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.
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 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 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 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.

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