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## **Don't Just Listen- Do Something! Lessons Learned about Governance from the Growing Up in Cities Project**

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## Comment on This Article

### Abstract

*Eight practitioners in the Growing Up in Cities project of UNESCO reflect on what they have learned in terms of how to move government officials and leaders of civil society to view children and youth as partners in creating livable cities. They describe their experience in participatory action research with children and youth, how they achieved successful outcomes, what they learned from mistakes, and strategies that they would apply if they were beginning a new initiative to ensure that city officials, community leaders and donors integrate young people into decision-making. The conclusion summarizes the group's shared wisdom regarding how to make certain that adults in power not only listen to young people but also take action on at least some of their recommendations. These reflections should have relevance for any action research project with young people.*

**Keywords:** participatory action research, children's participation, youth participation, urban children, child friendly cities

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This special issue on "Children and Governance" provides a timely opportunity for eight of us in the Growing Up in Cities (GUIC) project to reflect upon what we have learned about how to get officials and leaders of civil society to take action in response to young people's ideas for improving urban conditions for children and youth. Seven of us have been working with GUIC and similar initiatives for ten years now, so it is time to take stock. We were part of the project's revival in 1996, with sites in eight countries, and we have shared this phase of our work in the books *Growing Up in an Urbanising World*, *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth* and many other publications. (For these books and selected relevant publications, see the list of references at the end of this paper.) The eighth member of our conversation is Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, who coordinates four new project sites in Canada. Other new sites are currently underway in New York City; Guadalajara, Mexico; Durban, South Africa; and Victoria, Australia, with others on the drawing board. In all, the project has accrued experience from more than 50 locations. Thus, this is a good occasion for us to pool our collective experience and reflect about what we have learned in terms of moving municipal officials and other leaders in civil society to view children and youth as partners who can bring valuable energy and ideas to the challenge of creating livable cities.

The mission of GUIC is first to enable young people to document their community environment and propose feasible priorities for change and to then bring people together to *act* on at least some of the recommendations. The keyword for the project is partnership. Project facilitators—who are usually activist researchers with a university base—identify communities with children in difficult conditions, such as

children of low-income working-class families, indigenous groups, refugees, immigrants, squatters or street children. The project's ultimate goal is to increase understanding about how the city functions for these children and how conditions could be improved, as the basis for more enlightened government policies citywide. At the same time, the project seeks to implement some of the children's recommendations in visible ways in their own locality so that participants can see the value of collective democratic action. To achieve these ends requires strengthening capacities for governance on the levels of local institutions, municipal agencies, and the larger public. Project facilitators identify responsible government officials and try to engage them in the process, but in addition, reach out to other people with influence in the city as well as public media and allies in UNESCO's international network. On the local level, they seek out institutions that show a commitment to children's and families' well-being, such as community nonprofits and schools. By increasing public awareness about the issues that these children face and building local support, we hope to motivate government officials to take action.

The project is also defined by a core set of methods, which combine the collection of data such as aerial maps, census figures, and observations of children's lives in public places, with information gathered through children's drawings and interviews, child-led tours, and interviews with parents and community leaders. This approach is described in detail in our manual, *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth* (Driskell 2002). We encourage innovation, supplementing these core methods with a variety of techniques. Most project sites involve young adolescents from ages ten through 14, but a few sites have worked with participants as young as eight or as old as 19.

In the 1970s, when the urban designer Kevin Lynch initiated GUIC, the project was bedeviled by the difficulty of moving from recommendations to action. Lynch was eager to understand dynamic images of the city by giving young adolescents the means to document their experiences. He also had specific goals for urban policy and practice: he intended the project to demonstrate flexible research methods that could be carried out with modest budgets as a way to build local and regional research capabilities that could inform urban policy on the scale of individual cities and even at the national level. What he achieved was to compile reports from the four countries where the project was introduced under the auspices of UNESCO—Argentina, Australia, Mexico and Poland—and to condense the results into a set of recommendations for policies that would make cities more supportive places in which to grow up. These can be found in his book *Growing Up in Cities* (Lynch 1977). If his recommendations had been followed, cities would be much better places for all ages. But they have not been. In Australia and Argentina, where project facilitators presented young people's ideas for local improvements to municipal officials, no heed was taken. In the 1970s, the idea that young people had ideas of value to create more livable cities was still a generation ahead of its time.

By 1996, when we revived the project, children's standing was supposed to have changed. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child proclaimed that children

have a right to express their views in all matters that affect them.<sup>1</sup> This principle was then integrated into Agenda 21 from the Earth Summit (1992) and the Habitat Agenda (1996), with specific reference to the rights of children and youth to participate in decisions that shape their environment. Without question, GUIC has received more support in the 1990s and this opening decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than it did in the 1970s. The adoption of the project in more and more cities is one measure of its success. Elected officials and community leaders are much more likely to give young people a respectful hearing now. All the same, getting adults in power to invest in actually implementing some of the recommendations they receive and making young people partners in creating better communities often seems as obdurate a problem now as it was in the 1970s. This article gives us an opportunity to review what we have learned since 1996 to increase the chance that our goals will be realized in the future.

The dialogue that follows took place in cyberspace, through group email as we shared our responses to the following set of questions. We are happy to have this opportunity to share our experience and reflection.

### **A Rich Base for Reflection**

**Louise Chawla:** I have convened this conversation, so I will begin by introducing myself. In 1994, when I was a Fulbright Scholar at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, the Centre was planning an international conference on Urban Childhood for 1997. I convinced the Centre to revive GUIC, in alliance with Childwatch International in Oslo, and persuaded UNESCO to adopt the project once again. Since that time, it has been part of the Social Sciences Division of Research and Policy, under the steadfast management of Nadia Auriat, while I have served as International Coordinator. In this role I have the privilege of receiving correspondence and reports from a multitude of sites, and I try to serve as a bank for project memory. I do this now from my position as a professor in the honors program at Kentucky State University.

**To begin, would each of you briefly introduce yourself and share the critical experiences that you have had with GUIC or other areas of your practice that form the basis for your current thoughts about how to make urban governments and civil society more responsive and accountable to children.**

**Barry Percy-Smith:** I work as a Senior Research Fellow in the **SOLAR Action Research Centre** at the University of the West of England in Bristol, England. My initial contribution to the Growing Up in Cities project was undertaken in conjunction with my doctoral study. I was enthused by GUIC because it offered creative ways of engaging with young people, and through its action focus, it espoused a commitment to change, which mattered to me then as it does now. I carried out my GUIC research in two sites in Northampton—an inner city and a suburban environment. I believe my work generated a breadth and depth of significant insights into the lives, experiences and values of the young people I worked with. For the most part, young people were enthusiastic about being

involved, but the project did not lead to change to the extent I hoped. I would say that the main reason was that, at the time, I did not have the knowledge or skills as a “change practitioner” to know how to embed action in my research. However, I have also realized that change does not come easily. It involves dealing with complexity, power and issues of accountability, and with a large “governance” machine—driven forward by particular values and priorities—which are often resistant to change. Since GUIC I have begun to learn some of the skills and knowledge that enable me to try to initiate change in social and organizational settings or, as the acronym SOLAR spells, “Social and Organizational Learning as Action Research.”

**Jill Kruger:** I am a Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of South Africa and a founding member of the Child and Youth Commission of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). My involvement in the Growing Up in Cities program was triggered by my engagement with children in self-care—especially street and latchkey children. I was drawn to the GUIC initiative in May 1995 on the Norwegian Island of Håholmen at a workshop about children’s drawings in social research. Louise invited me to be part of the GUIC initiative, and its approach seemed to me intrinsically important in work with girls and boys in South Africa. First, it stressed a participatory methodology; second, it introduced many young people to the notion of rights and related responsibilities; and third, it encouraged them to view their environments in a constructively critical way. Most importantly, it gave them an opportunity to be included in local planning processes.

**Karen Malone:** I’m a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia, and Asia-Pacific Director for GUIC. My story with GUIC started as a chance meeting with Louise at a North American Association for Environmental Education conference in Portland, Maine. I was a doctoral student just finishing my thesis, and I gave a short presentation on my participatory study with children living next to heavy industries in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Louise was in the audience and approached me afterwards to hear more, and then she introduced me to the possibility of getting involved in GUIC. After a year of seeking funding, I was offered a postdoctoral fellowship through my university, and I brought on board two great assistants: an anthropologist, Lindsay Hasluck, and a Master’s student in planning, Beau Beza. Then I found myself on a 35-hour flight from Melbourne, Australia to Trondheim, Norway. I learned and grew so much in that first encounter with the other city directors and Louise. As we spent days beating out the methodology, our different fields of study, life experiences and research interests converged in rich and engaging ways. What kept us grounded was the spirit of commitment each individual brought to the task of making the GUIC project work, essentially because we all believed it had the potential to make a difference to a lot of children’s lives around the globe. I am not sure any of us realized how successful the project would become as an international model for children’s participatory environmental action, but strangely enough, even at that table in Trondheim, we knew we had something special.

**Robin Moore:** I am a Professor of Landscape Architecture and Director of the Natural Learning Initiative, College of Design, North Carolina State University. I was a student of Kevin Lynch's at MIT in the mid-sixties. I also studied with urban design researcher Donald Appleyard, who had studied with Lynch. Under their influence, I continued developing participatory design methods, which I had initiated while studying architecture in London a few years before. At MIT, I applied them, now as a form of "user needs research," to the design of children's outdoor community environments. I was attracted to MIT because issues of urbanization in the developing world were strongly represented in the curriculum. When Louise contacted me 30 years later to ask if I was interested in participating in a re-launched GUIC, the answer was easy, especially as I was already working on community projects with Nilda Cosco in Buenos Aires.

**Nilda Cosco:** I am an Education Specialist at the Natural Learning Initiative, College of Design, North Carolina State University. I spent most of my life in Buenos Aires prior to 1996, working as an educational psychologist in community projects sponsored by UNICEF and community-based organizations. Part of my degree work at a Jesuit university required fieldwork in some of the lowest income communities in the city. When Robin Moore asked me if I would like to coordinate the GUIC-Argentina project with him, I felt well prepared to contribute, both as a native and through prior practice. My first task was to find a research site—as it turned out, an arduous and frustrating process.

Rather than returning to Salta, the original GUIC site in a northern province, we decided to work in Buenos Aires for practical and logistical reasons. We wasted many months trying to work through the public schools where bureaucratic barriers and inertia made it impossible. Eventually, professional contacts led us to Boca-Barracas, one of the oldest areas of the city, with a long history of artistic involvement and political activism. After several false starts, we eventually established a working relationship with a group of local social and community development workers and launched the GUIC project in earnest.

**David Driskell:** I am currently a Lecturer in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, where we soon hope to launch the first UNESCO Chair for Growing Up in Cities in collaboration with the colleagues who are contributing to this article, as well as new friends and allies. I am also a practicing city planner specializing in community participation. My link to GUIC goes back to 1990, when I was a graduate student at MIT studying the work of Kevin Lynch, and also a member of the core team organizing a working conference called "The Playful City" at Stanford University, where I first met Louise. Four years later, in 1995, I decided to leave my planning job in Berkeley, California, and follow my wife to India (her home country) where she was beginning fieldwork for her dissertation. Less than 12 hours after deciding to leave Berkeley, I had a call from Robin Moore (a principal in the firm where I was working), who told me that Louise was looking for contacts in India for a new Growing Up in Cities project. Another 12 hours after that, I had a fax from Louise in Norway stating that I was the country director for GUIC-India. Many things have happened in the years since, including co-directing the India site with Kanchan Bannerjee; writing numerous iterations of the GUIC



methods manual;<sup>2</sup> facilitating GUIC workshops in Amsterdam, Amman and Ottawa; advising GUIC projects (and potential projects) in Lebanon, Russia, the Philippines, Canada and Kenya; and, most recently, coordinating a new GUIC initiative in New York City. After years of working on GUIC “on the side” (subsidized by my consulting income), I have been able to secure part-time support from Cornell and UNESCO to focus more fully on growing GUIC through information resources, training, curriculum development, and new research initiatives.

**Natasha Blanchet-Cohen:** My base since 1996 has been the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) at the University of Victoria in Canada. Under the leadership of Philip Cook and others in child rights, IICRD has been working nationally and internationally to breathe life into the Convention on the Rights of the Child through research, education and training. For IICRD, taking the lead on GUIC in Canada was a natural fit. I have been co-coordinator with Philip since the initiative began a year and a half ago, with one year remaining, so these are my reflections in the middle of the process.

The GUIC Canada initiative brings together six organizations spread across three provinces in the country. Three of the partnering organizations work directly with youth in advocacy and service delivery. Environmental Youth Alliance in Vancouver and HeartWood in Nova Scotia focus on environmental leadership, and Redwire in Vancouver is a media organization led by aboriginal youth. The fourth partner is the Youth Commission in Gatineau (Quebec), a formal structure of city government, and the fifth is the Canadian Commission of UNESCO. IICRD is the sixth, lead organization. Each comes with a wealth of experience engaging with young people, but with variation in focus and level of operation as well as different perspectives on governance. Present within our group are some of the tensions that nourish Canadian society: the Aboriginal and the French-English questions. GUIC provided the focal point of youth (in our case, ages 10 to 19) involvement in cities to bring us together. We saw GUIC as an opportunity to understand young people’s perspectives on their lives in cities, and to create more child- and youth-friendly cities.

## **Getting to Successful Outcomes**

**Louise: Let's take stock of GUIC initiatives that could serve as models for action. What are the GUIC achievements that you have been part of that you consider most successful? What were the critical ingredients of success?**

**Barry:** In the GUIC work in Northampton, one of the more successful outcomes was the development of a play area. There was an element of serendipity in this since prior attempts to develop the play area—involving me as researcher taking young people’s ideas to the planning committee—were met with a wall of bureaucracy and local politics, including a raft of reasons why they shouldn’t develop the play area and the prospect of any developments taking years to come round. (It was exceptional at that time for members of the public to address the planning committee, let alone taking children out of school to address it). Then, a

short while after, I was contacted by a local community safety officer who said he was asked to look into how to make the play area less of a “problem area.” After consultation with local residents and work with young people to draw up plans, our ideas were given the go-ahead and the redevelopment work started. What made a difference in getting this done more quickly was the involvement of a local officer on behalf of the Leader of the Council. The fact that local elections were coming up and the Leader of the Council was looking for re-election cannot be discounted as another motivating force.

What this taught me was the importance of being open to chance events which could be used to further community development goals. It also demonstrated that other critical ingredients of success are getting the community behind you (especially parents and local workers), and linking research to the agenda of different local groups and local initiatives, particularly local government priorities.

I think it is also important to identify “quick wins” as well as larger, more long-term objectives. This is important to maintain the commitment of children and community members, given that many communities experience research fatigue, with little changing as a result.

**Louise:** On the opening page of Kevin Lynch’s book, *Growing Up in Cities*, he wrote that one purpose of the study was to expose “the misperceptions of planners and educators.” He evidently took for granted that misperceptions about children’s lives would be the rule. I thought that your discoveries about green space in Northampton were a striking example of this. Could you tell us what you found?

**Barry:** In Northampton, local planners and park managers assumed that the existence of a large municipal green space adjacent to the inner city neighborhood justified no further concern about open space for play in the neighborhood itself. Yet young people either weren’t allowed to go there because it had a bad reputation and it involved crossing a major arterial road, or they didn’t want to go there because it brought them into contact with other groups of young people they didn’t feel comfortable with. The research process exposed issues concerning territory, place identity and the realities of park use, and in so doing, challenged the assumptions of decision makers.

**Jill:** “Most” successful—how do we define that? I could name various projects, depending on the criteria. If I consider structural change which radically improves the lives of children in a community, or attitude change on a broad front that will assist in bettering children’s lives, then my most successful projects would be the first—at the *Thula Mntwana* informal settlement, where a Children’s Center and playground were constructed, and the latest—in KwaZulu-Natal, where 9-year old Babiza, whose mother is HIV positive, shares his experiences in the book *Babiza’s Story*. This project sought to address the difficult issues of denial and prejudice, which children face in South African environments when family members are HIV positive.

Although projects always include evaluations, at one stage there was a GUIC cyberspace discussion about whether it might be possible to undertake *before* and *after* evaluations of target groups so as to extend and standardize measurements of “success.” If I remember correctly, this was rather difficult due to the diversity of sites and the need to customize methods for each new site. Nevertheless, I worked with Dev Griesel, a South African psychometrist, on a post-study evaluation which utilized both qualitative and psychometric measures (Griesel, Swart-Kruger and Chawla 2002). The qualitative measures proved more useful in generating an understanding of the children’s experience. We particularly appreciated Albert Bandura’s input in the early phases of the study as well as Louise’s partnership. Possibly, if pre- and post-tests were developed especially for GUIC, psychometric testing would be more effective.

Importantly, in South Africa, where our so-called Bantu education system thrust millions of people into the barest semblance of an education in the apartheid era, children who have taken part in GUIC projects speak of intrinsic, vital and long-term gains such as enhanced personal capacity and a heightened awareness of the environment and their neighborhoods. This is reflected in behavior change: they might no longer litter, might stand up for those who are harassed at shops, might report abusive taxi drivers to their parents—things they would not have done before. What do these actions reflect, other than an altered sense of self?

**Louise:** I was recently at a conference where an activist psychologist, Alicia Lucksted from the School of Medicine at the University of Maryland Baltimore, called this belief in intangible outcomes “faith in the ripples we cannot see.”

**Jill:** Another lesson that GUIC has taught us is that children do not divorce human relationships from their sense of their local environment. This was evident in a study by Je’anna Clements in Emthanjeni, in the Western Cape province of South Africa, which was carried out according to GUIC principles (Clements, Kruger and Mabuzo 2003). It highlighted the fact that how you experience your neighborhood is intimately tied up with how you are treated there.

I believe that the effort we have put into enabling young people’s views to be known has helped—to a degree—to lessen prejudice toward their ideas and recommendations. This is the perception of some other child participation specialists in this country as well. The first GUIC study at the Canaansland squatter camp included a workshop convened by the Mayor of Greater Johannesburg, who invited the children to present the results of their work to city officials and staff of child-rights organizations. This led into a study with Muslim children living in high-rise buildings on the edge of the central business district in Ferreirasdorp. The same Mayor stimulated the notion of peer research by inviting the children of Ferreirasdorp to report to the adult mayoral panel at a national meeting of youth council representatives, then urging the young councilors to seek the insights of community youth in their projects.

**Louise: What were the critical ingredients of these successes?**

**Jill:** In my experience, individuals: the commitment of individuals to children and to protecting, caring for and respecting them. This commitment opens them to participatory initiatives and prepares them for the criticism of their colleagues for going the “tedious” route of taking what children and youth have to say seriously. There is a vast difference between “hearing” children speak and “listening” to what they say. There appears to be growing acceptance in South Africa now that children’s voices should be heard and the perspectives of children and youth have been sought on various issues but there is not always evidence that they are seriously acted upon.

It is the commitment of individuals within any institution, whether funding, governing or research, that carries a project to a satisfactory conclusion. The more executive power such individuals have, the more certain your project will be to attain fitting closure. This means that success depends on appropriate partnerships.

In GUIC, a special ingredient of success is also the international network of support—knowing there is always a touchstone for ideas and others to turn to for advice and support when unexpected obstacles are encountered. I was able to invite Karen to join me at a UNICEF workshop in Florence in 2003 and for a pilot project in South Africa in 2004; we are the only GUIC directors thus far who are based in the South and we hope to raise finance to undertake a comparative project within the next five years.

**Karen:** The success of GUIC can’t be measured superficially. It has always been a complex and layered project, operating on a variety of dimensions and across multiple time zones. As a global project that brings together a multi-disciplinary team of researchers and child activists, working through the machinery of the United Nations, and growing year by year, it is certainly unique. The project’s success has been due in part to the people involved—individuals across sites who have maintained their commitment even through there was little financial gain, and to overall management by the coordinators—from the beginning, Louise, but soon joined by David—who have drawn the team together at strategic moments to complete projects. Although each site finds its own funding, UNESCO has supported the workshops, conference presentations, and publications that have brought us together as a group. On the ground, the success of the project at my sites has been largely due to my building it into all areas of my academic work (teaching, research, community service) and to my developing alliances and partnerships with individuals in NGOs, government departments and local councils. Publications about GUIC sites in Australia and the Pacific Islands have reached both local and international audiences through academic forums as well as public media. This has given the project a high profile, which has led to many opportunities to share it with others. And so the cycle keeps going.

I have also expanded the age group of the project from the early years to the later teens to capture the current interest in planning for the early years in councils and federal government. Also, I have diversified the scope of GUIC by zeroing in on the

specific needs of funding groups or communities. For example, in Frankston, the City Council was concerned about safety, so even though we still did much of the usual GUIC fieldwork, we utilized the workshops, focus groups and story map sessions to hone in on issues of safety, security and drugs. In the Yarra Ranges, we acquired funding for health and well-being research that focused on art in the environment, and we included GUIC as an element of the community project by involving children in creating ephemeral environmental sculptures at local sites. During the art making process, we developed a dialogue with the children about their stories of place and the significance of living in the mountains as a unique experience of growing up. In the most current location, Heywood, the local Aboriginal Cooperative is applying for UNESCO Heritage Listing. To support this, we have worked with the school to involve youth in developing research projects that relate to this submission process as a way to assist the initiative, build capacity, and encourage cross-cultural understanding and tolerance in a small country town that has had its fair share of racism.

I have also had success working across departments and sectors within UNESCO, and in more recent times, with UNICEF as well. For example, when UNESCO's Coasts and Small Islands-Small Islands Voice Programme (CSI-SIV) moved into the Pacific Ocean region, it gave me an opportunity to do research useful for both CSI and GUIC. I used the opportunity to organize an international teaching practicum for my education students. While they taught in community schools in the Cook Islands, they were able to use GUIC's child-centered research methods to collect information on children's experiences of growing up on an island home. This research and its approach to working with children were then utilized by UNESCO's CSI-SIV team as a model for their other island sites in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. While I was in the Cook Islands, I also ran workshops and professional development for teachers and students at the University of South Pacific, as a way of adding value to the visit. By embedding these projects in communities, we have been able to develop participatory research that builds capacity in children, adults—and in the case of the Cook Islands—local student teachers and island teaching staff.

Another example is the work we did in Papua New Guinea (PNG). As part of a cross-sectoral arrangement between UNESCO's Youth Sector, the PNG Education Department, the U.S. Peace Corps, the CSI project, and GUIC, we drew youth from all the provinces together to do research with children in the urban village of Hanubada. We then fed this research into a Youth Declaration as part of a human rights submission that was put together by the local community to oppose building a dry dock in Halifax Harbor where the village was located. For the youth from the provinces, it enabled them to acquire the skills they needed to then develop some of the first baseline data on children in PNG that has ever been gathered. UNICEF integrated this data into the first audit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which had only recently been ratified by PNG.

Finally, in Australia, I have built alliances and funding opportunities with local schools through Education Innovation funding, city councils, and federal initiatives.

Through university research centers, I have been able to inject a child/youth element into already established and funded community research projects.

The most recent work that I have been doing involves the use of Internet technology as a means to establish more sustained conversations with children and youth at research sites. This started from my original work with CSI-SIV, where the Internet was a primary means of conversation among often very isolated island youth. For this purpose, CSI-SIV set up an extensive online Youth Forum that ran for three years. More recently, I have developed a weblog so youth out in the country in Victoria can engage with city youth as well as youth from GUIC sites around the globe.

Through all these means, it has been possible to achieve greater depth and breadth in the research and in the project's capacity to make a difference for children, youth and communities.

**Robin and Nilda:** Working with a small group of social workers based at a local community center was a successful strategy. These colleagues were highly knowledgeable about the community and among them had contact with hundreds of families as prospective GUIC participants. We worked together to select the sample, using location and dwelling type as key criteria. We then worked together to pilot and modify the standard GUIC interview to fit local conditions, and trained the team to administer it. The local researchers were paid to conduct the interviews, write them up and facilitate the child-taken photos. They also helped organize the child-led field trips. From the point of view of governance, this strategy built capacity for participatory work with children, empowered the social workers to continue the process they had learned, and legitimized the project by conducting activities through a local office of city government.

Another strategy that worked well was the fortuitous opportunity to collaborate with a national labor union. Both of us had worked with the union prior to GUIC—Robin as a designer and Nilda in several capacities in community projects, including assisting with drafting sections of the new City of Buenos Aires Constitution to ensure that the rights of children were properly represented. The union provided direct financial support and many in-kind contributions, sponsored several educational seminars for their members to disseminate GUIC, and organized related community activities. It also sponsored the participation of our Swedish youthwork colleague, Ted Birch, in one of the seminars, and the creation of a curriculum called "The Neighborhood as a Child's Habitat" that was carried around the city by the Movil Verde, a mobile environmental education unit. By being involved in GUIC, the union was able to reinforce its solidarity with young people. Union members learned that easy-to-understand methods were available for working with young people on other issues as well.

A specific GUIC achievement was the establishment in 1998 of a toy library in the community with assistance from the Children's Hour Aid Fund of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. Unfortunately, the local YMCA center that hosted it had

to close after a year due to the economic situation in the country. Nonetheless, many children benefited while the doors were open.

Through GUIC, we introduced the methods of "Gulliver's Mapping" and "Framing," invented by our Japanese colleagues Junzo Okada and Isami Kinoshita, respectively. Both have become diffused through the GUIC network, and now we see them popping up in other participatory action research projects unrelated to GUIC.<sup>3</sup>

Another Buenos Aires-GUIC achievement was the exhibit of child-taken photos, funded by North Carolina State University. The exhibition was developed by the children, who also wrote the catalog. It had its first showing in Boca-Barracas before moving to the Buenos Aires Cultural Center, then to the Trondheim Urban Childhood Conference, UNESCO's Paris headquarters, and finally the College of Design at North Carolina State University. The children created the exhibition to communicate directly about the circumstances of their lives and their observations about the environment. Any adult paying attention would have learned something significant about urban childhood.

There were other participatory methods developed during the community-action phase of the project as well, all of which had a strong educational, skill-building thrust for children. If nothing else, a sense of empowerment through new capacities for understanding and action were a GUIC legacy for the children.

Experience with many methods led us to categorize four types of participatory methods: those developed and implemented by children; those facilitated by adults with children; community events organized by adults with full participation by children; and actions organized by adults drawing on the work of children. In different degrees, all can contribute towards empowerment and governance. It is crucial for planners and designers who want to work with young people to have a skilled command of different participatory methods and to know which to use under what circumstances. Failure or a bad experience can easily lead to unfortunate professional skepticism towards the participatory approach.

We would like to think that exposure to GUIC by colleagues who participated in the Buenos Aires GUIC activities contributed to some of the success of participatory urban planning and educational projects that subsequently flowered in Buenos Aires.

In addition to the above reflections, GUIC gained added potential with the 2000 launching of the Ph.D. Program in Design at the College of Design, North Carolina State University. As a founding faculty member, Robin suddenly had a vehicle for students wanting to research children's environments. In 2001, Nadia Auriat put out a call for interest in starting a GUIC project in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. The timing was perfect as architect and urban planner, Eyyad Al-Khalailah (a.k.a. Ed Salem), was already studying with Robin. Ed grew up in Jordan before coming to the United States. We started working with the UNESCO Office in Amman to see how Ed's research interests and cultural knowledge could be

dovetailed in a GUIC project in Amman. It was a long story, including a delay caused by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Eventually, with UNESCO support, Ed conducted the fieldwork and completed his dissertation (Al-Khalailah 2004), and he has just accepted an academic position in the Department of Regional and Urban Planning at United Arab Emirates University, where he will hopefully convince a new generation of architecture students to work with children and get involved in related urban design issues. Currently, Robin is also supervising the dissertation of Indian architect and urban designer Sudeshna Chatterjee, who has used an adapted version of the GUIC interview protocol as part of her methodology in a traditional low-income settlement in Delhi, to investigate the question of what makes an urban environment friendly to children (Chatterjee 2005). The result will add to the knowledge base created by *Growing Up in Bangalore* (see below) and more generally, to the creation of child-friendly cities in India.

**David:** Questions about success are difficult, both because of the slipperiness of a term like “success,” which can shift dramatically depending on the position and perspective of the person defining it, and because of the complexity of a project like GUIC, with its multiple outcomes, tangible and intangible, where “success” and “failure” intermingle in ways that are difficult to unravel.

The easiest successes to feel satisfaction about are the ones we can literally point to: tangible outcomes like the study center in Sathyanagar (India) or the GUIC manual. However, like Jill, I think that it is the intangibles that are the most important, especially in terms of their long-term impact. These are much more difficult to substantiate, and raise the issue of evaluation, an area in which I think we need to focus more effort (going beyond the standard evaluations our funders might require).

The intangible successes include changes in attitudes and perceptions. I was struck in India by the ways in which many of our project staff began to talk differently about the project area over the course of the research effort. They gained a new respect for people—especially young people—whom they had previously seen as “dirty” or “lazy,” or as “victims” in need of our help and pity. They were surprised by the joy they encountered, the resourcefulness, the tenacity and hope. Many of them noted in exit interviews the ways in which the project had transformed their understanding of slums and the people who live there. They saw slum dwellers as resourceful partners who can and should lead the development process, and they questioned a development paradigm that placed such people as aid recipients, “program participants,” or passive beneficiaries of benevolent NGOs.

Another success of GUIC has been its ability to survive and grow as an international network despite very limited resources. I am familiar with other programs that have spent millions of dollars and had far less impact. I think this is in part due to the power of the ideas GUIC represents and the passion and commitment that people in the network bring to GUIC initiatives. But it is also due to the fact that we remain a distributed network of autonomous individuals and organizations. We are not focused on a grand program design or on the survival of an organization. Instead, we have become adept at stretching limited resources, leveraging local



contributions, adapting to changing conditions, and maneuvering around various obstacles. While we have been tempted at times to pursue a more traditional form of organization, we have by necessity remained a loosely connected network, motivated by personal commitment rather than organizational obligation.

**Louise:** How would you summarize these advantages?

**David:** I see three essential ingredients:

- The power of GUIC's ideas and principles and staying focused on them.
- Talented, committed individuals who were willing to take the lead, build relationships, listen to young people, support each other, and do what's necessary to achieve success.
- Being reflective, critical and open to admitting failures as well as successes.

**Natasha:** GUIC provides a common framework to work within. The international GUIC experiences, for instance, have provided a rationale for the value of using common tools at each site. Initially, our Canadian partner organizations came with their own agendas and experiences, and they were reluctant to use common tools. It took over half a year to agree on tools that would be used across the sites. Organizations had to feel part of this development process. Some tools were replicated from the GUIC set (e.g., photo-frame), others adapted (e.g., mapping and visioning) and some created from the partner organizations' own repertoires (e.g., "jenga," which enables young people to identify the building blocks that strengthen their community). It became clear that before engaging with young people, the organizations would have to be fully on board. Only then would they be effective allies of the young people. The flexibility GUIC provides is central: we realized how GUIC takes on a different form depending on the context. It has been useful to have the critical insight and feedback of one of the members of the 1996 GUIC revival, David Driskell.

GUIC Canada's strength also comes from the implementing organizations. It brings credibility to the initiative to have a partnership of front-line youth organizations, an academic institution, an established formal youth structure, and an international NGO. Besides learning from the other members of our team, the partnership allows us to draw on our different networks when reaching out. It is notable that from the beginning, we agreed that dissemination and advocacy would be key components of the GUIC initiative, because we considered these to be essential to moving beyond our field work with young people.

Our approach is reflected in the structure of the public forum held at the mid-point of the three year project. In the morning, project partners presented with young people, using videos as the medium for sharing young people's perspectives on their lives. These videos, filmed and edited by young people themselves, were powerful. In the afternoon, municipalities showcased their experiences and discussed ways of moving forward. Then, space was given to speakers around the

theme of “going glocal,” i.e., the value of linking the perspectives on young people’s everyday lives to national and international processes that support their participation. We heard from mayors that as a result of the public forum, they returned to their communities eager to revisit their approach to youth engagement.

GUIC can help profile the importance of young people’s participation in municipalities. In the City of Gatineau, for instance, GUIC began as a time-specific project of the Youth Commission (YC). However, the City now asserts that GUIC will remain an integral part of its programming and approach to working with youth. Is it because GUIC has been effective in showing ways of involving the city’s more marginalized young people, the basis for YCs initial interest in the project? Or is it because GUIC adds status to their work? Whatever the answer, it is likely that GUIC will have long-term repercussions in Gatineau because of political and institutional buy-in. Whether “institutionalization” will stifle the GUIC approach at some point is difficult to say. At this point, being part of GUIC’s coordinated network allows for focus and critical inquiry. As the profile of municipalities enlisted in GUIC is raised, other municipalities are encouraged to promote their own mechanisms to engage youth.

As the GUIC Canada initiative unfolds, we recognize the value of linking local action research with young people to organizational structures supportive of young people’s participation. For example, in a small city in Nova Scotia, through GUIC activities young people realized that negative public perceptions prevented them from getting a safe and accessible skateboarding facility. With the youth organization’s facilitation, the youth planned a number of community services to improve the community’s perception of skateboarders. The town then donated materials and space to build a skateboard park. In Gatineau, through GUIC activities, young people identified the lack of welcoming spaces and supportive learning environments in their city. With the YC, the youth have begun designing a youth co-op café where young people can meet as well as learn employment skills. GUIC provides an opportunity to advance the notion of youth involvement in communities in new ways.

In sum, there is value in initiating GUIC within organizations that are already supportive of young people’s participation. This increases the likelihood of GUIC having a life of its own beyond the funded project. Throughout the process, there must also be dissemination and advocacy in order to implement young people’s ideas and increase public acceptance of the GUIC approach and principles.

## **Learning from Mistakes**

### **Louise: Where did your efforts fail?**

**Barry:** Quite simply, my initial work with GUIC did not lead to significant changes in the neighborhoods—certainly not as much as young people would have liked—or even any significant changes to attitudes or practices in the local authority. Embedding children’s rights and a Child Friendly Cities approach into local decision-making is important, because even if local authorities make some improvements for

young people, in a few years' time, young people's views and needs may change so it is important for local authorities to continue to be sensitive and responsive to children's changing situations.

My feeling is that the overall approach of GUIC as a model for participatory action research (PAR) is generally right, but what is critical is how its principles are put into practice. The emphasis needs to swing more towards action. This means that learning needs to happen not just with children but also with local officials and in organizations and systems. There needs to be more attention paid to what happens to research findings, how research is used and the complexities that inevitably arise. My feeling is that children's participation often remains tokenistic because there is a lack of organizational and systemic learning, and therefore no action.

My view is that the basic PAR approach adopted by GUIC needs to be augmented with "whole systems action research," which is the approach I have learned at SOLAR to support learning and change across whole systems (Percy-Smith and Weil 2003; Weil 1997; Wildemeersch et al. 1998). It involves engaging stakeholders in reflecting on the issues at hand in light of current systems and procedures. For example, we work with local departments and agencies to identify blockages to effective policy learning, development and implementation, and we use research grounded in the lives of children and communities to highlight paradoxes and contradictions between policy intentions and the reality of what happens in practice.

This approach means that, instead of public space planning and conditions for participation prescribed by adults or professionals on the basis of their own ideas and values, which either include or exclude young people according to whether they fit into adult's views of the world, we seek to equalize power relations between young people and adults as the basis for dialogue and social learning and a more democratic use of public space. This requires contexts characterized by flexibility, mutual respect and reciprocity. In this situation, values, experiences and perspectives are shared and explored collaboratively in order to reach more socially responsible and democratic outcomes. In the process, adults and professionals learn—rather than assume—how to cater for children in public space, and together with young people, they develop appropriate strategies. At the same time, other stakeholder groups in the community can be included. This means interpreting the role of the professional as "facilitator" rather than "expert," and as someone who is accountable to children and communities as well as the state. It also means challenging social attitudes about children and childhood, children's needs, the value of public space for children, and children's ability to participate.

Issues of power and accountability are key here and need to be incorporated into the research process. In particular, what happens if local officers don't agree or don't understand the value or importance of young people's views about improvements they would like to see happen in their neighborhood? What happens if young people's priorities for change collide with those of other community groups or the local authority? We need to think through the ethical and political aspects of decisions about how best to respond to young people's ideas.

In my initial work with GUIC in Northampton, a key problem was failing to get partners on board sufficiently at the outset, which meant the project wasn't tied in closely enough to local decision-making and development processes and service provision. (Admittedly, getting this kind of buy-in from the beginning is rarely an easy process.) I had backing from the youth service and had interactions with the local planning department and leisure department, and even with the leader of the Council during the project, but when it came time for action, there was no interest. I feel there are four reasons for this.

First, the dominant view of research seems to be that a researcher does a survey or set of interviews, writes up the results, and hands the report to decision-makers, at which point they decide whether and how to respond to the research findings. They don't see action in response to the research as part of a process of which local people have a democratic right to be a part. This raises issues of accountability for local authorities, but it also suggests the need to adopt a different sort of approach to research and decision-making.

A second reason for the lack of response was that I didn't sufficiently tie the GUIC research into the local authority's agenda. This should also be part of the action research process, but I think this is a skill which I probably hadn't sufficiently developed at the time. It is important to work with local authorities as active collaborators who reflect on and reframe the research agenda to include their own priorities, which are often driven by the central government. This should of course also be undertaken with the community as a negotiated approach.

The third reason for a lack of response concerns the research approach. Interviews with local officials may be useful as part of the process of generating insights, but there is a need to engage local officials more actively throughout. This may involve a periodic play-back of findings as they emerge, to continually re-establish the local authority's collaborative role in the project and maintain their active commitment.

The fourth reason is that this approach that I am advocating involves working with a degree of complexity or "messiness" which necessitates a high level of commitment. Instead, many local officials seem daunted by the prospect of having their work complicated by involving community members, who might disagree with current policy and practice and expose its limitations.

**Jill:** I came into GUIC as an activist challenging social attitudes about children and childhood in an era when millions of children were very suppressed in South Africa. A widespread misunderstanding in South Africa—that the rights of children meant that they had no responsibilities—was eased somewhat through the Child Rights Commissioner in the South African Human Rights Commission and the creation of an Office on the Rights of the Child within the Presidency with its associated national, regional and local plans of action for children. Both were committed to child participation from their inception and GUIC has always worked in consultation with these offices, wherever possible.

But I digress! Whereas Barry feels that he had insufficient tie-in with the local authority at Northampton, I felt that a **four-site project I was commissioned to undertake in Johannesburg** had every ingredient for success thus far mentioned! However, local elections led to an unforeseen change in the local council and a replacement of the mayor who strongly supported children's participation in local planning. My brief ended with the submission of the report and recommendations for implementation. Expected communications on development of the project were not received and a follow-up evaluation by an independent assessor, which I supported three years later, showed no further movement on the project. We should be clear that lack of completion does not equal acrimony between partners. We all understand work overloads, red tape and other bureaucratic nightmares.

**Louise: What did you learn from these failures?**

**Jill:** It is often impossible to ensure that projects will be carried to conclusion when new people take office. It may appear to them that the issue of whether or not to implement children's recommendations is merely another issue on their agendas, as Barry pointed out. We need to remember that if we really mean it when we say that others must share ownership in our processes, then we cannot custom-design all our own research and interventions and ask others to buy into them. We must be responsive to local approaches but we must continue to press for favorable outcomes, no matter how long it takes, because we would not have been invited on board if there was no commitment to change in the first place.

One possible way of helping local authorities to commit anew to finalizing a project might be to seek external funding to help implement certain of the children's key recommendations, with the approval of the local council.

Although we want to learn from our mistakes, we should be careful what we label a "failure." Can a GUIC project ever fail in all respects? GUIC directors bring a wealth of expertise to their engagements with children and are innovative in problem solving. South African GUIC projects build in mastery experiences for the children. Consider the gains at certain sites regardless of local government action: After the GUIC process in Canaansland, Kensington and Riverlea, young people engaged with adults on issues that concerned them. At the first site, children were invited to attend some local committee meetings, at the second, to sit on the policing forum, and at the third, to join the women's campaign against verbal sexual abuse. Members of the Johannesburg Junior Council raised finance for the children in Ferreirasdorp to address a local issue of their concern and they worked towards creating a safe recreation space at the local Madressa. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and the Netherlands Embassy provided funds for the children of Thula Mntwana for the recreational and study space that they requested. The 2002 provincial project, which was the first project in South Africa to include a fully representative sample of 600 children (in school, out of school, or in special institutions or with special needs), provided the first composite set of child-generated indicators of what might constitute useful participatory processes—in parallel with recommendations for neighborhood improvements. The children of

Emthanjeni likewise generated guidelines on how participatory processes might be taken forward. Small inputs often lead to changed approaches in the longer term.

Certain issues which children highlight in neighborhood assessments have wider import, and it is possible to work on these differently than originally envisaged. In most Johannesburg studies, for instance, sexual harassment of girls has been widely reported. The children's insights and recommendations were shared at the South African Human Rights Commission inquiry into sexual offenses against children in Soweto in 2001.

The GUIC challenge that requires participatory research to lead to positive outcomes forces us to look critically at each and every project and to ensure that there are good outcomes of some kind for the children, even if all project partners cannot meet their side of the bargain.

**Karen:** The most difficult element of the project for me has been trying to manage my time and engage with the data and outcomes in a meaningful way. While I have published extensively about the project sites, I still look across at mountains of drawings, surveys, children's words and ideas that fill every space of my office and overflow into my home, and realize I have hardly scraped the surface. This is not a new phenomenon for any research work, but it is still a limitation that we need to face. At this point in the development of GUIC, I believe we need to consider how to make the findings we have accrued available to a wider global audience. While many of the results have been presented in academic publications as neatly analyzed outcomes, I believe that city councils, children and youth need access to the raw data so that they can draw out similarities and differences across sites and across time. As I move into new sites, the children and youth there always ask what other young people have said in other places. They want to converse with other children and share their findings. They want to open up their local lives to a global forum and learn from others. A more comprehensive website with a database and a discussion group or chat room would provide an online environment that could make GUIC more accessible to a broader audience. I believe the project needs to use the technologies that children are now using more and more, whenever they are available.

The long term sustainability of projects is also difficult in a climate where people move in and out of city councils, university departments, and government agencies. I would have liked to evaluate more closely tangible outcomes that became entrenched in council processes, but this is not the funded work of academics, so balancing the line between academic work and community development has often meant spending much less of my own time identifying project outcomes than I would have liked.

**Robin and Nilda:** A principal objective of GUIC in Buenos Aires, as with other GUIC sites, was to influence urban policy in favor of children. We pushed long and hard to achieve this, with limited success. Why?—because we had no power. In the end, influence is all about politics. For that reason, whether or not GUIC had an influence on some of the more recent impressive initiatives of the Municipal Urban Planning

and Education Departments will never be known, because the leaders of these new endeavors would lose standing if they admitted as much. Such is the nature of politics.

Perhaps our most obvious political naiveté was to work with the network of local organizations in Boca-Barracas (La Red Solidaria), not realizing that the municipal government at that time was more centrist and would never respect the more left-leaning locals (and vice versa).

**David:** Ah, where to begin! For every success there was a long list of things we could have done better, or done differently. However, I am in agreement with Jill again because I would not count anything as an unqualified failure. Invariably the bad was intermixed with some measure of good, and even the most dismal experience had a variety of intended or unintended positive outcomes.

I think the biggest challenge has been developing inroads and alliances with local leaders and planners to effect change beyond the most immediate scope of the project's work. While short-term, tangible neighborhood changes have been relatively achievable, many priorities for change have languished due to lack of interest and response from local officials. I think this has been due in part to the fact that many project leaders have been researchers or other professionals who were inexperienced at political lobbying and change processes. Thus, while efforts have been made to go from research into action, the actions themselves have been relatively limited.

In our experience in India, we also had the difficulty of dealing with an authoritarian leader within our partner NGO—a factor that drained considerable energy from other pressing project needs. This is something we discussed at length in a previous article, "Tales from Truth Town" (Driskell, Bannerjee and Chawla 2001).

I also think we need to find ways to involve young people in more meaningful ways early in the process, helping to define project goals and activities, and we need to "push the envelope" more in having young people centrally involved in the data analysis and priority-setting activities.

Lastly, we need to sustain local programs and interventions. Not that we want to create interminable Growing Up in Cities projects. But we do need to be more proactive in developing local ownership of the project, so that the methods and approaches become part of the way local organizations engage in their work. We also need stronger capacity for supporting local initiatives. Initial workshops and activities in Jordan and Lebanon, for example, suffered from a lack of follow-through, and requests for training support from people in several countries have gone unanswered due to lack of resources.

**Natasha:** A challenge in implementing GUIC through organizations in Canada stems from the basic premise of action research: actions cannot be predetermined, for they flow from the research. The front-line organizations were eager to act, but they came with their own organizational priorities. Before starting, some

organizations had identified the action research project in their work plan. Asked how this was possible, they responded that they already knew young people's experiences from previous work. In other cases, the organizations saw themselves as able to speak on behalf of young people.

Youth organizations are often wary of research in general, seeing it as controlling and appropriating. Others in the team saw research as serving solely an academic purpose. It was difficult for many to realize that we all needed to engage as researchers along with the young people. We worked on developing user-friendly tools to enable the organizations to document and analyze the information themselves. Finding an effective mechanism has been difficult. It is not always clear how to remain true to young people's voices. For instance, young people did not have the opportunity to define their own priorities. Inadvertently, organizations' eagerness to organize young people's perspectives and provide solutions took precedence over young people's own inquisitiveness.

Our efforts also failed in terms of *directly* following up with all young people involved in the GUIC activities. In Canada, wanting to be socially inclusive, we increased the number of participants compared to the initial GUIC experiences, but we did not have the resources to follow-up with each child. Yet, I question whether this is always necessary; can participation in the activities itself be sufficient? As Genevieve, 17, answered when asked what she was doing in her city of Gatineau to bring about change: "I think that I am doing it at the moment by speaking." Children feel empowered by being listened to and informing others about their situations, and indirectly, each child can benefit from the dissemination of their collective voice.

Another point of concern: whom do the GUIC activities target? While reaching out to the most marginalized young people was a priority, we realized it was unclear what this meant in the Canadian context. All young people face exclusion from city processes and city geographies, but we also need to be attentive to further differences among them. We have had a tendency to focus on young people in youth centers or attending school. What about those who are homeless, or those who are disengaged from society, living in basements? Youth entry into GUIC activities has depended on organizations' existing relationships with young people. This has both advantages and disadvantages. Having an aboriginal youth organization involved made it easier to include aboriginal young people, for instance. The aboriginal organization, however, also had its own mandate and agenda to meet that was not always exactly in line with GUIC. Or was it? At different times during this initiative, we have wondered what is part of GUIC and what is not.

### **Bringing Decision-makers on Board**

**Louise: If you were starting a new GUIC initiative, what would you do to try to ensure that city officials, community leaders and donors would give young people's ideas authentic attention, following through on at least**



### **some of their suggestions, and integrating young people into ongoing decision-making?**

**Barry:** I can give some examples from the whole systems action research with which we are experimenting at SOLAR. For instance, SOLAR has recently undertaken a project in Hounslow which involved bringing young people and professionals together to explore and develop responses to health issues. Professionals expected young people to highlight well-documented problems that mirrored the mainstream policy agenda, such as teenage pregnancy, alcohol, substance misuse, and obesity. The young people acknowledged these were important, but said that the real issue was *stress*, which led to other, symptomatic problems such as smoking and alcohol use. This process highlighted the disjunctions between policy and provision, on the one hand, and young people's experiences, on the other. If we had simply undertaken research according to policy priorities, we would not have exposed this. What became clear was that stress was symptomatic of a wider problem of alienation and a lack of communication and understanding between adults and young people. Parents and teachers are pushing young people too hard—which itself is symptomatic of a target-driven culture.

After young people presented the results of their own investigations to health officials and local authorities, the groups worked together to find solutions to the concerns young people had expressed. At one level these focused on increasing opportunities for young people in their neighborhoods—for example, through the provision of youth facilities. However, while the professionals saw these facilities as places to “de-stress,” young people saw them as basic, essential services that should be provided anyway as part of a healthy life. They did not consider the provision of these services, by themselves, a satisfactory response to the underlying causes of stress. At another level, young people saw solutions to stress in terms of addressing underlying conflicts and pressures in relationships with adults (both in and out of school) and pressure on young people to achieve in schools. In seeking to respond to health concerns, we thus had to look beyond health to see what was going on in the wider systems (home, school, peer groups, neighborhood) in which young people's lives take place.

This initiative illustrates the principle that it is insufficient to document environmental and public health issues without acknowledging the wider, and often hidden, complexity of social, cultural, economic and political factors that shape children's lives. If research and development with children is to be effective, we cannot edit out this complexity. As we undertake research, we need to ask questions like:

- What assumptions and agendas are at play in policy formulations that impact children?
- Are paradoxes and contradictions evident between what policy says and the realities of people's experience?

- What values and attitudes do adults have about children and youth that shape local decision-making?
- Are there disjunctions between these adult assumptions about children and childhood and children's own views and experiences?
- How can top-down policy agendas be informed and reconciled with the bottom-up agendas of children in communities?
- What are the implications for policy learning, evaluation and implementation when we involve children?

Putting children into policy and action is as much a political and cultural process as it is scientific. We need to institute more sophisticated participatory practices that build in democratic accountability and commitment; bring to the surface the hidden values, assumptions and processes that shape policy decisions; and work creatively with tensions and disjunctions in local decision-making systems.

**Jill:** Yes, I agree; you've put that very succinctly. On a very practical level, I would strive to a greater extent to have sponsors commit to action in writing, and in doing so, acknowledge that the most effective actions will only become clear as research proceeds. It is important to budget for some kind of concrete response to children's suggestions from the beginning, as well as a follow-up assessment that will document how the various partners have responded. Children can easily understand that change can be divided into short-term, tangible outcomes (as David mentioned earlier) and longer-term benefits, and they are able to prioritize recommendations accordingly.

I have also come to believe that it is imperative for people from children's own localities be trained as facilitators who engage with the children at every stage of a project. Otherwise, all participatory work with children is seen as the domain of specialists, and it is believed to be time-consuming, difficult and unfeasible by "ordinary" people. I believe that this is partly why there is hesitance and sometimes resistance to implementing children's recommendations. You can style a project clearly and fit it into local authority planning exceptionally well, but it will go nowhere if people have no feel for it. This is somewhat different from having a sense of "ownership" in a project, although that is also important.

At the same time, criteria for the selection of local facilitators are all-important. Otherwise community members might simply assign facilitators who already work with children as the most appropriate individuals, as I have seen happen more than once. Such people are already engaged in full-time work and the participatory project is simply added to their workload. As we all know, participatory work is stimulating but energy-consuming. The new recruits are in a challenging learning process where they need time to assimilate their new experiences and ideas and also time to prepare for each interaction with the children. However, some of them are erratic in attendance and in attention to this work due to prior responsibilities which they cannot cancel or because they do not see the new initiative as requiring

their full attention. Also, in some instances they may find it difficult to reconcile their authoritative persona in other settings with children and the flexible interactions required in a participatory initiative.

In a project that I co-facilitated with the Department of Education in KwaZulu-Natal, I did not work with the children at all. The project was to enable children aged 7 to 17 to create an anthology of children's writings on how they experience HIV and AIDS in their local settings. Some children wrote true stories and poems, others chose to write fiction. I designed the workshops with a small team of teachers, to bring them in touch with their own understandings and capacities and to develop the skills needed to work directly with the children. The outcome was a 100-page anthology—*I Got the Message: HIV and AIDS Life Stories, Fiction and Poems from KwaZulu-Natal Schools*. Afterwards, many of the educators who were involved in the project reported more responsive interactions between themselves and their pupils, including pupils bringing HIV-related problems to their attention.

**Louise:** Your work illustrates Barry's point that facilitators need to be prepared to follow where participatory work with young people leads; sometimes it points beyond physical resources in the environment—which is the central focus of GUIC—to social issues. In the case of South Africa, the problem of AIDS is so overwhelming that it is shaping every aspect of many children's lives: who will be there to care for them and to provide them with a home, who will build and maintain their communities, and will they survive into adulthood themselves? In this case, it is urgent to understand these changes from young people's perspectives.

**Karen, you have taken GUIC in a variety of directions as well. What have you learned in the process?**

**Karen:** The other day I was reflecting with a colleague from the Yarra Ranges City Council about the difficulties he encountered when implementing the GUIC project in his region. He commented on the often short-term vision of city councilors who are looking at what can be achieved in their limited term of office. He noted that the appeal of the GUIC project to many councilors is the UNESCO label and the visibility of working with children and youth, but often this is just a veneer that does not influence long-term policy or organizational changes. Authentic participation of children and youth, he believed, is the key to making sure children know their rights and continue to have the support and power to question whether their ideas are being taken seriously.

In our discussion, we talked about how important it is to have ongoing evaluation frameworks in place from the beginning. We also talked about having adequate funding to support a project to completion, or at least expectations that match funding, so that the final action or policy components are not dropped off. We also discussed how important it is to use the lobbying power of families and communities. By working across council departments and not depending too narrowly on specific individuals, we have helped make projects resilient to council changes and more likely to be sustained when funding is spent. Other tactics that

have helped us ensure actions in response to children's priorities are to have adequate lead time to develop partnerships, and to make sure that both short- and long-term strategies to sustain the project are in place in the council and community.

**Robin and Nilda:** Learning a hard lesson from our first experience, we have a clearer view of how GUIC could achieve more success a second time round. In the Buenos Aires context, it is imperative to partner with respected, neutral, stable community institutions. The two we had the most success with were the Catholic Church and the YMCA (which in Spanish has the non-gendered translation of the Christian Organization for Youth). We also had success with the labor union; although, in another context, it could have been a political liability.

If organizations such as these appropriate the GUIC approach to community action with young people, the role of GUIC professionals can then be more behind the scenes, focusing on training and technical assistance. We in fact worked in this manner with the environmental education unit, the Mobil Verde (who in turn was sponsored by the union, although this was not obvious to the community). Training is one of the directions that GUIC has been taking, and from the point of view of the Argentina experience, GUIC needs to continue in this direction, focusing on training, consultation, and technical assistance. The great resource that GUIC has to offer is its explicitly defined mission and methodology—as laid out in the manual *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth* that David compiled from our experiences (Driskell 2002). There certainly is room for other research or community action projects with young people *related* to GUIC. However, a genuine GUIC project must use the manual. If not, “anything goes,” and the core vision of GUIC would be lost.

**David:** Ensuring action? Funny you should ask. During the past year I have been working with a group of students at Cornell to develop and implement a new GUIC initiative in New York City. The process began with a series of meetings with innovative and well-respected community-based organizations in a variety of New York neighborhoods, each working in some way on issues related to GUIC (such as youth and community development, or social and environmental justice). Over the course of several months, we developed working relationships with seven community organizations as well as several institutional partners, and together we formulated a set of pilot projects for summer 2005, working in six different New York neighborhoods.

Some of the directions we pursued in this new initiative include:

- Involving the partner organizations, including youth representatives, in determining the program goals and priority activities. At an early workshop, young people asked to be the lead organizers and facilitators for part of the workshop agenda—an important step that immediately shifted the project dynamics.
- Working across multiple sites in a single city to develop a more sustainable local network of organizations and individuals committed to youth research, planning

and action—a network that we hope will outlive the “Growing Up in NYC” project.

- Talking about the project as a two- to three-year initiative that will grow organically based on the priorities and directions established this summer.
- Creating opportunities early in the process to explore the definition of “action” and examples of different types of action.
- Planning from the project’s inception to host a citywide youth forum in which young people will present their results and recommendations to city and neighborhood officials.
- Including a “seed grant” in the initial fundraising proposal to support young people’s priority actions.
- Developing a project advisory group of adults from various positions in city government and with different expertise, who can be allies in developing political action strategies and who can serve as resources to young people as they move into their data analysis and action-planning stages.

We have made several missteps, and we are still working to realize the youth forum and project advisory group to support site-based actions, but we have also had some important successes that I think have served us well and have strengthened our position for success in the long term.

I think the core principles and approach of GUIC are strong and need to be kept in focus, but we need to challenge ourselves to stay true to those principles, rooting the project more firmly with local organizations, strengthening local capacity for transforming research into action, and developing more effective strategies for getting the attention, and support, of municipal officials. Perhaps this calls for a clearer articulation of those principles and a more formal or overt commitment to them by local project members.

In addition, I think we need to look for opportunities to develop a stronger youth presence within the project internationally, so that young people are helping to determine the project’s international priorities and directions and have voice and visibility in conference presentations, writings and other project communications.

Lastly, I think we need to be more savvy in the way that we present and disseminate project outcomes and recommendations. We need to strategize communication and “public relations” strategies for getting the attention of municipal officials, and take advantage of media opportunities to help ensure that young people’s voices are heard by as broad a public as possible. This might also help us secure greater resources to support training and networking opportunities—not with the aim of developing an international organization, but rather to help support a more effective “distributed network” of individuals and organizations committed to engaging young people as constructive partners in the creation of child- and youth-friendly cities.

**Natasha:** Since Growing Up in Canada is still in process, I’d rather limit myself to the previous three questions. In another year, we’ll have more experience with the action phase that I will be glad to share.

## Common Strategies for Success

**Louise:** When I listen to all of you, I hear five points coming through again and again as advice to anyone who seeks to introduce participatory action research with children and youth in communities.

First is the importance of a *broad-based alliance* that includes some stable institutions that are committed to children and families and that have roots in communities for the long haul, as well as organizations with multiple levels of influence. To achieve such an alliance, it is essential to think in terms of "governance" and not just "government," even though GUIC's ultimate goal is more enlightened municipal policies that affect children and youth. This means not just working through formal channels of government but also a broad array of actors in civil society, rooting participatory processes in organizations that "walk the talk" when it comes to children's well being. As you have described your projects, the allies you have mentioned include schools, churches, parent groups, art associations, the media, universities, an embassy, NGOs and INGOs (international nongovernmental organizations like UNESCO), as well as a mayor, a community safety officer, a local office of community development and social work, provincial and national departments of education, local councils and youth councils. It reminds me of the saying of Lyn Campbell, the child ombudsperson for Christ Church, New Zealand, who did so much to include children in decision-making there: "You bang your head on every door until you find the ones that open." It suggests how arduous this process can be and that there is no universal formula. The best partnerships have to be sensitive to local conditions. Yet we can learn from the example of Natasha's network, which combines organizations that work at several levels of policy-making, from local organizations to citywide commissions to the national UNESCO Commission to an international child rights institute. Besides providing resources and leverage, this type of multilevel alliance prepares a project to survive changes in political administrations and the loss of individual supporters when they move on.

A second critical ingredient is *political sophistication*. It is necessary to know the local and city-wide political scene in order to know which organizations are likely to work together most effectively and to see ways in which GUIC can help decision-makers accomplish their goals. Robin and Nilda warned that it is important to think about how potential partners are viewed by other key groups that one seeks to influence, and to anchor projects in neutral, stable institutions that are generally accepted and respected by all parties. This does not necessarily mean avoiding groups with a political orientation because sometimes these alliances can be advantageous, as it was for Robin and Nilda when they worked with the labor union. But it is critical to build a broad constituency of allies, or a project can fly out the door along with a departing political administration.

Another side of political strategy is seeing how to connect the project to a government agenda. Barry talked about the importance of bringing local authorities on board early in the process so that the project can be tied to government goals

for service provision. Karen's work shows how this is often the key to getting funding. Barry notes that action research with children is likely to expose disjunctions between what governments say they want to achieve for children and families, and the actual effect of policies. At this point, it is important to be able to turn to other allies in civil society who are also part of the process, who can put pressure on government agencies to live up to their obligations. Clearly, project facilitators need to be skilled change agents who can present this process as a learning experience through which everyone will benefit in the end. No small task! One person who has explored this challenge, with helpful advice for activist researchers, is Randy Stoecker (2005).

There is a third all-important consideration: *budgeting for outcomes*. A basic axiom of political life is that if you want to know what is possible, read the budget. I hear you all repeatedly talking about the importance of getting budgets that have line items up front for the implementation of some of the young people's ideas and for the long-term evaluation of outcomes. As Natasha notes, a challenge for participatory processes is that no one knows what young people will recommend until the end of the research process. Getting funders to accept this uncertainty and still to guarantee some outcomes is vital. Budgeting for long-term evaluation is also vital in order to ensure that all the parties involved know that they will be held accountable.

Fourth, it is necessary to know *the right tools to engage young people* and enable them to present their experiences and ideas in compelling ways, as well as to know the ethical principles that guide the use of those tools. While David has synthesized our core principles and methods in his book *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth* (Driskell 2002), we always intended GUIC to encourage innovation and flexibility in response to the needs of each site, and it is clear that each of you has done this. People need to be familiar with a versatile toolkit of methods and also be open to innovation as situations require. We also need to take David's observation seriously that if young people come on board as partners for every stage of the action research process, they will often pioneer the innovations. Thus, perhaps we should say that the core of GUIC is its focus on young people as allies in caring for their localities and improving the urban environment, as well as ethical principles for working respectfully with young people as partners.

Finally, to accomplish all of these goals, project facilitators need to be adept at *communication through a variety of media* to reach a variety of audiences. When I first contacted you in 1995 and 1996 to help revive GUIC, my main criteria were your records as activist researchers, your passionate commitment to improving environments for children and youth, and your skill as communicators. Doing this work requires simultaneously establishing a research base in academic journals and books, as well as reaching out to government officials and the public through popular media. Besides getting project stories into radio and TV programs, newspapers and popular magazines, some of you have turned to video and children's books. As more and more people have come online with internet access, you have also been exploring this new frontier for communication, which creates

exciting opportunities for young people to share their experience with others their age around their cities and even around the world.

From the beginning, Lynch said that the goals of GUIC included building public support to improve urban conditions for children and to influence local and even national policy (Lynch 1977). For this purpose, we have tried to create model projects that get the widest visibility possible, so that their influence spreads outwards like ripples in a pond. In GUIC, this is what we mean when we talk about the project's sustainability. Individual research sites were never intended to last forever. As the project moves into a site, it is meant to be used as a tool to help community leaders and government agencies understand the issues that young people face and to see ways to integrate young people into community development as constructive, insightful partners. If institutions see ways to include the methods that they learn into ongoing operations, that is great. But if the project is just used to help solve a particular problem, that is okay too. We hope it will leave behind a new configuration of better, more equal relationships between adults and young people, and a public that sees young people in a more accurate and more hopeful light—as partners in collaborative processes to create more livable cities for everyone.

## Endnotes

1. See Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child at [www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm](http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm).
2. Eventually published in 2002 as *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth*. Paris/London: UNESCO/Earthscan Publications.
3. For details, see Driskell (2002).

**Natasha Blanchet-Cohen** is a Co-Coordinator of the Growing Up in Cities-Canada network, based at the International Institute for Child Rights and Development at the University of Vancouver, Canada. She has contributed to policy papers on children's rights and development and published articles on this subject and youth participation in *Childhood*, *The International Journal of Children's Rights and Children*, *Youth and Environments*.

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**Karen Malone** is a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She has initiated *Growing Up in Cities* projects in numerous sites in Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Cook Islands, and written extensively on child and youth issues, including editing *Children's Use of Space* (Concept Publishing, 2005) and co-editing *Researching Youth* (Australian Youth Studies Clearinghouse, 2000).

**Robin Moore** is a Professor of Landscape Architecture and Director of the Natural Learning Initiative, College of Design, North Carolina State University. His publications include the books *Childhood's Domain* (Croom Helm, 1986) and *Natural Learning*, co-authored with Herb Wong (MIG Communications, 1997). For many years he served as president of IPA (the International Association for the Child's Right to Play), and he is known as a design consultant for children's environments in the United States and abroad.

**Barry Percy-Smith** is a Senior Research Fellow at the SOLAR Action Research Centre at the University of the West of England in Bristol, England. SOLAR stands for "Social and Organizational Learning as Action Research," and he has applied this "whole systems" approach to participatory action research in a variety of projects for young people and adults, as well as written book chapters, articles and reports on these topics.

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