

# Children and the Environment

**THE PAPERS IN** this issue of *Environment and Urbanization* highlight different aspects of the relationship between children and the environment. Three of them - the papers on Sao Paulo, Jakarta and Khartoum - highlight the very poor environments in which the children of low-income households live and the links between such poor living environments and the high incidence of disease, accidents and premature death (including high infant mortality rates). Two papers look at children in what might be termed "adult" roles - working minors in Brazil and street children, hotel boys and children of pavement dwellers and construction workers in Bombay. The paper by David Korten also concentrates on street children and discusses the ways in which external agencies should intervene to help them and to lessen their numbers.

Two other papers focus on interventions to promote better environments for children. The first, by Lee Smith and Chaudhry, describes how learning packages on environmental issues, developed for schools by the Mazingira Institute in Kenya, also stimulated the children to learn about their own environment and to respond by writing essays, drawing pictures and answering questionnaires. The second, by Bob Hughes, stresses the importance for children of adequate provision for play and how the features of a good play environment are invariably mis-understood by those responsible for designing and constructing the built environment. The paper by Sheela Patel on Bombay also suggests new techniques for gathering information about street children.

Most papers have as their central concern the impact of the environment on children's health and development. As Silvia Blitzer points out in the Guide to the Literature, this demands a consideration not only of children's home, recreational and educational environments (which are the focus for most research on children and the environment) but also of environmental problems that children face in "adult" contexts. Such contexts include the environmental problems associated with workplaces (since so many children work) and homelessness (including the environment in which "children of the street" and abandoned children live and work).<sup>(1)</sup>

One theme common to all papers is the vulnerability of children to disease, accidents and prema-

ture death - a vulnerability which is much greater than for adults, especially for infants and young children. Mohamed Omer's paper points out that a child is particularly vulnerable while in its mother's womb and that in Third World nations (and especially among displaced populations) this mother is often illiterate, malnourished, debilitated and chronically sick, and thus offers a very poor environment for the growing foetus at a very critical stage in his or her life. Children in the womb are also vulnerable to certain pollutants common in the urban environment.

Children's vulnerability is obviously exacerbated by their inability (or, as they grow older, their limited ability) to protect themselves. Several papers point to children's vulnerability to exploitation by adults. For instance, it is difficult to see how a legal system can protect under-age working children from exposure to dangerous chemicals, poor working conditions, over-long working hours and inadequate pay when the fact that the children are working already contravenes the law.

Infants and young children depend entirely on others to protect them and to provide a safe living environment - parents, health professionals, teachers, planners, architects and society in general. A failure to provide this protection is, in effect, a societal failure. If children suffer or die from environmental problems, it is very rarely the environment itself that is to blame but the political decisions which did not allocate resources to deal with the environmental problem.<sup>(2)</sup> As Box 1 shows, the scale of ill health and premature death among infants and children is enormous; the statistics reflect society's failure to protect children. It is difficult to imagine that the scale of the problem with street children and with the exploitation of child labour would not diminish dramatically, if poverty was drastically cut. It is worth recalling that in Europe and North America, little more than a century ago, the scale and nature of the problems of "street children" and child labour were certainly comparable to those in the Third World today, as were the underlying causes. Here too, most street children maintained ties with families, although a proportion had to fend for themselves. In mid 19th century London, only about half the children between the ages of five and fifteen went to school and the