

Child-friendly Local Governance

Keynote Address by Kul Chandra Gautam*

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“Child Rights Approach to Governance, Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability in Asia-Pacific”

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I am delighted to join this conference dedicated to promoting child-friendly local governance globally, in the Asia Pacific region, and here in Nepal.

Two decades ago, I was personally and professionally deeply involved in the early stages of conceptualizing and promoting the “Child Friendly Cities” initiative.

So, let me share with you a little bit of the history of this movement that has brought us all here today.

History of Child-friendly Cities Initiative

As a follow-up to the historic World Summit for Children in 1990, we at UNICEF wanted some high visibility tangible actions to take place in urban areas which were then home to over one-third of the developing world’s child population.

Demographic trends showed that urban population was rising faster than rural, and that if the ambitious goals of the Summit for Children were to be achieved, we needed to focus more on the sprawling slums and shanty-towns of developing countries.

We therefore approached a group of mayors, and organized a conference called: “Mayors as Defenders of Children” in 1992 in Dakar, Senegal.

Several successive meetings of “Mayors as Defenders of Children” in different parts of the world, including in Europe, encouraged municipal authorities to use the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a framework for designing activities for the well-being of children, and the goals of the Summit for Children to set time-bound measurable targets.

As this was happening, UNICEF was also working on initiatives such as the “Baby-Friendly Hospitals” and “Child-Friendly Schools”.

We noted that many mayors found these initiatives very inspiring and appealing.

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And so it was that we conceptualized the idea of “Child-Friendly Cities”, which was formally launched by UNICEF and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) in 1996.

The Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) then became the first multi-stakeholder partnership to put children at the centre of the urban agenda.

The second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) declared that the well-being of children ought to be the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and good governance.

We established a Child-Friendly Cities Secretariat at the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence with the active involvement of UNCHS/Habitat and the generous support of one billion lira at that time from the Italian Government.

This Secretariat helped strengthen efforts to build our institutional capacity to undertake in-depth research, analysis, and information management in support of CFCI.

There were a number of Italian cities, including Florence, whose Mayors enthusiastically joined in the campaign to turn their cities into models of CFCs.

Early Pioneers – Brazil and Philippines

A pioneering experience took place in Brazil where UNICEF had long been supporting urban basic services dealing with issues of street children in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and several other big cities.

Starting in the late 1980s, UNICEF started a fascinating partnership in the state of Ceara, in the poorest Northeastern region of Brazil, where we encouraged and supported the Governor and several Mayors to lead a child survival and development campaign.

Municipalities were encouraged to dramatically increase coverage of such life-saving measures as vaccinating children, protecting them from diarrhoeal disease, expanding nutritional and sanitary services, etc.

A good public monitoring system was developed to measure the performance of various municipalities in terms of results achieved in service coverage. A healthy competition was encouraged among various municipalities to outperform each other.

Impressive results were achieved. Ceara State, with a population of 7 million, reduced its infant mortality rate by 32 % within 3 short years from 1987 to 1990. The social mobilization aspects of the initiative were truly inspiring.

In recognition, UNICEF gave the people and state of Ceara its highest award – the Maurice Pate Award - in 1993.

Building on this experience, in the late 1990s, UNICEF helped the state and municipal authorities of Ceara to develop a more formal system of monitoring and certifying municipalities, and granting them what came to be known as a “UNICEF Seal of Approval” as child-friendly municipalities.

The programme involved the use of a set of social indicators – ranging from rates of child mortality, malnutrition, and sanitation, to enrolment in pre-schools, school drop-out and repetition rates, existence of sports and recreation facilities for children, and various measures of child protection and participation in local and municipal decision-making.

Score cards were prepared and publicly displayed, including in billboards - using red, yellow and green colours of the traffic light – indicating the progress made by various institutions and municipalities in terms of their level of child-friendliness.

This method resonated well in Brazil, where competitions and prizes are popular methods of social mobilization.

Ceara showed that municipalities can indeed visibly improve implementation of child rights when challenged to achieve results-based goals.

The “UNICEF seal of approval” not only led to major improvement in the well-being of children, but served as a new instrument to measure the quality of public administration focusing on results rather than on personalities or processes.

The “seal of approval” became a powerful tool for promoting greater transparency and accountability in the use of resources by municipalities and local authorities.

Over 90 percent of municipalities in Ceara participated in the UNICEF seal of approval contest, and the most successful ones often proudly displayed their “seal of approval” in their office stationery and logos.

Word spread to other parts of Brazil, and to other countries, about this innovative scheme, and even the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank offered to use some elements of it in their project assessment criteria.

In the Asia Pacific region, the Philippines became a pioneer in setting up a Child-Friendly Movement, using accreditation mechanism for urban communities and municipalities to measure improvements in 24 priority indicators of child well-being in the fields of protection, health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and child participation in local governance.

As part of this movement, the Philippines devised what it called “Four Gifts for Children”- encouraging all participating cities, villages and *barangays* to develop: a) *local development plan* for children, b) *local investment plan* for children, c) *local codes* of conduct pertaining to children, and d) *local annual state of children report* using some common indicators for a child-friendly locality.

Brazil and the Philippines were, thus, the early pioneers.

Currently, I understand that the Child-Friendly Cities initiative is active in some 14 countries (Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Indonesia, Spain, France, Italy, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Jordan, and Turkey), and hundreds of municipalities.

These, and many other countries represented at this conference have tried out their own unique approaches to making their cities, and in some cases, villages and provinces, child-friendly.

I am sure we will hear many exciting stories and case studies at this conference.

We are delighted that our host country Nepal too has embarked on what it calls Child-Friendly Local Governance (CFLG), focusing both on some urban areas and in many rural communities.

Why Focus on Urban Poverty?

Let me now turn to why we need to give greater attention to children in urban areas than we have done so far.

The problems of poverty, deprivation, lack of basic services and poor infrastructure in rural areas are well-known and documented in many countries.

But the scale of urban poverty and some of its unique impact on the well-being of children are less well-known.

It is generally assumed that urban areas are better off than rural areas in terms of access and availability of basic services. That is why people migrate in massive numbers from rural to urban areas.

It is easy to understand why many people living in rural areas find the bright city lights irresistibly attractive. The opportunity to live in areas with ready access to amenities such as electricity, running water, paved roads, schools and hospitals nearby can indeed be very tempting.

Precisely for these reasons, millions of rural folks flock to the cities in search of better life, to escape poverty, and often the oppressively conservative mores of most rural societies.

But urban life is a mixed blessing.

Living in poverty in urban slums can sometimes be far worse than in rural poverty.

The sense of deprivation and disappointment in urban areas is multiplied as one sees that you are so close to opulence, yet so far from enjoying it.

The sense of injustice, unfairness and powerlessness is compounded, when you see the glaring gap between the haves and the have-nots with little correlation between your hard work and poor rewards, compared to those of others who seem unfairly privileged.

Lack of affordable basic services including access to adequate housing, primary health care, nutrition and basic education is the daily lot of children in poor slums and shanty-towns.

Children are exposed to multiple risks in cities: polluted air, dirty water, traffic accidents, lack of sanitation, and smelly garbage dumps surrounding your shacks in the slums.

Settlements where many poor children and their families live in urban areas are often considered illegal by local authorities. They are, therefore, excluded from official development plans and do not receive support for the development of basic infrastructure.

There are special forms of deprivation and neglect affecting urban children, for example, “street children”, and children who are subject to hazardous and exploitative child labour.

Cities are often where child prostitution and trafficking thrives. There is heightened temptation and opportunity for children to get into drugs and petty crimes.

Urban societies are often characterized by less secure family and community support systems. There is a greater propensity for children and youth to be rebellious, to feel alienated, vulnerable to recruitment by militant and criminal gangs, often with false promises of power and perks.

When children living in slums or dark inner alleys of the city grow up surrounded by wealth and opportunities from which they are excluded, it can give rise to intense anger and frustration.

No wonder, it is said that urban guerilla movements are often more brutal and violent than their rural counterparts.

Most studies of poverty overlook those residents of a city whose homes and work are unofficial or unregistered – precisely those most likely to be poor, lacking security of tenure in over-crowded and unhygienic slums with high rates of unemployment, pollution, crime, high cost of living and poor service coverage.

In addition to other perils, slum inhabitants frequently face the threat of eviction and maltreatment, not just by landlords but also by municipal authorities that periodically launch campaigns to bulldoze and ‘clean up’ their unauthorized settlements.

Happy occasions for other city dwellers, like major sports events or international conferences, often become nightmare events for the poor, as that is when municipalities bulldoze unsightly slum areas and forcibly evict their inhabitants.

In the past few weeks we have seen headline news of two huge protest movements in Turkey and Brazil precisely related to such phenomena.

Young people of Istanbul “occupied” Gezi Park in Taksim Square to protest government plans to demolish one of the few green spaces in the heart of that city to make room for construction of a mosque.

Now, Istanbul already has many huge and beautiful mosques, but very few green areas.

The protests by young people in Taksim Square are, in a way, part of the quest for more child-friendly cities with greenery.

These protests have evoked great sympathy among many ordinary Turks. And we have seen solidarity strikes all over Turkey, forcing the government to rethink its policy.

In Brazil, a country where people love sports and particularly football, young people staged huge demonstrations calling for revoking a hike in the cost of public transport even as the government spends huge sums for the construction of infrastructure for the World Cup and the Olympic games.

As we saw, the protests in Brazil grew into a nationwide movement calling for more investment in better education, health services and public transport, forcing President Dilma Rousseff as well as governors and mayors to agree to their demands.

The Nepalese Conundrum of Poor Governance

Here in Kathmandu, last year a government which claimed itself to be pro-poor, attempted to demolish squatter settlements along the Bagmati river without any viable plan for resettlement of their poor residents.

That attempt failed, but the problems persist.

Today, Kathmandu is one of those capital cities of the world where public parks and open spaces are few and disappearing fast.

Extremely vulnerable to a predicted major earthquake, the unplanned construction boom of this city defies all building codes. We have a long way to go to become a child-friendly city.

The main problem here is not lack of resources, nor awareness or plans and laws. It is our inability to enforce existing laws and rules, a general atmosphere of impunity, and a prolonged political transition in which accountability for good governance has been the prime casualty.

And as always, poor women and children are the main victims of poor governance.

A glaring example of this has been the recent headline news in the Nepali media about the shockingly poor results in our nation-wide high school examinations.

Over 70 percent of students from public schools who appeared in these exams, failed. Actually, it is not the children who failed; it is our un-child-friendly public education system that failed to deliver quality education to those children.

On the other hand, more than 80 percent of children who attended private schools, passed.

Most private schools too are not very child-friendly, but they take accountability for results more seriously.

Contrary to general perception, most students who attend ordinary private schools are not necessarily the children of the rich and powerful.

Even many middle and low-income parents make great sacrifice and vote with their wallets to send their children to private schools, because the quality of education in public schools is so poor.

And let there be no misunderstanding on another count – actually the government of Nepal spends a respectable amount of its budget on education.

Teachers of public schools are generally better trained and better paid than those of most private schools. And generally public schools have better buildings and facilities.

Yet, their performance is far worse than that of private schools. Why is that so?

There are two main reasons – poor school governance because of hyper-politicization of our education system; and a pedagogical approach that is not child-centred or accountable for results.

Education is just one example. A similar situation prevails in many other sectors.

Child-friendly Governance in Nepal

Despite many such challenges, all is not hopeless, and those of us working for the well-being of children are duty-bound to be positive and optimistic as we search for solutions against all odds.

One such solution is child-friendly local governance, which has the potential to help us overcome many other obstacles to good governance in countries like ours where politics tend to be corrupt and divisive.

Currently the most divisive debate in Nepal's political discourse is the issue of federalism – specifically, on what basis to structure our proposed federal states.

Much of the debate on this issue seems to focus on rectifying some real and some perceived injustices of the past suffered by some of our ancestors, rather than on building a brighter future for all of our children.

We must, of course, acknowledge the inequities and injustices of the past, learn lessons, and not perpetuate or repeat old mistakes.

However, we cannot change the past, but we can surely shape our future.

So, as we debate the issue of federalism, let us be guided by what would be in the best interest of our children and grand-children.

We certainly want to preserve our rich and diverse cultural heritage. But let us be clear: our children and their children will be growing up in a rapidly globalizing world.

We want them to be competitive and prosperous in that changing world, and not just in some federal cocoons of our ancestral homelands.

The future structure of our state should be one which best guarantees a good start in life for all our children; that offers a level playing field for them to grow up to their full potential, and that maximizes prospects for our nation's prosperity while minimizing the damage to our fragile environment.

Today, we are unhappy that for far too long too much political power and economic clout has been concentrated in Kathmandu. And the outlying areas and people in the periphery have been neglected.

What we do not want in the name of federalism, or any other “ism”, is to transplant some of the special power and perks of Kathmandu to a dozen or two dozen mini-Kathmandus, and to the local elites of those areas.

What we want is genuine devolution of such power to thousands of local communities.

I am glad that we now have a combined Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development.

Let me humbly suggest to our Honourable Minister and senior officials of that Ministry, that to the extent your views are heard by our political leaders, please recommend to them to follow what has come to be known as the **principle of subsidiarity**, as Nepal makes momentous decisions on restructuring our state.

Subsidiarity is an organizational principle that encourages decisions on most issues to be taken by the smallest, lowest or least centralized competent authority.

Only when there are issues of economies of scale, the need for collective efforts for large scale national projects, or decisions above a certain budgetary threshold, should such decisions be handled by a higher authority.

This principle of subsidiarity is now being applied quite systematically in the European Union and in many administrative services of advanced countries.

It can do wonders in empowering local communities, increasing efficiency and improving service delivery.

Let our political leaders and drafters of our new constitution who are obsessed with the issue of federalism, but tend to neglect the issue of local governance, be mindful of this emerging worldwide experience.

In this context, we must compliment the leadership of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development for convincing the government of Nepal to officially endorse Child Friendly Local Governance (CFLG) as an integral part of its Local Governance and Community Development Program (LGCDP).

And we are delighted that a dozen external development partners, including the Government of Norway, UNICEF and many INGOs are supporting the CFLG approach.

One of the great achievements of the 1990 people’s movement and the multi-party democratic system it established was the setting up of popularly elected local village development committees (VDCs) and district development councils (DDCs).

Supported by direct block grants under the scheme “Let Us Build Your Own Village” (*aafno gaaun aafai banaaun*), we saw a whole new development dynamics emerge in thousands of Nepal’s villages.

Unfortunately, the decade-long violent insurgency, the subsequent prolonged political transition, and our inability to organize local elections for nearly 15 years have weakened these local governments considerably.

Still, the system of these block grants administered by local communities offers great potential.

The Ministry of Local Development has developed very thoughtful “Resource Mobilization and Expenditure Management Guidelines” for the utilization of these grants. It includes a provision that mandates all local bodies to allocate at least 35% of their block grants for such priority target groups as children (10%), women (10%) and other disadvantaged groups (15%).

I understand that at least 15% of the development budget of all VDCs and DDCs should be allocated to implement CFLG initiatives.

That is commendable, but money alone does not guarantee progress, of course. So, we are delighted that there is also a provision for effective participation of these groups in some of the decision-making processes in the very design and implementation of community development activities.

Meaningful participation of children – with equitable representation of boys and girls – is ensured through our extensive network of school and community-based child clubs; as is women’s participation through para-legal women’s groups, mother’s clubs and local women’s cooperatives.

Sometimes, traditional male leaders of our society, including politicians and bureaucrats, are cynical about the real value of such participation, seeing it as mere symbolism.

But those of us who have had the opportunity to witness the activism of some of these women’s and children’s groups are awed and inspired by their creativity, commitment and down-to-earth pragmatism.

We support women’s and children’s participation, not only because it is their right as equal citizens under our national laws and international conventions, but also because they often bring fresh perspectives, real commitment and can help us hold some of our slippery male leaders to a higher degree of accountability.

One other distinct and practical merit of women’s and children’s participation in local governance is that in Nepal’s highly divisive and partisan political context, they tend to be less partisan, and more focused on real issues of common concern to all in the community.

Indeed, some of the notable progress Nepal has made, for example, in meeting such Millennium Development Goals as reduction of maternal and child mortality; the high rates of Vitamin A coverage and childhood immunization, the progress in community forestry, etc. have been achieved largely thanks to the dedicated services of our 50,000 female community health volunteers (FCHVs), mother’s clubs and other women’s groups.

The work and impact of our Women’s Para-legal Committees to raise awareness of women’s and children’s rights, to protect girls and women against harmful social norms such as child marriage and the *chaupadi* system (of isolating women during menstruation in dark and dingy outside cowsheds); gender-based violence and discrimination; and to facilitate local conflict resolution, healing and reconciliation is not sufficiently appreciated by our politicians and administrators.

The impressive work of Nepal's large network of Child Clubs focusing on raising community support for quality education, participatory school management, and extra-curricular activities to promote sanitation and hygiene, also merit greater appreciation by our leaders.

Child participation strengthens good governance

At this conference we will hear many exciting stories of how participation of children and youth has brought about some dramatic changes in their lives, as well as those of their communities.

This evening, we will see a film entitled "The Revolutionary Optimists", which chronicles the journey of a group of youth called "The Daredevils," in one of Kolkata's most notorious squatter settlements.

Using a cell-phone based mapping technology, these youth helped make dramatic improvement in the health of their community, by painstakingly tracking and collecting data around health issues that impact their neighbourhood.

In ten years, they turned a trash dump into a soccer field, lobbied for electricity and clean drinking water, and helped decrease diarrhea and malaria rates in their neighborhood, and doubled polio immunization rates.

Similar community mapping exercise by children has proved successful in places as diverse as Karachi, Cape Town and Nairobi where enlightened municipal authorities have involved young people in surveying, documenting and mapping their urban surroundings, and generating essential information for better delivery of basic services.

Many towns and cities around the world have devised creative ways to involve children and youth in their governance. Such child-friendly local governance has allowed young citizens to play a constructive role in the planning and management of urban infrastructure and basic services.

In many countries children's parliaments have been established to help young people to participate in democratic and participatory decision-making processes.

Many adult parliamentarians have been deeply impressed by the quality of discussions and soundness of recommendations coming out of these children's parliaments.

Right here at the opening of our conference this morning, we saw how effectively our talented young participants articulated their ideas, hopes and dreams in their very touching remarks and through interactive drama presentation.

And I am confident that given a chance, they will wow us with their ideas and perspectives in the main proceedings of the conference itself.

Indeed, quite a few countries have reduced the voting age to 16 years in national, municipal and local elections recognizing that youth today are very knowledgeable about problems confronting our societies, and especially in coming up with innovative solutions that many older parliamentarians might not have even imagined.

I recall whenever UNICEF organized inter-generational dialogues involving children and leaders in national and international forums, adults were always surprised and impressed by the energy and innovative ideas of young people, their ability to think outside the box, and propose creative but practical solutions to many complex problems.

So, I would urge and encourage all participants at this conference to consider child participation in local governance as a great resource for joint problem solving.

Indeed, child-friendly local governance should be considered as an essential ingredient of good governance.

By involving children and youth in local governance, we inculcate in their growing minds and hearts, from an impressionable young age, the quality of good citizenship, the habit of listening to others, respecting other people's views while contributing their own ideas, and a sense of responsibility for finding win-win solutions.

Thus, child-friendly governance means both protecting and nurturing children's right for their own survival, development and protection as well as facilitating their participation to contribute to broader issues of governance for the common good of their community.

Of course, we must not over-burden children with premature adult responsibilities. Children must, first and foremost, enjoy their childhood. Society must create opportunities for them to play and learn, and develop their personality.

Child participation in local governance must, therefore, be in accordance with their evolving capacity and maturity, and without undermining or compromising their own well-being.

When child participation in governance is arranged as part of their own growth, development and socialization, we can strike a win-win deal for children and for society at large.

It is not only in the governance of the public sector where child-participation is needed and useful, but the private corporate sector also can benefit enormously from following a child-friendly approach to its governance.

Employees can be more productive, new market opportunities can be better explored, better management practices tried out, if young people are involved in corporate governance.

That is why, many enlightened private companies and corporate foundations these days actively involve youth participants – as volunteers, interns, and even as executives and board members in their activities.

We would like to encourage the private sector to involve youth not only in their charitable activities as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) but also through new innovative market based ideas that respond to the unmet needs of children and their families especially in urban and peri-urban areas.

The United Nations and the international community as a whole are currently crafting a new agenda for sustainable development as successors to the Millennium Development Goals.

We expect that the well-being of children and future generations will once again be at the heart of that agenda.

The UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda acknowledges that by the year 2030 almost two-thirds of the world's population will be urban.

Therefore, the post-2015 agenda must be especially relevant for urban dwellers.

Cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost, says the report of the High-level Panel.

Inclusive growth must emanate from vibrant cities, the only locale where it is possible to generate the number of good jobs that young people are seeking.

We at this conference can make a modest but meaningful contribution to that great post-2015 agenda-setting exercise by proposing some well-considered ideas for child-friendly local governance.

In that context, I am happy to note that UNICEF and a number of other organizations are now trying to develop an *Urban Child Development Index* as part of the "Child-friendly Cities" initiative.

I hope there will be a good discussion of that idea at this conference to come up with a robust and practical tool for monitoring and promoting child-friendly governance.

Let this Kathmandu international conference on Child-Friendly Cities inspire us all to come up with brilliant ideas to shape "The Future We Want" as the Rio+20 summit outlined, a sustainable future of peace and prosperity with equity for all the world's children.

Thank you.