



Healthy Environments for Children Alliance

A world-wide alliance to reduce environmental risks to children's health that arise from the settings where they live, learn, play, and sometimes work by providing knowledge, increasing political will, mobilizing resources, and catalyzing intense and urgent action.

Issue Brief Series: Human Settlements

Children have the right to safe housing. While efforts including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Habitat Agenda (adopted by the United Nations) which declared that everyone has a right to safe housing, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development highlight commitment to increase a child's access to adequate shelter, millions of children around the world still live in unsafe human settlements today.

Lack of adequate and safe human shelter presents a worldwide crisis. Currently, three billion people - half the world's population - live in cities and these cities continue to grow. The United Nations estimates that in 20 years, over 60% of the world population will be city dwellers. High-rise buildings have been constructed in response to increased housing demand, presenting concern with regards to safe construction, social and environmental degradation, maintenance, and accommodation within the neighborhood environment. Peri-urban squatter settlements typically lack access to clean water, proper sanitation, solid waste management, safe cooking and heating fuel sources and other basic services, making them what United Nations Secretary General Kofi Anan called, "some of the most life-threatening environments on earth." Sadly, 800 million people -- 40% of city populations -- live in slums worldwide.

Urban settlements challenge children's environmental health with increased pollution from industry, traffic, fumes from cooking and heating devices, overcrowding and inadequate solid and liquid waste management. Children are particularly at risk to these and other difficulties posed by inadequate shelter because of their unique behavioral, physiological and developmental characteristics.

Water and Sanitation

In the Habitat Agenda, countries agreed that children must live in adequate housing that must include access to sufficient supplies of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. Yet, at least 1 billion people suffer from the danger and humiliation associated with the lack of access to these basic needs.

Children are particularly vulnerable to contaminants in water, which can lead to diseases such as diarrhea, intestinal parasitic infection and resulting malnutrition, anemia and retarded growth. Biological hazards are present when water sources are contaminated by human or animal waste. The problem of water scarcity in developing countries, often the case in sub-standard human settlements, means that people, most often women and girls, have to travel long distances to carry water. There are many negative health impacts of water carrying, both direct and indirect, such as musculo-skeletal problems, and less time for education and income-generating activities.

... a Global Concern

- Low-income families around the world are most likely to suffer the consequences of inadequate living conditions.
- This is particularly the case where building materials may be poor or dangerous, housing communities built on contaminated or disaster-prone sites, water and sanitation may not be accessible, solid waste may not be adequately managed, insect vectors grow unchecked, and biomass fuel is often used for heating and cooking.
- Extended family groups often share living space, which may offer the advantage of resource-sharing but can also lead to overcrowding with negative effects on health, such as increased exposure to communicable diseases.
- In the developed world where basic services such as water, sanitation and waste management are met in most communities, unhealthy housing may persist with people exposed to poor housing design, inferior construction, and use of unhealthy building materials such as lead or asbestos. Overcrowding can also be a problem in industrialized countries.

Acting to safeguard children's environments can save millions of lives, reduce disease and provide a safer, healthier world for our children's future.

See the *Healthy Environments for Children Alliance Framework for Action*

Children's Vulnerability to Inadequate Shelter

Behavioral: Children typically spend a large portion of their time indoors and around the home shelter. Behavioral patterns, such as frequent hand-to-mouth activity put children at risk for exposure to germs and other contaminants. Overcrowding, lack of sufficient quantities of clean water, and lack of adequate sanitation disproportionately affect children and can be the breeding grounds for diarrhea, acute respiratory infections and other diseases that lead to a high prevalence of disease and death among children.

Physiological: Relative to their body weight, children eat and drink more than adults, therefore, unclean food or water can be more dangerous to children. Not only is their exposure level proportionally greater, their tolerance is often weaker, leading to children becoming sick more readily than adults.

Developmental: Children need a balance of social stimulation, as well as privacy, areas for play and opportunities for mental and physical development. When a child is denied these opportunities because of

Actions at Every Level Make a Difference

The challenges of providing adequate housing and human settlements require effort at every level. National and local governments, community organizations, educators, media, city planners, architects, health professionals, parents, family members and children themselves need to work together to improve human settlements, both locally and around the globe.

Governments

Governments can create conditions to promote housing opportunities, such as economic and public assistance policies so that people have access to land and housing and employment. Both national and local governments can invest in human capital and the sustainable development of a nation by providing for basic rights to safe and sufficient drinking water and access to sanitation.

NGOs

NGOs can assist with awareness-building, public information and outreach, regarding liveability, safe housing, access to water and sanitation and safe and adequate human settlements.

Individuals

Individuals can become informed about risks to health in human settlements. Community groups can be organized around the provision and maintenance of water and sanitation facilities, upgrading of housing stock, and waste management. Parents can take measures in their homes to improve children's health through encouraging personal, household and food hygiene, proper ventilation, discouraging smoking in the home, use of improved stoves, safe energy sources, combating disease-bearing insects and protecting children against exposures to toxic chemicals and unintentional injuries.