in the outpatient registers of the paediatric unit. Just over 5000 children aged under 14 years live in the Basti. For common ailments the majority of households visit the Hope Dispensary, with the next most commonly visited medical facilities being private doctors and government hospitals and dispensaries (Prerana, 2007). The most common childhood diseases reported at the Hope Project are respiratory diseases, diarrhoea, gastritis, intestinal worms, anaemia, scabies, and ringworm. An adverse living environment characterised by overcrowding, lack of ventilation in homes, and inadequate sanitation, water supply and water storage facilities no doubt contributes to the childhood diseases reported.

However, despite a largely unplanned physical environment, with debris and garbage generously strewn around, very few serious injuries occur in the public domain. Only a few superficial cuts were reported. I too had noticed that during my year-long observation in the Basti. In fact, the only accident I
witnessed involved play equipment provided by the government in front of the municipal school.

The stories of Rani and Wahida

Rani’s family lived in one of the peripheral slums of the Basti called Nizam Nagar, one of the most deprived precincts and also the most crowded. The average monthly income of a family there barely exceeds 30 euros. Spread over about an acre, this informal housing accommodates 4458 people. Rani lived with her mother, two unmarried sisters and a married sister and her family in their two rooms arranged one on top of the other. The married sister occupied the top room. Half of the bottom room was occupied by a bed and the remaining floor space at the back was used for cooking, storage and for sitting around. The room had windowless walls on three sides and only opened onto the street in front. Rani’s mother had carved out a small shop selling cigarettes in the front of the room. There was no attached toilet or any piped water supply in this house.

When she was 11 years old, Rani kept a journal for me for a week, recording her day before she went to sleep. This account of her life provides some valuable glimpses about the multiple roles a girl child plays in this community. Rani was responsible for fetching milk for tea for her family every morning from Hasan Bhai’s tea stall. She would meet and chat with friends and neighbours here. In poor families such as hers, food is purchased on a daily basis, as there are no refrigerators for storing groceries.

Rani was a good practising Muslim. She washed herself in the morning and routinely offered all five prayers, or namaz, throughout the day. She called on her friend Meher, who lived around the corner, every morning and walked with her to the Hope Project’s non-formal school for adolescent girls. Rani performed daily household chores and shopping for the family, fetching cigarettes, snacks and groceries both for her mother’s shop and for home. Rani acted as guardian to her little niece, playing with her, feeding her, looking after her. She was a part-time shopkeeper, and sat in their small house-front shop to relieve her mother of her shopkeeping duties for some time every day.

Rani was a good student; other girls came to her for homework help. She bought sweets with small change, liked to play with domestic pets and with friends in the street in front of her house, in the nearby open spaces including the yard of the public toilet across from her house, in Meher’s back yard, and in the city park that was just outside the wall that separated her street from the park. Rani’s two older unmarried sisters took care of the cooking, cleaning and washing.

Rani had a friend called Wahida – unlike her, an orphan who had grown up in many households. Wahida split her time between the houses of her older siblings, her grandmother and her friend Rani’s family in Nizam Nagar. Her days were filled with household chores, besides attending the non-formal Hope school and evening religious studies. Wahida also attended a vocational training course in tailoring and sewing every afternoon in the community centre across from Nizam Nagar.

Both Rani and Wahida had grown up in severe poverty. Rani’s father had died of a drug overdose after reducing the family to penury. Rani’s mother barely earned a dollar a day from her shop and found it difficult to pay even the two rupees that would have bought Rani a hot lunch at school. Wahida had no one to watch over her and depended on charity for meals and a roof for the night. Yet both girls not only survived but thrived in this slum which represents one of the best examples of social capital in an urban neighbourhood. Seven years later, Rani and Wahida have both successfully completed school and are undergoing training as nursery teachers. Wahida is also working as an assistant to a city physiotherapist.

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• Bernard van Leer Foundation
Slum redevelopment with children in mind

There are many such stories in Nizamuddin Basti that speak to the power of family and community social capital in aiding the well-being and future prospects of children. The many everyday places in Nizam Nagar and the larger Nizamuddin Basti that allow children like Rani and Wahida to be active social participants in everyday life are the stuff that communities are made of.

When families are driven out of their slums and taken by truckloads to a resettlement site, they are not only driven away from their homes but also from their communities. Sadly, this is the reality of how many cities are tackling slum renewal – notably Delhi, where families living in squatter settlements are routinely
displaced from their squatter locations to make way for profitable new developments and are relocated to barren resettlement sites typically outside the city. Delhi has 44 such resettlement colonies, with a total population estimated to be 1.8 million (Government of Delhi, 2002). Less than 1% of the land occupied by squatters is privately owned (Kundu, 2004), implying that if there were political will, the state could easily provide adequate housing with secure tenure inside the city.

Most slum redevelopment assumes that overall slum improvement processes will automatically benefit children. This is unfortunately not always true. Even the best of initiatives that work on improving sanitation – such as through providing more public toilets, as is currently happening in Nizamuddin Basti – do not take children’s needs into account. Public toilets are scary places for children and with long adult queues, children have to wait a long time for their turn. These are reasons why children can often be seen to squat in the space outside the toilet block or in the street right outside their homes.

The new toilet blocks were part of a larger improvement plan in the Basti that did not adequately consider children. For example, the Basti improvement plan ostensibly benefited children by creating two new landscaped parks. One of them was exclusively for women and children, although it opened its secure gates for only a few hours in the evenings. (Recently a local ngo negotiated access at least once a week outside of the evening hours for children who are part of their programmes.) The other new park replaced a large, central open space in the heart of the community, which was used for sorting scrap. As most residents in the peripheral slums of the Basti depend on this business for a livelihood, the unavailability of this space meant sorting scrap at home. As a result, the home environment is now extremely hazardous for children. These kinds of problems result when communities are not made partners in development, and solutions instead come from a myopic outside view.

In Khirkee, another urban village in Delhi south of the Nizamuddin Basti, children living in a small slum cluster in neighbouring Panchshel Vihar had access to only one badly maintained park, even though the local area had several landscaped parks. When I asked 12-year-old Rinki, who was a play leader of the slum children, what sort of improvements she would recommend for the park, she told me, ‘Please don’t do anything otherwise we will not be able to play here any more.’ This poignantly sums up the attitude of the city. While in theory investment in parks is seen as benefiting children, in practice the temptation is to protect the newly beautified parks from slum kids, who are viewed as vandals. In some communities, slum children are actively evicted from parks, which defeats the purpose of providing them. Rules on park use also discourage imaginative play – when we observed children in landscaped, rule-bound parks that kept out slum children, we counted them playing 12 to 16 different games. In contrast, the slum children from Panchsheel Vihar were counted playing 34 different games in the badly maintained park in Khirkee.

Children use the public realm of neighbourhoods not only for playing but for many other activities including privacy needs and concealing secrets. This requires a range of spaces of different scales and character. Well-designed parks are no doubt very desirable for slum kids, but throughout the day more play happens in the streets and informal open spaces of the neighbourhood than in formal parks. Children in both Nizamuddin Basti and Khirkee referred to the importance of having friendly adults around their play territories, which tells us we need to create new, more imaginative solutions for children’s play than resource-intensive parks which inevitably become sites of conflict between different user groups.

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Children from both communities routinely sought out open spaces in the local area outside their neighbourhoods. This points to the importance of integrating slums with the wider local area and securing access to open-space resources for slum children outside of the slum. The importance of community-level open spaces for children living in slums cannot be overemphasised. As there is little opportunity for innovation within the 12.5 m² of cramped private domestic space that Delhi slum dwellers are typically allocated, children in slums, including very small children, spend a large portion of their day outdoors. The cleanliness, safety and friendliness of the outdoor spaces...
in a slum thus play an important role in the health and well-being of children. Slum improvement plans will work better for children if we consider environmental improvements to the slum neighbourhood as a whole by involving children and by considering slums to be an integral part of the city.

The policy environment in India

India deals with slums only through poverty alleviation strategies. Since the 1980s, every Five Year Plan has included strategies targeting the environmental improvement of urban slums through provision of basic services including water supply, sanitation, night shelters and employment opportunities. But as urban slum growth is outpacing urban growth by a wide margin (UNDP, 2007), the living conditions of more than 100 million urban slum dwellers in India remain vulnerable.

Is it possible to create a new imagination of slum development within the current policy environment of India? Following the liberalisation of India’s economy in 1991, two landmark events unfolded which may enable this:

1. the 74th Constitutional Amendment of 1992, which proposes that urban local bodies (ULBs) should have a direct stake in urban poverty alleviation and slum improvement and upgrading, with participation of citizens, and
2. the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), launched in December 2005, which embodies the principles of the 74th Constitutional Amendment. JNNURM outlines a vision for improving quality of life in cities and promoting inclusive growth, through substantial central financial assistance to cities for infrastructure and capacity development for improved governance and slum development through Basic Services to the Urban Poor. These include security of tenure at affordable prices, improved housing, water supply, sanitation, education, health and social security.

In promoting an integrated approach to planned urban development and the provision of basic services to the urban poor, JNNURM can perhaps reduce some of the existing lapses in planning and service delivery and improve living conditions for the urban poor in a fairer manner. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation has recently launched the National Urban Poverty Reduction Strategy (2010–2020): ‘A New Deal for the Urban Poor – Slum Free Cities’, which adopts a multi-pronged approach to reducing urban poverty involving measures such as slum renewal and redevelopment (Mathur, 2009). This calls for developing Slum Free Cities plans for some 30 cities which have been selected for a ‘National Slum Free City Campaign’. None of the national policies on poverty has any focus on children’s well-being or development, however, or on slums as vibrant neighbourhoods that offer affordable housing to Indian citizens.

Slum Free Cities is operationalised through a government scheme called Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY), using JNNURM support. RAY sees slum settlements as spatial entities that can be identified, targeted and reached through the following development options:

1. slum improvement: extending infrastructure in the slums where residents have themselves constructed incremental housing
2. slum upgrading: extending infrastructure in the slums along with facilitation of housing unit upgrading, to support incremental housing
3. slum redevelopment: in-situ redevelopment of the entire slum after demolition of the existing built structures
4. slum resettlement: in case of untenable slums, to be rehabilitated on alternative sites.

RAY provides detailed guidelines for spatial analysis and situation assessment and recommends a participative process, involving slum communities with the help of NGOs and community-based organisations active in the area of slum housing and development, to identify possible development options. Slum Free Cities provides an opportunity for new thinking, as well as posing a problem to municipalities and NGOs who may not have the technical knowledge and imagination to create innovative community-driven solutions.
As the well-being of children – in terms of health, nutrition, education and protection – is closely connected to the quality of physical living environments and to the delivery of and access to services, children must be central to slum improvement programmes. Slum improvements funded by JNNURM should be used to make Indian cities child-friendly, and build on the assets of intricate social networks, inherent walkability and mixed uses which are considered by new planning theories to be vital in making neighbourhoods sustainable (Neuwirth, 2005; Brugman, 2009).

Slum Free Cities planning guidelines already incorporate many elements that could secure children’s right to an adequate standard of living, such as secure tenure, improved housing, reliable services and access to health and education. However, intentions are often not translated into action. Children’s direct participation in local area planning and design for slum improvements would be a good step forward in creating child-friendly cities in India. Action for Children’s Environments (ACE) is currently working on a study supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to understand how the first phase of JNNURM-funded slum improvements have affected children, with the aim of informing these policies and improving the practice of planning and implementation of projects to make slum redevelopment more child-friendly.

References