

Environments of Poverty and What they Mean for Child Protection

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Introduction

This paper explores the three-way relationship between poverty, the physical surroundings and children's exposure to maltreatment, focusing primarily on the low income countries of the global South and discussing the implications for practice. The links between poverty and maltreatment have been widely acknowledged within the academic literature¹ and in the child protection frameworks of agencies and organizations.² Yet even so, this relationship is often something that is alluded to within the organizations rather than confronted head on. It can cause uneasiness, suggesting, as it does, some personal deficiency or deviance among the poor – not to mention the implications that programming might have to deal with the larger context of poverty. Attempts to address child protection are unlikely to be effective without acknowledging and attempting to understand this critical relationship,

The physical environment links are even less well recognized and more likely to be overlooked. Child maltreatment is usually viewed in purely social terms. Yet an understanding of the effects of living conditions and neighbourhood space can shed some light on the dynamics that connect poverty and maltreatment. This is a constructive avenue for understanding and responding to issues of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

¹ See for instance Gelles, Richard (1992) "Poverty and violence towards children", *American Behavioral Scientist* 35(3): 258-27; Freisthler, Bridget, Darcey H. Merritt and Elizabeth A. LaScala (2006) Understanding the ecology of child maltreatment: a review of the literature and directions for future research. *Child Maltreatment* 11:263-280

² UNICEF points out, for instance, that "children who live in poverty are often those who experience violence exploitation, abuse and discrimination.... In a self-perpetuating cycle, marginalization of children who are victims of violence and abuse decreases their likelihood of escaping poverty in the future." UNICEF (2006) Information sheet: Child protection, the MDGs and the Millenium Declaration, Programme Division, UNICEF, New York.

These protection issues are most often seen as revolving around a wrong that is inflicted on a child by another person, either through their actions or their failure to act. When we look more closely at the context in which these actions occur, it calls this understanding into question. Can we reasonably distinguish between the neglect of an overburdened mother who lets a small child to play near heavy traffic, and that of a local government that fails to provide safe play space or affordable childcare? Is there much to choose between the violence of a frustrated, unemployed father and the violence of a system that lets children go hungry while waiting for economic benefits to trickle down? Organizations respond to human misery in sectoral ways, so there is a need for definitions that clarify where one sector begins and another leaves off. This may be necessary for organizational clarity, but it can result in some arbitrary distinctions – and this is not the most constructive approach to problems that grow out of complex systems of interrelated factors.

There is certainly a rationale for more holistic definitions and less firm sectoral boundaries. But this review will not look at the ways that larger systems inflict damage upon children. It will not, for instance, consider the lack of education in the context of conflict to be a protection issue, or the exposure of young children in urban slums to the hazards of inadequate sanitation, even though arguments could be advanced for this. This overview will be restricted to more traditional understandings of abuse and neglect as being related to the harmful actions of identifiable perpetrators. Even within this more confined scope, however, there are practical advantages to considering risk factors within the physical environment that can contribute to the maltreatment of children, and to the implications for interventions that can help to strengthen their protection.

The literature on this topic is sparse. What research there is on child maltreatment is overwhelmingly oriented to the global North, which means it can have limited relevance to situations in low income countries of the South.. Research on the implications of environmental factors in low income countries is even harder to find. There is, in effect, no distinct body of literature on this topic to review. Putting together a picture of the situation in low income countries is a matter of pulling bits and pieces of useful evidence from sometimes unexpected sources, while borrowing from and building on the conceptual frameworks from the North.

This paper first provides a brief overview of the available literature on child maltreatment, focusing primarily on the conceptual orientation provided by Northern research and the rationale for considering an environmental perspective. It then explores in greater depth the environmental factors in various situations that might contribute to children's risk of abuse or neglect. It goes on to consider how appropriate environmental responses might diminish risks and enhance protection, proposing also that this can be a constructive entry point for a larger community process for protection.

A brief overview of research trends, North and South

Conceptual frameworks from the North

Current Northern research on the topic of maltreatment is wide ranging, focusing on fine grained understandings of situations to support the most effective responses. Research looks at specific populations,³ investigates different types of abuse,⁴ the factors precipitating it,⁵ and the identification of maltreated children,⁶ as well as considering prevention and constructive responses.⁷

When child maltreatment was first discussed in the formal academic literature of the North some decades ago, it was approached from a medical or psychological perspective, and viewed in terms of clinically defined pathology. Over the last 30 or more years there has been a move in this field, as in many others, towards a more ecological orientation. Understandings of child maltreatment have for the most part moved away from a clinical view of parental deviance (or the deviance of others who were mistreating children) and towards a recognition of the larger context in which both child and perpetrator are embedded.⁸ This more holistic view acknowledges the problems in using a specific factor to explain a complex phenomenon.

This ecological model of child maltreatment was first articulated by Garbarino in 1977.⁹ He acknowledged that, while individual psychopathology was an important factor, the problem was more productively understood by considering the larger ecology of family life, which could encourage a “climate for child abuse”. This model considers the many factors that might contribute to the way a child is treated. These factors can be very

³ See for instance Zhai, F and Q Gao (2008) Child maltreatment among Asian Americans: characteristics and explanatory framework. *Child Maltreatment* 2008 Oct 29 (Epub ahead of publication)

⁴ See for instance Kemp, Alison, Frank Dunstan, Sara Harrison, Susan Morris, Mala Mann, Kim Rolfe, Shalini Datta, D Phillip Thomas, Jonathan R Sibert, and Sabine Maguire (2008) Patterns of skeletal fractures in child abuse: systematic review *British Medical Journal* 337: a1518.

⁵ Sartor CE, Agrawal A, McCutcheon VV, Duncan AE, Lynskey MT. (2008) Disentangling the complex association between childhood sexual abuse and alcohol-related problems: a review of methodological issues and approaches. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 69(5):718-27

⁶ Sugar, N F (2008) Diagnosing child abuse, *British Medical Journal* 337 :a1398

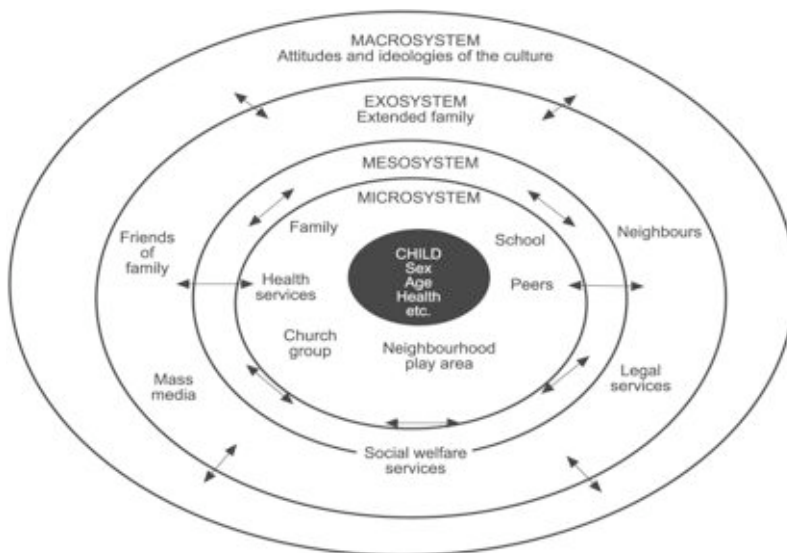
⁷ Coles, L (2008) Prevention of physical child abuse: concept, evidence and practice. *The Journal of Community Practice* 81(6):18-22; Sraubstein J, Joshi P, Due P, Wright J, Leventhal B, Merrick J, Kim YS, Silber T, Kumpulainen K, Menvielle E, Riibner K(2008) Prevention of public health risks linked to bullying: a need for a whole community approach. *The International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health* 20(2) 185-199

⁸ Freisthler, Bridget, Darcey H. Merritt and Elizabeth A. LaScala (2006) Understanding the ecology of child maltreatment: a review of the literature and directions for future research. *Child Maltreatment* 11:263-280

⁹ Garbarino, J (1977) The human ecology of child maltreatment: a conceptual model for research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 39: 721-735

immediate, relating, for instance, to stresses within the household leading to irritability and tension. They can also reflect realities within the larger community; children living in neighbourhoods where there is a lack of social support networks, for instance, are found to be at greater risk of maltreatment.¹⁰ There are also larger political and economic conditions that might contribute to maltreatment, with rates of child abuse and neglect being related to such events as crop failures or factory closings.¹¹ An absence of investment in social services, or high rates of unemployment can be linked to higher rates of mistreatment of children; so too can wider cultural and social attitudes about appropriate ways to rear children.¹² Bronfenbrenner's classic ecological model of the child at the center of a nested hierarchy of developmental influences provides a graphic representation of these interconnected layers (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The ecology of child development



Source: Dockrell and Messer (1999, p. 139)

Whether child maltreatment occurs within the family, at school, in an emergency camp or a work setting, the common thread, from this perspective, is that the problem cannot be seen simply as an interaction between a child and the perpetrator of some kind of mistreatment. This does not mean that responsibility is removed from the perpetrator. But

¹⁰ Coulton, Claudia J, David S. Crampton, Molly Irwin, James C. Spilsbury, Jill E. Korbin (2007) "How neighborhoods influence child maltreatment: A review of the literature and alternative pathways", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 31, 1117–1142

¹¹ Fryer G and Miyoshi, T (1996) A cluster analysis of child maltreatment incidents in rural Colorado. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 10(3) 363–369, cited in Slack, Kristen Shook, Jane L. Holl, Marla McDaniel, Joan Yoo and Kerry Bolger (2004) Understanding the risk of child neglect: an exploration of poverty and parenting characteristics, *Child Maltreatment* 9: 395–408

¹² Freisthler, Bridget, Darcey H. Merritt and Elizabeth A. LaScala (2006) Understanding the ecology of child maltreatment: a review of the literature and directions for future research. *Child Maltreatment* 11:263–280

it does mean that for children to be adequately protected, interventions must take into account the factors that contribute to precipitating an event.

A closely related approach to understanding child maltreatment is a risk accumulation model. Children's well being is often discussed in terms of risk factors and protective factors, and the importance of "cumulative risk" is well established in understanding children's resilience and developmental outcomes. The likelihood of poor developmental outcomes is known to increase in more than linear fashion with a greater number of risk factors.¹³ When this concept is applied to maltreatment, it suggests that multiple adversities and risks can combine to create a threshold at which abuse or neglect are more likely to occur.¹⁴ For instance, unemployment, combined with parental drug abuse or mental illness, social isolation and a lack of education, would be more likely to precipitate child abuse than any of these factors alone. For families in poverty especially, these kinds of risk factors tend to co-exist and to reinforce one another. At the same time, a range of protective factors can help minimize the likelihood of maltreatment.

The dearth of research from the South

Within low income countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America there is arguably a much wider range of risk factors than is generally addressed in the maltreatment research from the North – not only more extensive and deeper poverty, with all that this implies, but also the circumstances surrounding more prevalent war and displacement, the far greater impact that is felt from the increasing number of disasters, large and small, and the spread of the HIV/Aids epidemic. Bonded and hazardous labour, enlistment in conflict, trafficking, long term displacement, child headed households are some of the concerns in lower income countries that are not generally part of the protection spectrum in the more affluent nations where most research takes place. Children in poverty in much of the world might be considered to be at risk in many more situations than are commonly at issue in the North, and in places where social protection systems are seriously under resourced or non-existent. As Lachman and colleagues point out, structural problems in many poor countries, such as global debt, restrict social spending and make effective child protection services even less likely than they would be otherwise.¹⁵

Despite the greater range of problems, there is far less related research in poor countries. A scan of 100 of the most recent peer-reviewed overview articles on the topic of child maltreatment within one database, for instance, listed only 2 that refer to low or middle income countries.¹⁶ Lalor discusses the reasons for this in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. In part it is due to the far higher prevalence of competing problems, such as disease and malnutrition, which have tended to take precedence in both research and response. In part it is the lack of resources for research, both in terms of finances and

¹³ Evans, Gary W and Kimberley English (2002) "The environment of poverty: multiple stress exposure, psychophysiological stress and socioemotional adjustment", *Child Development* 73 (4) 1238-1248.

¹⁴ MacKenzie, Michael and Jonathan B. Kotch (2005) Reconceptualizing risk and child maltreatment, Presentation at SSWR conference (Society for Social Work and Research) 14 January 2005.

¹⁵ Lachman, Peter, Ximena Poblete, Peter O Ebigbo, Sally Nyandiyi-Bundy, Robert P Bundy, Bev Killan and Jaap Doek (2002) Challenges facing child protection, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 26, 6-7: 587-617

¹⁶ Scan of PubMed underaken December 2 2008

research experience. But Lalor also sees the absence of attention as being related to a common impression that child abuse is a Northern issue that does not occur within traditional African society. Where it has been identified as an issue, it is seen as an aberration related to rapid social change and foreign influences. Lalor points out, for instance, that even within the very extensive research undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years on sexual behaviour in an effort to understand the HIV/Aids epidemic; strikingly little attention is given to child sexual abuse.¹⁷ Similarly, within the Middle East, Al.Mahroos points to the very scant attention directed towards child maltreatment, despite the evidence that children in the region are subjected to all kinds of abuse.¹⁸

Despite the fact that it remains minimal compared to research in the North, and that peer reviewed research is rare, there *is* a growing body of evidence from the South on child protection issues. What research there is has been largely epidemiological in nature, assessing the extent of various kinds of abuse.¹⁹ Relatively little attention has been given to understanding the dynamics underlying maltreatment or the approaches that might be effective in combating it in under-resourced situations. Research from the South has also tended on the whole to take Northern research as a template, focusing on the problems that are studied in the North, rather than providing an overview of the more complex context of the problem in poor countries, or the wider potential for maltreatment. A good example is the research looking at disaster and conflict-related protection issues, an area that has tended to receive more attention than “everyday” protection concerns. The research in this area has focused heavily on the prevalence of trauma related to specific events, rather than on the critical and wide ranging protection challenges which accompany the day-to-day hardships surrounding conflict or disaster, and the seriously under-resourced recovery processes.²⁰ Although there are some welcome research developments,²¹ our knowledge on the whole remains sparse and uneven. There are numerous trends in poor countries that in all likelihood contribute significantly to the protection issues for children; yet we have little understanding of the implications for children of such realities as rural-urban migration, climate change or globalization. What evidence we have is most often focused on morbidity and mortality.

¹⁷ Lalor, Kevin (2004) Child sexual abuse in sub-Saharan Africa: a literature review, *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28 (2004) 439–460

¹⁸ Al_Mahroos, F T (2007) Child abuse and neglect in the Arab Peninsula, *Saudi Medical Journal* 28(2) 241-248

¹⁹ For example, see such reviews Okeahialam, Theodore, (1984) Child abuse in Nigeria, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 8: 69-73

²⁰ Batniji, Rajaie, Mark van Ommeren and Benedetto Saraceno (2006) “Mental and social health in disasters: relating qualitative social science research and the Sphere standard”, *Social Science and Medicine* 62(8), pp 1853-1864.; Jones, L (2008) Responding to the needs of children in crisis, *International Review of Psychiatry*. 20(3):291-303

²¹ In recent years for instance, CIDA has supported a number of research projects on child protection issues in different parts of the world through its Child Protection Research Fund, making a substantial contribution to overall knowledge <http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/acdicida.nsf/En/JUD-4189526-JA7>

Research focused on environmental factors

Despite the ecological approach that is so often given to understanding child maltreatment in the North, this seldom includes close attention to the physical environment. The focus is generally on the social ecology of children's worlds. When neighbourhood is discussed as a factor, for instance, it is the social processes within the neighbourhood that are generally of interest, rather than the physical features that could be contributing to those social processes. Investigations of the links between neighbourhood disadvantage and family violence, for instance, are more likely to look at the percentage of unemployed residents or single parents than at the quality of housing, the availability of recreational space, the degree of crowding or the amount of traffic. Yet there is considerable evidence demonstrating that features within the physical environment can add to the stresses that, in turn, might precipitate child maltreatment. The work of Gary Evans and various colleagues, for instance, provides compelling evidence of the cumulative strain that can be imposed by features of the material environment, and the effect that this can have on family relationships.²² Many of these material features are most commonly found in environments of poverty, or conversely, people in poverty are the most constrained in terms of being able to deal effectively with them.²³ Overcrowded housing or a lack of safe play space in a neighbourhood might not be sufficient in themselves to result in maltreatment, but they can contribute to the challenges and complexity of a situation within which maltreatment becomes more likely to occur. Environmental factors can also relieve tension and act as protective elements in buffering children from the risk of maltreatment.

In their classic work from the 1980s, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton describe this relationship between people and place in pointed terms: "*The material environment that surrounds us is rarely neutral; it either helps the forces of chaos that make life random and disorganized or it helps to give purpose and direction to one's life*" (p. 16).²⁴ This connection has been well established in research from around the world for many years. We know that physical conditions affect health, learning, social growth and emotional stability, and that adequate living conditions can be fundamental to children's well being and their optimal development over the long term.²⁵ The impact of the

²² See, for instance, Evans, GW and English, K (2002) The environment of poverty: Multiple stressor exposure, psychophysiological stress, and socioemotional adjustment. *Child Development* 73 (4) 1238–1248; Evans, Gary W, Maxwell, Lorraine E, Hart, Betty (1999) Parental language and verbal responsiveness to children in crowded homes. *Developmental Psychology* 35(4)1020-1023.

²³ Freisthler, Bridget, Darcey H. Merritt and Elizabeth A. LaScala (2006) Understanding the ecology of child maltreatment: a review of the literature and directions for future research. *Child Maltreatment* 11:263-280

²⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, M, E Rochberg-Halton (1981) *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*
- Cambridge University Press

²⁵ Carol M. Werner, Irwin Altman and Barbara B. Brown (1992) A Transactional Approach to Interpersonal Relations: Physical Environment, Social Context and Temporal Qualities, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 1992; 9; 297-323, p 298; Evans, G. W. (2006). Child development and the physical environment. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 57, 423-451

physical environment for levels of personal control, for supportive social networks and for restoration from stress has also been clearly documented.²⁶ Yet material and spatial realities are often overlooked or taken for granted as factors affecting people's behaviour and their relationships with others.

In low income countries, although difficulties may be documented, there is essentially no research providing a critical understanding of the implications of material factors, or the extent to which they contribute to the overall protection picture. However, a number of connections can be drawn less directly. For instance, there is research linking environmental factors to higher levels of stress; there is also work that makes the link between parental stress and child maltreatment. So although we cannot point to studies linking overcrowding and child abuse, for instance, or inadequate provision of water and sanitation and higher levels of neglect, we can find persuasive evidence for the likelihood of these connections.

Whether in Northern or Southern research, an important factor is what researchers decide to look for. Various disciplines bring particular perspectives to bear, which determine the range of variables that are anticipated to be meaningful, and which, in turn, determines and constrains what is found. A medical anthropological study from Mongolia is a good example. Using an ecological model researchers investigated variables that they considered might be related to psychopathology in young boys, including socio-economic factors, community violence, cultural attitudes and the use of verbal and physical punishment with children. A highly significant factor turned out to be the size of the household. Coming from a physical environment perspective, one might assume that this could be a proxy for crowding, something that in other disciplines been related to household tensions. But this connection was not in fact explored.²⁷ The point is that even ecological investigations may fail to uncover physical environment connections if these are not being specifically sought. The best that we can do, given the paucity of research in this area, is to draw from a range of related research to create a likely picture of the whole.

Drawing on evidence and insights from research in both North and South, then, this review now looks briefly at the links that have been so clearly established between poverty and child maltreatment. It goes on to discuss how the material environment and spatial relationships may mediate and contribute to this connection, serving as both a risk factor and a protective factor for children. The discussion will then focus on ways that this understanding might influence responses to child maltreatment, especially in the poorly resourced settings of low income countries.

²⁶ Evans GW (2003) The built environment and mental health *Journal of Mental Health* 80(4) 536-556

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Poverty and maltreatment

The early Northern work on child abuse and neglect, undertaken largely from a medical perspective, did not consider social and economic factors to be critical causal factors.²⁸ Steele and Pollack, for instance, in a 1968 study of abusive parents, argued that while social and economic difficulties unquestionably added stress to peoples' lives, contributing to "behavior which might otherwise remain dormant", these factors could be considered merely to enhance the likelihood of abuse rather than serving as "necessary and sufficient causes."²⁹ (p 94) Subsequent research, more ecological in approach, however, has pointed to very definite correlations between these social and economic factors and the rate of maltreatment. For sure, the maltreatment of children does not occur exclusively among the poor; nor do the great majority of people in poverty abuse their children. However, there is strong and consistent evidence of the disproportionate presence of child abuse and neglect among lower income groups, both in high income and lower income countries.³⁰ It is worth noting here that a "labeling bias" may have an effect on the higher rates associated with the poor. Some studies draw on formal child maltreatment reports, while other research uses self-report measures (that is, parents', children's or relevant others' acknowledgement of episodes of maltreatment). The rates of maltreatment identified by the two approaches often fail to match up.³¹ In the USA, where most research on rates of maltreatment is based on reports to child protective services, there is evidence in these formal records that children from low income families are more likely to be considered victims of abuse, while those from more affluent families are more often assumed to have experienced an 'accident'. But it is also true that even US research based on self-report measures has found violence to be consistently higher among the poorest households.³²

Various observers have pointed to the danger that this evidence may contribute to simplistic assumptions about the dysfunctional, neglectful or abusive tendencies of people in poverty. It is important to recognize that poverty appears to be associated with maltreatment in specific circumstances – younger parents in poverty, for instance, dealing

²⁸ Gelles, Richard (1992) "Poverty and violence towards children", *American Behavioral Scientist* 35(3): 258-274

²⁹ Steele, B and C Pollock (1968) A psychiatric study of parents who abuse infants and children. In R Helfer and C Kempe (eds) *The Battered Child*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press pp 102-147

³⁰ Farinatti, Franklin A S, Nice M Fonseca, Miriam Dondonis, Erica Brugger (1990) Child abuse and neglect in a developing country, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 14: 133-34; Slack, Kristen Shook, Jane L. Holl, Marla McDaniel, Joan Yoo and Kerry Bolger (2004) Understanding the risk of child neglect: an exploration of poverty and parenting characteristics, *Child Maltreatment* 9: 395-408; Freisthler, Bridget, Darcey H. Merritt and Elizabeth A. LaScala (2006) Understanding the ecology of child maltreatment: a review of the literature and directions for future research. *Child Maltreatment* 11:263-280

³¹ Coulton, Claudia J, David S. Crampton, Molly Irwin, James C. Spilsbury, Jill E. Korbin (2007) "How neighborhoods influence child maltreatment:A review of the literature and alternative pathways", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 31, 1117-1142

³² Gelles, Richard (1992) "Poverty and violence towards children", *American Behavioral Scientist* 35(3): 258-27

with younger children, are at elevated risk, or those who lack social support networks.³³ Particular aspects of poverty have also been found to be more strongly associated with neglect or abuse than others, specifically factors that indicate the higher presence of stress. For instance, in one study lower levels of employment and parents' perception of economic hardship were found to be more important than the actual level of household income.³⁴ Undoubtedly poverty in and of itself is detrimental in many ways for children and families, but for the most part there are mediating factors that explain why it is associated with maltreatment.

As part of the more ecological approach, much of the research linking poverty and maltreatment in the USA over the last several decades has focused on neighbourhood effects, pointing to concentrations of maltreatment in certain disadvantaged neighbourhoods.³⁵ There is limited understanding of the processes underlying this connection, and it remains unclear whether these concentrations are due to similarities in the family circumstances of those living in the same neighbourhood, or to more specific neighbourhood-related influences on behaviour. Once again, there is some evidence suggesting that there may be more variability between neighbourhoods in the likelihood that maltreatment will be officially recorded than there is in actual behaviour, and that episodes in poor neighbourhoods are more likely to be reported, since stigma can influence the perception of events.³⁶

Most of this research on neighbourhood factors has considered the socio-economic characteristics of neighbourhoods, pointing for instance to levels of unemployment, impoverishment or social disorganization. An excellent example is the work of Sampson and colleagues, who look at the level of "collective efficacy" within neighbourhoods.³⁷ They point to three aspects that are critical to the well being of children: the extent to

³³ Gelles, Richard (1992) "Poverty and violence towards children", *American Behavioral Scientist* 35(3): 258-274

³⁴ Slack, Kristen Shook, Jane L. Holl, Marla McDaniel, Joan Yoo and Kerry Bolger (2004) Understanding the risk of child neglect: an exploration of poverty and parenting characteristics, *Child Maltreatment* 9: 395-408

³⁵ Freisthler, B. (2004). A spatial analysis of social disorganization, alcohol access, and rates of child maltreatment in neighborhoods. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 803-819.
Garbarino, J., & Crouter, A. (1978). Defining the community context for parent-child relations: The correlates of child maltreatment. *Child Development*, 49, 604-616; Garbarino, J., & Sherman, D. (1980). High-risk neighborhoods and high-risk families: The human ecology of child maltreatment. *Child Development*, 51, 188-198; Zuravin, S. J. (1989). The ecology of child abuse and neglect: Review of the literature and presentation of data. *Violence and Victims*, 4, 101-120.

³⁶ Coulton, Claudia J, David S. Crampton, Molly Irwin, James C. Spilsbury, Jill E. Korbin (2007) "How neighborhoods influence child maltreatment: A review of the literature and alternative pathways", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 31, 1117-1142

³⁷ Sampson, Robert J, Jeffrey Morenoff and Felton Earls (1999) Beyond social capital: spatial dynamics of collective efficacy for children, *American Sociological Review* 64: 633-660

which adults and children within a community are linked to one another; the intensity of interaction among adults and between families on issues related to child rearing; and the level of informal control of and support for children. These traits are compromised, they argue, in areas where disadvantage is concentrated, and where families are isolated from supportive resources. Even where there may be strong personal ties, they argue, these may not be enough to overcome the concentration of distrust, uncertainty and economic hardship to develop more widely shared expectations around collective action for children. Below, in the section on neighbourhood space, we will consider in more detail some of the material and spatial factors that can contribute to the presence or lack of this collective efficacy.

The contribution of the physical environment

Pelton proposed in the 1990s that it was actually the material hardships related to poverty rather than poverty itself that explained the relationship between poverty and maltreatment. Physical conditions, he noted, were critical mediating factors, adding to the stresses that contributed to child maltreatment.³⁸ This undoubtedly oversimplifies the complexity of maltreatment. However, there is no doubt that those in poverty are far more likely to be exposed to less than ideal environments, and any explanatory links deserve exploration.

Stress

Because of how fundamental a role the presence of stress plays in this relationship between child maltreatment, poverty and the material environment, it is important to understand something about how stress operates. Stress is described in terms of the basic concept of allostasis, which is the capacity of the human system to maintain stability – something that is essential to survival. This allostasis is threatened by challenge of various kinds – whether it be an infection, a dangerous situation, an emotional upset, or an overload of noise. To maintain stability, the body activates a complex set of responses, for instance through a surge in blood pressure or the release of stress hormones. When the situation is resolved, these responses become inactive again. However, when stress is chronic, this inactivation may not take place and the system may be continually exposed to stress hormones or experience chronic high blood pressure. Long term or repeated stress, such as continual feelings of anxiety or frustration, or chronic ill health, can result in a constant wear and tear on the system, the “allostatic load”, which in turn increases the vulnerability of the system and which has effects for physical and mental health.³⁹

³⁸ Pelton, Leroy (1994) The role of material factors in child abuse and neglect, in Melton, Gary B and Frank D Barry (eds) *Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect: Foundations for a New National Strategy*, Guilford Press, New York, pages 131-182

³⁹ McEwen, Bruce (1998) “Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators” *New England Journal of Medicine* 338 (3) 171-179

When Gelles and colleagues looked at the association between stress, poverty and the maltreatment of children, they found a direct association between the accumulation of stressful life events and severe violence.⁴⁰ Noting that more affluent families are able to use their resources to lessen the burden of stressful events, this research suggests that it is the capacity to manage stress that is key, and this clearly related to poverty levels. There is a long-standing recognition that a sense of control over one's life is a fundamental component of psychological health.⁴¹ One of the facets of poverty that is often pointed to is the relative lack of control over life that this implies.

In this context, it is clear that the accumulation of stressors is critical in understanding child maltreatment, and that difficult living conditions must be seen as a contributing factor. Evans and Saegert emphasize that we should not underestimate the extent to which a combination of poor living conditions can amplify other social stressors.⁴²

Although an understanding of stress as a mediator is critical in considering the connection between physical environment factors and maltreatment, it is also clear that certain environments may simply be more conducive than others to violence, abuse or harassment even when stress does *not* serve in this intermediary role. Having to use a toilet at a distance from home, for instance, especially when there is no lighting along the way, can contribute substantially to the risk of harassment for young girls without stress necessarily contributing to the event.

This discussion will now focus on the various levels or settings within which physical environment factors can be argued to contribute to child maltreatment. Particular attention is given here to evidence, where it exists, from low income countries, but research from the North is also discussed where it contributes useful insights.

At the level of the child

It is well established that not all children within a community or even within a family are at equal risk for abuse or neglect.⁴³ Gender, age and birth order, for instance, can all play a role; the presence of abnormalities can be a factor; being a foster child also contributes considerably to the likelihood of maltreatment and neglect.⁴⁴ In Brazil, Scheper Hughes found that infants who were especially docile or passive were selectively neglected by

⁴⁰ Gelles, Richard (1992) "Poverty and violence towards children", *American Behavioral Scientist* 35(3): 258-274

⁴¹ Allow, LB and Abramson LY (1982) Learned helplessness, depression and the illusion of control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 42: 114-126

⁴² Evans, G and S Saegert (2000) "Residential crowding in the context of inner-city poverty" in Wapner, S, J Demick, T Yamamoto and H Minami.(eds) *Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research*, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Press, New York, Boston, Dordrecht, London, Moscow.

⁴³ Caldwell P., Child survival: vulnerability and resilience in adversity in the European past and the contemporary Third World, *Soc. Sci. Med.* 43(5) 609-619

⁴⁴ Engle, P, S Castle and P Menon (1996) "Child development: vulnerability and resilience", *Social Science and Medicine* 43(5), pp 621-635; Caldwell P(1996) Child survival: vulnerability and resilience in adversity in the European past and the contemporary Third World, *Soc. Sci. Med.* 43(5) 609-619

mothers, who felt they lacked the vitality to survive shantytown conditions.⁴⁵ Children's behaviour can also be a factor in other ways. Children who are more demanding in various ways, for instance, easily distressed, clinging and anxious, or headstrong and overactive, may provoke impatience in caregivers and other adults and may be more likely to suffer maltreatment. These behaviours can be affected by the material environment. Poor provision for sanitation, waste removal and adequate supplies of clean water, along with other environmental hazards, can mean that young children especially are repeatedly or chronically ill and malnourished; this can result in passivity, but can also mean children are more irritable, clingy and demanding. When there is no suitable place to play, high energy children are far more likely to anger caregivers by climbing, jumping, running in homes ill-suited for these activities.⁴⁶ Physical conditions can also exacerbate the challenges of dealing with children who are disabled in various ways, making them more vulnerable to both abuse and neglect.⁴⁷

It is also clear that being a girl is in many places an added risk factor. Gender related violence is endemic in most countries – figures suggest, for instance, that between 20 and 50 percent of women worldwide experience violence at the hand of a family member.⁴⁸ It can occur across the life cycle – starting with the selective abortion and infanticide of girls, and going on to selective neglect, genital mutilation, sexual abuse and harassment in various contexts and coerced marriage or prostitution. Research, cited by a United Nations report, indicates that between 40 and 60 percent of sexual assaults within families are directed at girls under 15.⁴⁹ When mothers are the victims of domestic violence there are also profound effects for children. Research from Nicaragua, for instance, found that the children of abused women were significantly more likely to be malnourished, to have diarrhoea, and to die before the age of five.⁵⁰ The very low status of some women in hierarchical households can contribute to levels of maltreatment, since they may have far less capacity to protect their children.⁵¹ Environmental factors that can reinforce the risks that girls and women face. The spatial isolation and restrictions on mobility experienced by girls in some settings may add to their vulnerability. At the same time, the sense that girls are behaving inappropriately simply by being in the public domain, especially once they reach puberty, may increase their risk; when toilets, water sources, schools are at a distance, this can create a difficult bind. Girls in a Johannesburg

⁴⁵ Scheper-Hughes, Nancy (1992) *Death Without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. University of California Press: Los Angeles, Berkeley, London.

⁴⁶ Bartlett, S Housing as a factor in the socialization of children: A critical review of the literature, *Merrill Palmer Quarterly*, 43 (2) 1997

⁴⁷ Save the Children Norway (2005) *Give us a Chance: Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in Nepal*, 2005, Save the Children Norway, Nepal

⁴⁸ Cited in Unicef (2000) Domestic violence against women and girls, *Innocenti Digest* no 6

⁴⁹ United Nations (1995) *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics*, United Nations 1995

⁵⁰ Asling-Monemi, et al. (1999) 'Violence against women increases the risk of infant and child mortality. A case reference study in Nicaragua, 1999'. Cited in *Innocenti Digest* no 6

⁵¹ Engle, P, S Castle and P Menon (1996) "Child development: vulnerability and resilience", *Social Science and Medicine* 43(5), pp 621-635;

settlement, for instance, spoke of their fears of going to the toilet alone, and had to plan in advance for a time when they could go as a group.⁵²

At the level of home and housing

The degree to which housing meets or fails to meet a family's basic needs is fundamentally related to the way caregivers deal with children. Material circumstances have a significant effect on parental behaviour.⁵³ As Belsky pointed out in the 1980s, the quality of parental care is directly related to the balance of supports and stressors in the parents' lives.⁵⁴ It has long been recognized that caregivers who are exhausted, frustrated or depressed are more likely to compromise in their desire to do their best for their children, and may even become abusive.⁵⁵ These states of mind can all be exaggerated by challenging surroundings. There is little doubt that difficult living conditions can be not only dangerous and unhealthy, but also highly stressful, whether through crowding, dilapidation, high noise levels, unsuitable space or a sheer lack of the basic amenities needed for day to day survival.⁵⁶ These stresses are far more difficult to cope with or escape from for parents in poverty. This stress is not conducive to responsive flexible parenting.⁵⁷ Conditions that undermine the energy and emotional resources of parents must be taken seriously as a contributing factor to neglect and abusive behaviour.

Crowding and environmental chaos: Although the perception of crowding appears to be affected by cultural expectations and experience, it has also been demonstrated that, regardless of perceptions and local norms, the actual physiological tolerance for crowding is similar across cultures, and that there are similar correlations between the number of people to a room and the level of stress.⁵⁸ Confined household space limits the activities that are possible for children and often means they are underfoot when adults are trying to get work done. Behaviour that might be acceptable under other conditions can become intolerable when space is tight, and can result in a much higher levels of irritation on the part of adults. Crowded conditions increase the need for discipline, and when stress levels are high, this can take punitive forms.

⁵² Personal communications

⁵³ Bartlett, S Housing as a factor in the socialization of children: A critical review of the literature, *Merrill Palmer Quarterly*, 43 (2) 1997

⁵⁴ . Belsky, J. (1984). The determinants of parenting: A process model. *Child Development*, 55, 83-96.

⁵⁵ McLoyd, V C (1990). The impact of economic hardship on black families and children: psychological distress, parenting, and socioemotional development. *Child Development*, 61, 311-346

⁵⁶ Aidoo, Magna and Trudy Harpham (2001) "The explanatory models of mental health amongst low-income women and health care practitioners in Lusaka, Zambia", *Health Policy and Planning* 16(2),pp 206-213

⁵⁷ Evans, Gary W, Maxwell, Lorraine E, Hart, Betty (1999) Parental language and verbal responsiveness to children in crowded homes. *Developmental Psychology* 35(4)1020-1023

⁵⁸ Evans, GW, S J Lepore, et al. (2000). "Cross-cultural differences in tolerance for crowding: fact or fiction?" *Journal of Personal and Social Psychology* 79(2): 204-210.

In Egypt, research found that overcrowding was a significant predictor of emotional abuse among adolescents.⁵⁹ Since the research sample consisted only of adolescents, we don't know whether the same association held true in this context for younger children – but since younger children have even fewer options for escape, this is a reasonable assumption. In Guadalajara, Mexico, a case control study conducted with 205 maltreated children under 7 and 379 controls found overcrowding to be one of six factors significantly associated with maltreatment – the other factors were related to various family interactions and to drug addiction on the part of the mother.⁶⁰ In India, children from overcrowded homes were found not only to have higher blood pressure and poorer school results, but also more difficult relationships with parents.⁶¹

It must also be acknowledged however that this link is not always and necessarily identified as a factor. A study on physical, sexual and emotional abuse of girls and women by intimate partners in South Africa found that the degree of crowding was not significantly associated with abuse; it was primarily a matter of the low status of women and the ideology surrounding masculinity.⁶²

Also related to overcrowding is the concept of “environmental chaos”, a summary term that refers to crowding, along with high levels of noise, many people coming and going and a lack of structure in daily life. This has been consistently found across cultures to have negative impacts on children's development, but also on the quality of interaction between children and caregivers, resulting both in less responsiveness on the part of caregivers, but also in more punitive responses.⁶³ Evans and colleagues explain that interactions become less sustained and predictable, and that behaviour and emotions become less well regulated, as energy is drained by contending with chaotic conditions.⁶⁴

Capacity to regulate privacy: An important aspect of the overcrowding issue is the capacity to regulate privacy, there have long been assumptions that this is primarily a cultural issue, and that privacy is not something that is expected outside of the North, with its emphasis on the individual. After the tsunami, for instance, it was assumed by many NGOs, both local and foreign, that one room replacement dwellings made sense since “this is what people are used to.” In fact, discussions with women and children in different parts of the tsunami area made it clear that privacy was a loaded issue even for people who had never lived in anything more than one room dwellings. Women in several areas spoke of their difficulties in balancing the needs of their children and their

⁵⁹ Afifi, Z. E. M., El-Lawindi, M. I., Ahmed, S. A., Basily, W. W. (2003) Adolescent abuse in a community sample in Beni Suef, Egypt: prevalence and risk factors. *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, 9 (5/6) 1003-1018

⁶⁰ Vega-Lopez, MG GJ Gonzalez-Perez, MPH Ana Valle, ME Flores, S Romero-Valle and IPP Quintero (2008) Social factors associated with child abuse and neglect in Guadalajara Mexico. *Pediatrics* 121: S109

⁶¹ Evans, GW, S J Lepore, et al. (1998). “Chronic residential crowding and children's well-being: an ecological perspective” *Child Development* 69(5): 1514-1523

⁶² Jewkes, Rachel, Jonathan Levin and Loveday Penn-Kakana (2002) Risk factors for domestic violence: findings from a South African cross-sectional study, *Social Science and Medicine* 55 (9) 1603-1617

⁶³ Wachs, T and F Corapci (2003) “Environmental chaos, development and parenting across cultures”, in Raeff, C and J Benson (eds) *Social and Cognitive Development in the Context of Individual, Social and Cultural Processes*, Routledge, New York, pp 54-83.

⁶⁴

husbands, and young girls discussed their discomfort in having no private place to dress and undress, or having to hang menstrual cloths to dry in places that were not hidden from view.⁶⁵ In Mumbai, too, relocated slum families involved in the design of their own housing were adamant about the need for room dividers or layouts that would allow married couples some privacy.⁶⁶ Children in Botswana, taking part in research investigating the abuse of young girls, noted that poverty and poor housing were a leading factor in abuse. Children pointed out that in overcrowded houses, where they were forced to share bedrooms with parents, they were exposed early in life to sexual activity and the increased likelihood of abuse.⁶⁷

Access to safe play space: Easy access to space for play becomes especially important to families when housing is inadequate. When tensions rise, it can be important to have a place to escape to. There are also indications that a healthy attachment relationship between parent and child has a spatial dimension. The anthropologist Margaret Mead referred to different age groups of children in spatial ways – as “lap children”, “knee children”, “yard children” and “community children”.⁶⁸ Very young children instinctively seek contact and proximity, not wanting to go too far from their caregivers, and caretakers ideally respond in a warm and protective way. But growing children also need to explore and experiment with independence. As children make that transition from being knee children to yard children, a family’s living situation will ideally provide the space to allow for this to happen in safe, stimulating ways. A child wants the ability to come and go, without going too far, and the caregiver needs to allow the child to take greater initiative within a certain established comfort zone. When there is no “yard” or its equivalent, however, but perhaps just a heavily trafficked street or an apartment building with no easy access to the outdoors, the natural developmental tendencies of a child can be thwarted. There is some evidence that these spatial restrictions can also impair the healthy and flexible evolution of the relationship of parent and child, contributing to a level of brittleness and anxiety that could contribute to maltreatment. While for more affluent households, even living in close quarters, there are apt to be opportunities to escape from and make up for confinement, in situations of poverty, this is far less likely.⁶⁹

Household conditions and neglect: It is not just abusive behaviour that is at issue here. Even more common is the neglect that accompanies difficult conditions. This can arise not from a lack of caring, but from the impossible choices that often face parents in poverty. When caregivers of young children deal with the overwhelming array of challenges that can accompany material deprivation – a lack of sanitation, a long distance

⁶⁵ Save the Children (2006) *Bridging the Gap: Save the Children’s Transitional Housing Project after the Tsunami in Ampara District, Sri Lanka*, Save the Children in Sri Lanka; also informal discussions with tsunami survivors.

⁶⁶ Conversations with members of Mahila Milan, Mumbai

⁶⁷ Okello-Wengi, Sebastian (2005) Socio economic factors contributing to girl abuse in Botswana, Childline Botswana/Canadian International Development Agency

⁶⁸ Whiting, BB and Edwards, CP (1988) *Children of Different Worlds: the Formation of Social Behavior*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

⁶⁹ Bartlett, S (1997) No place to play: implications for the interaction of parents and children, *Journal of Children and Poverty* 3(1) 37-48

to water points, unsafe cooking facilities, dilapidated housing, an absence of safe play space, it is almost inevitable that there will be some level of neglect. These difficult living conditions most often occur in clusters, and overburdened caregivers can be forced to leave children unsupervised, and to cut corners in every aspect of childcare.

Research from the USA indicates that the issue may go beyond time pressures however. A study exploring the relationship between housing conditions and the adequacy of the physical care of children among a sample of low income families found that children living in unsafe housing conditions were more likely to be neglected.⁷⁰ As in the situation with play, it is likely that when caregivers lack the control over conditions to be able to protect children adequately, they may become more fatalistic and less appropriately vigilant.

The situation can be complicated by depression or mental illness, especially for mothers. The worries and pressure associated with poverty and difficult conditions can be severe. There is increasing evidence globally of the high burden of mental health problems, with poor women in low-income countries being at highest risk.⁷¹ These common mental health problems are considered to be related to unpredictability, uncertainty and general insecurity,⁷² factors that are undoubtedly intensified by the realities of trying to cope in difficult and insecure conditions. Women in a number of settings speak of the punishing workloads they face in the context of material adversity, and of the fatigue and anxiety that characterize their days and undermine their capacity to cope adequately with their children's needs.⁷³

Neighbourhood space

Almost inevitably, worldwide, the poorer the neighbourhood, the fewer the amenities – whether parks, recreational space, street lights, safe sidewalks and crossing places – and the greater the density, the waste and dilapidation and the noise levels.⁷⁴ These things all have implications for the protection of children. Geographic hotspots for problem-related behaviours are generally considered to be associated with concentrations of disadvantage.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Ernst, Joy Swanson; Meyer, Megan; DePanfilis, Diane (2004) Housing characteristics and adequacy of the physical care of children: an exploratory analysis, *Child Welfare* 83 (5) 437-453

⁷¹ WHO (2001) *The World Health Report. Mental Health: New Understandings, New Hope*, WHO, Geneva.

⁷² Patel, V, R Araya, M de Lima, A Ludermit and C Todd (1999) "Women, poverty and common mental disorders in four restructuring societies", *Social Science and Medicine* 49, pp 1461-1471; WHO (2001) *The World Health Report. Mental Health: New Understandings, New Hope*, WHO, Geneva.

⁷³ Avotri, Joyce Yaa and Vivienne Walters (1999) "You just look at our work and see if you have any freedom on earth": Ghanaian women's accounts of their work and their health", *Social Science and Medicine* 48, pp 1123-1133; Aidoo, Magna and Trudy Harpham (2001) "The explanatory models of mental health amongst low-income women and health care practitioners in Lusaka, Zambia", *Health Policy and Planning* 16(2),pp 206-213

⁷⁴ Evans, Gary W and Elyse Kantrowitz (2002) Socioeconomic status and health: the potential role of environmental risk exposure. *Annual Review of Public Health* 2002. 23:303–31

⁷⁵ Sampson, RJ, J D Morenoff, TG Rowley (2002) Assessing "neighborhood effects": social processes and new directions in research, *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 443-478

The recognition that violence and crime can be very place specific is explored by Lieberman and Coulson in a report on community identification of problem places.⁷⁶ Crimes, they say, do not happen randomly, but because specific opportunities present themselves in particular places: “*Importantly, when crime is an everyday occurrence, people may fail to see the distinction between those crimes that can be prevented by a change in spatial dynamics and those crimes that they cannot prevent. An example that came up in one workshop was the case of a narrow alleyway linking a school and a tuck shop that was regularly used by school children during their break, and where rapes and muggings had occurred. For a mother whose daughter attended the school, this was simply a typical example of a crime occurring in her neighbourhood. However, at the site visit, it became clear to the mother that if two staff members were to police the alleyway, the problem would no longer exist. One uncontrollable crime became an issue of the teachers’ neglect of duty.*” (page 132)

A considerable literature from high income countries points to links between specific features of neighbourhood space and antisocial behaviour. Two of the classic contributions to this area, still relevant and rich, are Newman’s work on “defensible space”,⁷⁷ and Jane Jacobs’ insights into the quality of urban neighbourhood space.⁷⁸ Their work helps to make the case that features of the local environment can reduce the potential for violence, harassment and petty crime. Newman’s research indicates that such factors as building height and layout, and the number of people sharing an entrance can affect the incidence of crime. Jacobs stresses the importance of mixed use neighbourhoods that allow for “eyes on the street” and increase the potential for informal surveillance. Well lit streets, windows that face onto the street, neighbourhood enterprises and public spaces that are welcoming and well kept all increase the degree of control that residents have over their local space, contributing to an active community presence and to more constructive interaction, and can reduce the likelihood of children being exposed to harassment and abuse. Active street level commercial activity can help to ensure the steady flow of people in an area, which can increase security for all. It should be noted that this does not hold true for all local enterprises however. In the USA, for instance, Freistler has pointed to correlations between rates of maltreatment and the concentration of liquor stores or alcohol outlets.⁷⁹ Children in Johannesburg support this connection, speaking of their fear of passing places that sell alcohol, and the restrictions this imposes on their mobility.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Liebermann, Susan and Justine Coulson (2004) Participatory mapping for crime prevention in South Africa - local solutions to local problems, *Environment and Urbanization* 16(2) 125-134

⁷⁷ Newman (1972) *Defensible Space*, New York: Macmillan

⁷⁸ Jacobs, Jane (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House (reprinted 1993)

⁷⁹ Freistler, B. (2004) A spatial analysis of social disorganization, alcohol access, and rates of child maltreatment in neighborhoods. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 803–819.

⁸⁰ Kruger, Jill Swart and Louise Chawla. (2005). “We know something someone doesn’t know... children speak out on local conditions in Johannesburg.” *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 89-104

Evidence from the North, as noted above, demonstrates that child maltreatment even within the home is less prevalent in neighbourhoods where there are strong social networks – and that, conversely, rates go up in areas characterized by “social disorganization”.⁸¹ In part this is because of the role that social support plays in moderating stress,⁸² in part because of the broader environment of support that this creates for children. This is not a physical feature, but it can be strongly influenced by factors within the physical environment. There is some indication, for instance, of the powerful role that can be played by vegetation in this regard. In controlled research with low income residents from inner city housing projects of Chicago, Frances Kuo, Bill Sullivan and their colleagues have found that exposure to vegetation results in residents being friendlier and significantly more likely to know their neighbours. They also reported less crime, less aggression, lower rates of domestic violence and better interactions with their children among residents of building surrounded by greenery.. This body of studies also points to the strong restorative power of natural environments and the lowering of mental fatigue associated with stressful environments. As Kuo and colleagues explain: “ *the formation of neighborhood social ties (NSTs) may substantially depend on the informal social contact which occurs in neighborhood common spaces, and that in inner-city neighborhoods where common spaces are often barren no-man's lands, the presence of trees and grass supports common space use and informal social contact among neighbors. We found that for 145 urban public housing residents randomly assigned to 18 architecturally identical buildings, levels of vegetation in common spaces predict both use of common spaces and NSTs... In addition, vegetation and NSTs were significantly related to residents' senses of safety and adjustment. These findings suggest that the use and characteristics of common spaces may play a vital role in the natural growth of community, and that improving common spaces may be an especially productive focus for community organizing efforts in inner-city neighborhoods.*”⁸³

Similar effects have been found related to the quality of local streets and specifically the amount of traffic. Back in the 1970s, Appleyard and Lintell demonstrated that levels of social interaction were directly related to the intensity of traffic. People living on busier streets were far less likely to know their neighbours.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Sampson, Robert J, Jeffrey Morenoff and Felton Earls (1999) Beyond social capital: spatial dynamics of collective efficacy for children, *American Sociological Review* 64: 633-660

⁸² Cobb, S. 1976. Social support as a moderator of life stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine*. 38(5): 300-314.

⁸³ Kuo FE; Sullivan WC; Coley RL; Brunson L.(1998) Fertile ground for community: inner-city neighborhood common spaces *American Journal of Community Psychology* 26(6) 823-851

⁸⁴ Appleyard, Donald and Lintell, Mark(1972) 'The environmental quality of city streets: the residents' viewpoint',*Journal of the American Planning Association*,38:2,84 — 101

While culturally and locally specific factors certainly come into play and can mediate the ways in which such environmental features are experienced, the important point here is that environmental features have been shown to affect social relations and the kinds of social environments that can contribute to protecting children from harm. It is important not to reject such research as being relevant only in countries of the North where such work has taken place, but to explore through local and ideally participatory research what the local factors are that might make a difference. In general, there is far more limited research available from the South supporting the basic premise that a lively community life and the capacity for easy surveillance increase safety. Some research has related growing crime and insecurity to the increasing spatial divisions between social groups, as welcoming “public space” is increasingly privatized in gated enclaves for the wealthy. As Charlotte Lemanski describes it in Cape Town: “Citizen fear-management strategies of erecting walls and enclosing neighbourhoods have had a perverse effect, leaving both public and private spaces devoid of Jacobs’ natural surveillance (and thereby less safe), and making use of a perverted form of Newman’s “defensible space” to facilitate tribal territorialism that serves to increase fears and deepen segregation.”⁸⁵ (p 107) A related phenomenon is described in Nicaragua, where the whole city of Managua is described as being separated into a network of high speed roads connecting the residential, commercial and leisure worlds of the rich, leaving the remainder of the city to crumble into neglected and unpoliced slums, “with people going out as little as possible and restricting themselves to a few fixed routes and destinations.”⁸⁶ (p 118)

Residential instability: A critical feature of inadequate housing is the insecurity of tenure that often accompanies it and the frequent relocation that is a part of life for many people around the globe. Research from the USA relates high rates of residential instability within specific neighbourhoods to higher rates of child maltreatment because of the effects that this has in disrupting social ties and hindering the formation of social networks. Sampson and colleagues, for instance, point to the very significant role of neighbourhood stability in promoting protective behaviours towards children.⁸⁷ Qualitative evidence from different low income countries supports the notion that evictions and relocation undermine solidarity and social networks.

Local levels of provision: The level of basic service provision at the neighbourhood level can have significant implications for the protection and safety of children and young people. When groups of children from four different low income neighborhoods in Johannesburg assessed their local environments, a high percentage of the problems they identified highlighted this link between provision and personal safety. A lack of proper waste removal, for instance, aside from being a health hazard, was seen by the children as encouraging open space to be taken over for purposes like drug dealing and clandestine

⁸⁵ Lemanski, Charlotte (2004) A new apartheid? The spatial implications of fear of crime in Cape Town, South Africa, *Environment and Urbanization* 16 (2) 101-111

⁸⁶ Rodgers, Dennis (2004) "Disembedding" the city: crime, insecurity and spatial organization in Managua, *Environment and Urbanization* 16(2) 113-124

⁸⁷ Figure out which sampson paper

sex, thereby limiting the options that were open to them. Crossing lights that didn't work and that resulted in long waits to get across busy streets also exposed them to harassment. Streets without adequate lighting and parks without security measures limited their recreational options and compromised their safety. Inadequate public transport forced them to rely on often predatory taxi drivers.⁸⁸

Difficulties with reaching school can be threatening in many places. In Nigeria, girls who live far from school said they were often forced to accept rides from men, which put them in the "owing position".⁸⁹(p.207) Generally speaking, children in poverty, who are more likely to live at greater distances from school and who are more dependent on public transport, are especially vulnerable.⁹⁰

The provision of sanitation also has implications, especially for girls, as noted above. Many communities have only public toilet blocks, and for many they are at a distance from home. These can often be sites of abuse and harassment, especially for young girls.⁹¹

The bottom line is that, especially in a larger context of violence, the absence of appropriate physical provision can exacerbate the degree to which children are exposed to abuse or harassment, and can affect the level of mobility that is possible for them. When decisions are made by local authorities on these fronts, the safety implications for children and young people are seldom taken into account. As Kruger and Chawla point out in the case of Johannesburg, for instance, what may appear to a parks department to be the adequate provision of green space in a neighbourhood to meet recreational needs may fail to take into account all the factors that prevent children from actually making use of this space.⁹²

Stigma and identity: The experience of stigma has been identified as a potent source of stress.⁹³ Research has made it clear that for children in particular, the most challenging aspect of poverty is often the degree of associated stigma that they feel, and that most often this stigma is closely tied to their material conditions. Chawla and colleagues point out that children from a number of countries tend to see piles of uncollected trash, bad

⁸⁸ Kruger, Jill Swart and Louise Chawla. (2005). "We know something someone doesn't know... children speak out on local conditions in Johannesburg." *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 89-104.

⁸⁹ Barker, G. and Rich, S. (1992). Influences on adolescent sexuality in Nigeria and Kenya: Findings from recent focus group discussions. *Studies in Family Planning*, 23(3), 199-210.

⁹⁰ Human RightsWatch. (2001). *Scared at school: Sexual violence against girls in South Africa*. New York: Human RightsWatch

⁹¹ Burra, Sundar, Sheela Patel and Thomas Kerr (2003) Community-designed, built and managed toilet blocks in Indian cities, *Environment and Urbanization* 2003; 15; 11

⁹² Kruger, Jill Swart and Louise Chawla. (2005). "We know something someone doesn't know... children speak out on local conditions in Johannesburg." *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 89-104.

⁹³ Major B, O'Brien LT (2005) The social psychology of stigma, *Annual Review of Psychology* 56: 393-421

smells from poor sanitation, and dilapidated surroundings as painful reflections of their own worth in the world.⁹⁴

Although this would not appear at first glance to be a protection issue in the usual sense, in fact one of the findings arising from research with children in poverty is the extent to which they feel the stigma around the material circumstances of poverty is associated with a greater susceptibility to being bullied or harassed. According to Boyden and colleagues, “*Children recognize that frequently they are themselves the main instigators of abuses directed at others due to their poverty. In fact one of the worst consequences of being thought of as ‘poor’ is the associated social exclusion and susceptibility to teasing, bullying and denigration by peers.*”⁹⁵ (p.32)

Swart- Kruger’s participatory investigation into the lives of children in a squatter camp in central Johannesburg reveals how powerful the sense of stigma and exclusion is for these children as a consequence of their place of residence. The squatters were resented for invading this patch of vacant land and were blamed for the increase in local crime and the drop in property values. Children described the disgust and anger that they felt was directed at them by neighbours of all races, which affected their comfort in making use of neighbourhood resources. Those who attended local schools, for instance, were careful not to reveal where they lived, fearful of ridicule and rejection. Their identity as residents of this marginal community was, Swart-Kruger argues, an effective mechanism for social exclusion⁹⁶. When this squatter community was evicted and relocated miles away from the city in a barren stretch of veld, water had to be trucked in, and they were often without supplies for days at a time. A film documenting the children’s lives in this new site indicates how humiliating they found it not to be able to wash. One boy explains to the camera that when there is no water, he cannot attend school because it would be shameful to arrive unclean.⁹⁷

In school

Human Rights Watch reported in 2001 on the high prevalence of sexual harassment, intimidation and assault experienced by schoolgirls in South Africa. This report argued that, in effect, the school environment is an insecure space where, in a larger culture of violence, these acts can easily take place. School toilets, empty classrooms, long hallways all become sites for assault and abuse, as well as exposure to gang violence and robbery. This report points out that it is not simply a matter of turf wars between gangs spilling into schools, but rather that schools are “territorial prizes”, providing gangs the controlled area they need for selling drugs or recruiting new members. The high level of

⁹⁴ Chawla, L., Ed. (2001). *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*. London, Earthscan/UNESCO

⁹⁵ Boyden, Jo, Carola Eyber, Thomas Feeney, Caitlin Scott (2003) *Children and Poverty: Experiences and Perceptions from Belarus, Bolivia, India, Kenya and Sierra Leone*, Christian Children’s Fund

⁹⁶ Swart-Kruger, J. (2001). Children in a South African squatter camp gain and lose a voice. *Growing Up in an Urbanizing World*. L. Chawla. London, Earthscan/UNESCO.

⁹⁷ Find name of Canaansland movie

intimidation makes a culture of learning impossible to achieve, and children are also cheated on this front.

An interview with one girl indicates the extent to which school layout and security contribute to the situation: “*One of my friends who is a prefect was working at the media center and I was on my way to see her during break when [they] asked me where I was going and I said to the media center. They asked me if I was going by myself and I told them yes. I started walking there and they followed me. The media center is only about a two minute walk from the main school building but a teacher would not be able to see what goes on there, boys will go there to smoke because they cannot be seen. They started following me and came up behind me and pulled me behind the media center building. I felt like crying. They were trying to take my skirt off and they ripped my top. I had a button missing. There was a stick on the ground. I picked up the stick and started fighting them and they ran away.*”⁹⁸

Despite the fact that the high potential for abuse in schools is most frequently documented in Africa, the problem is clearly not restricted to this region. There are also numerous reports from India for instance, where an absence of sex segregated toilets and supervised playgrounds have been described as contributing factors.⁹⁹

Corporal punishment is a still more common phenomenon in many schools, widely accepted as a routine form of discipline. While it can clearly not be blamed on physical conditions, it is not unlikely that the challenge of dealing with overly large classes of children in overcrowded conditions could contribute to stress in teachers and predispose them to make greater use of punitive responses.¹⁰⁰

Although work on bullying in schools is primarily a Northern phenomenon, some UK researchers have made observations that could surely be more widely applied. Wendy Titman, for example, argued 20 years ago that the boring, barren and often hostile feeling playgrounds of many schools are the perfect breeding ground for bullying. When combined with the “code of silence” practiced by many children, this points to the need for skilled and perceptive adult supervision (as in the case of children’s play in some neighbourhoods) as well as attention to environments that are more welcoming and engaging for children.¹⁰¹

Conditions at work

One of the most common protection issues dealt with by child focused organizations is the harm and exploitation associated with hazardous work. This is one area where it is more common to find research relating physical conditions to child well being.

⁹⁸ Human RightsWatch. (2001). Scared at school: Sexual violence against girls in South Africa. New York: Human RightsWatch.

⁹⁹ Agrawal, Anuja (2008) Sex Abuse is Undermining Girls' Education, <http://www.boloji.com/wfs6/2008/wfs1168.htm>

¹⁰⁰ Bartlett Finding Hope unless can find another reference

¹⁰¹ Wendy Titman (1988) Adult responses to children’s fears, Delwyn Tattum and David Lane (eds) *Bullying in Schools*, Trentham Books: Stoke on Trent

The issue of whether or not, and in which situations, children's work should be considered harmful and exploitative is not a discussion that will be engaged in here. Suffice it to say that work, whether at home or in the workplace, *can* be developmentally suitable and rewarding for children, and can be excessive and inappropriate. At issue here is the degree to which physical conditions contribute to one or the other.

There have been numerous accounts over the years of the dangerous conditions under which many children work. A recent example, based on interviews with children over several months, describes the working conditions for young Bolivian miners, some as young as 5 years of age and working 7 or 8 hours a day. The long walk to work, carrying tools, was exhausting for some children. Many had no safety equipment; others dropped it once in the mines to be able to move through narrow galleries more easily with their heavy tools; they apparently considered their tools to be more important than their security. Children were exposed to poisonous gases and reduced levels of oxygen, and many chewed coca leaves as a way of dealing with their pain and exhaustion.¹⁰² This study is typical of many describing the ways in which hazardous physical conditions in the work world can threaten children's health and development on every front.

The physical realities of work do not have to be this explicitly hazardous in order for them to be potentially questionable for children. Aitken and colleagues, for instance, describe the situation in Tijuana, Mexico, where many children between the ages of 8 and 14 engage in "volunteer" work as packers in supermarkets. Their earnings come from tips, which amount to enough to make a significant difference to the survival strategies of their families, and these children are not subject to the many regulations that pertain to "real" work and those over 14. Although their work is not arduous, and is in theory limited to a few hours a day, many of these children actually combine up to 6 hours in the supermarket with a full school day, in effect putting in very extended work days away from home at a young age, in part because of the long distances they have to travel alone through their city.¹⁰³

Children's work for their own families is less likely on the whole to be considered exploitative (although there is certainly evidence that for many children work at home feels more rather than less exploitative because it does not earn them any money¹⁰⁴). For many children living conditions can make their work, even at home, far more draining and hazardous than is appropriate, especially for girls. Fetching water is a good example. This can be a simple and not very demanding chore, or it can fill a good part of the day, cutting into time for school and leisure and even compromising children's healthy growth. Recent research from South Africa found that on average boys between 10 and

¹⁰² Center for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI) and Fundacion MEDMIN (2006) Child Labourers in the Bolivian Mining Sector: Their Perspective, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) Child Protection Research Fund

¹⁰³ Aitken, Stuart, Silvia López Estrada, Joel Jennings and Lina María Aguirre (2006) Reproducing life And labor: global processes and working children in Tijuana, Mexico *Childhood* 2006; 13; 365-387

¹⁰⁴ Niewenhuys, Olga (1994) *Children's Lifeworlds: Gender, Welfare and Labour in the Developing World*. London: Routledge

19 were spending over an hour day fetching water and fuel, and girls were spending well over two hours.¹⁰⁵

A large proportion of the millions of working children worldwide work as domestic servants in the homes of others. In many cases, this domestic work is rationalized on the basis of kinship ties – these are children working for wealthier relatives who in return are guaranteeing their safety and promising an education. However, this situation is also widely recognized as a common setting for physical and sexual abuse, and it is the very privacy of the situation that contributes to this.¹⁰⁶ The physical and social isolation of these children is in some cases compounded by virtual incarceration, with children confined to kitchens and even locked in when their employers are out.¹⁰⁷ The ambivalence of this situation, as Jacquemin points out, describing circumstances Abidjan, can result in the youngest and most at-risk children being overlooked by agencies which are more likely to target somewhat older paid domestic servants.¹⁰⁸

In many cases children's work exposes them to life on the street, with the consequent exposure to hazards of various kinds, whether traffic, harassment or sexual abuse (see below)

Children on the street

The literature on street children tends to be quite polarized, with those who see these children primarily as victims in need of a range of protections on one side of the debate, and those who see them as resourceful agents, finding ways to manage the challenges of poverty and often abuse at home on the other. The situation is undoubtedly more of a spectrum of realities than an either/or situation. However the very relationship of children to this highly visible physical environment continues to provoke debate and rhetoric. Available evidence on the physical environments of these children tends to fall on one side or the other of this polarity.

One perspective is that, for the millions of children either working or living on the streets, this physical situation puts them in the way of a range of hazards, and that the extent of their exposure contributes to their level of risk. Ebigbo points to his research in Nigeria interviewing 100 girls between 8 and 15 engaged in hawking and another 100 non-hawking girls. Among the first group, 50 percent reported being raped or seduced while hawking; by comparison only 9 percent of the second group says they had been forced into intercourse while running errands or walking to school.¹⁰⁹ Even the 9 percent is of

¹⁰⁵ Mitik, Lulit (2008) Household work and schooling in South Africa: modeling parents' time allocation decisions, *Children, Youth and Environments* (in press)

¹⁰⁶ Rangita de Silva-de-Alwis (2007) Legislative reform on child domestic labour: a gender analysis, UNICEF Division of Policy and Planning, New York

¹⁰⁷ Akhtar, Sajjad and Saadiya Razzaq (2005) *Child Domestic Labour in Pakistan: Overview, Issues and Testable Hypothesis*, Centre for Research on Poverty Reduction and Income Distribution (CRPRID)

¹⁰⁸ Jacquemin, Melanie (2006) Can the language of rights get hold of the complex realities of child domestic work? The case of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, *Childhood* 13; 389-406

¹⁰⁹ Ebigbo, P.O. "Street Children: The Core of Child Abuse and Neglect in

course not a small number, seriously calling into question any assumptions about the relative absence of child abuse in more traditional societies.

Other investigators describe children's creative use of street space as a way to avoid abuse either at home or at the hands of authorities or others on the street. Davies, for instance, describes the world of street children in a town in Kenya, where they survive by means of scavenging rather than begging, and where they occupy a hidden stretch of mud road in the heart of the town behind the main commercial buildings – an area filled with rubbish and open sewers and considered within the town as being both filthy and dangerous. The children consider it a safe area, away from the adult world and relatively free from harassment because of its reputation, which they manage to manipulate and capitalize upon to ensure their own safety. The adult world has by default ceded them this space, knowing that otherwise the children would be an undesirable presence on the rest of the town's streets. Davies describes the very orderly use of the area which the children have organized, with places for play, for sleep, for clothes washing, cooking and so on.

¹¹⁰

Also from Kenya, Droz describes a new way of conceptualizing children on the street as belonging to “street families” rather than being “street children”, an approach that, in positive terms, stresses their strong ties to one another and often to adults as well, and that acknowledges the street as genuine social environment and a “home” rather than just an expression of homelessness. This apparently more progressive way of viewing these spatial, material realities, however, has also been used to “euphematize” the situation in Droz's words, in effect normalizing a challenging set of realities that have been forced on people by their deep poverty and the absence of effective supports. It has also been part of the rhetoric of the Kibaki regime, using the language of rights to argue for restoring the work ethic and the traditional meaning of family as they sweep the streets clean of these out-of-place “families” and force them into work camps. ¹¹¹

Disasters, emergencies and displacement

Displacement has become a way of life for millions of people world wide. There were an estimated 26 million internally displaced people at the end of 2007, people who because of political violence, armed conflict, forced eviction or natural disaster were forced to leave their homes. ¹¹² This figure does not include refugees who have crossed international borders – an additional estimated 13 million. The massive scale of displacement worldwide, along with the limited resources allocated to dealing with this problem, raises numerous protection issues for children.

Nigeria.” *Children, Youth and Environments* 13(1), Spring 2003.

¹¹⁰ Davies, Matthew (2008) Anthropological study of street children in northwest Kenya *Childhood* 2008; 15; 309-331

¹¹¹ Droz, Ivan (2006) Street children and the work ethic: new policy for an old moral, Nairobi (Kenya) *Childhood* 13:349-363

¹¹² IDMC (2008) Global statistics: IDP country figures, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpPages\)/22FB1D4E2B19](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpPages)/22FB1D4E2B19)

Aside from deepening poverty, displacement has profound social, emotional and cultural implications. There is an extensive body of research in the North discussing the distress, frustration and despair that can accompany displacement, whether as a result of eviction around gentrification or the loss of home through natural disaster.¹¹³ Some research has pinpointed very specific risks for children: for instance, increased rates of child abuse have long been associated in the North American literature with factors that generally become more prevalent after a disaster or other significant upheaval – such as maternal depression, poverty, loss of property or a breakdown in social support. For instance, a study in the USA looked at rates of inflicted traumatic brain injury in children under two in the six months following a hurricane. Drawing on hospital records, the research found that in areas most severely affected by the storm, five times as many small children were admitted with inflicted brain injuries in the six months after the hurricane as in the previous six months.¹¹⁴ The same study found that accidental traumatic brain injury was ten times higher over this six month period. Researchers hypothesized that this was due to the increased presence of environmental hazards due to the displacement to temporary housing, as well as to the reduced parental supervision. In other words, both abuse and neglect are at issue here.

No similar research in low income countries points precisely to rates of increase in episodes of child abuse or neglect. However there is a growing body of anecdotal evidence and qualitative research on the challenging conditions within emergency camps and other temporary living solutions which create very specific protection problems. These camps are generally uncomfortable and overcrowded, with no provision for privacy in spaces that may be shared by multiple families. Communal showers and toilets may be at a distance, with often no lighting along the way. Sexual violence is apparently common in some places, and there have been numerous reports of children and women enduring abuse of various kinds. In interviews after the 2004 tsunami, adolescent girls complained of the lack of privacy around sleep, washing and dressing, and of the continual sexual harassment they faced.¹¹⁵ The lack of privacy and the challenging physical conditions contribute to the more general stress and anxiety experienced by people who are victims of conflict or disaster. Deprived of their own space, of the routines of home, and a sense of control over their lives, people may experience a breakdown in the social controls that normally regulate household and community behaviour.¹¹⁶ UNCHR research points out that sexual exploitation has also become a

¹¹³ See for instance Carr, Leslie (1994) The can't move-must move contradiction: a case study of displacement of the poor and social stress, *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless* 3(2) 185-201 ; [Kessler RC, Galea S, Gruber MJ, Sampson NA, Ursano RJ, Wessely S](#).(2008) Trends in mental illness and suicidality after Hurricane Katrina, *Molecular Psychiatry* 13(4):374-84.

¹¹⁴ Keenan, Heather T, Stephen W Marshall, Mary Alice Nocera and Desmond K. Runyan (2004) "Increased incidence of inflicted traumatic brain injury in children after a natural disaster", *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 26(3), pp 189-89.

¹¹⁵ Fisher, Sarah (2005) *Gender-based Violence in Sri Lanka in the Aftermath of the Tsunami Crisis*, Dissertation submitted to the University of Leeds

¹¹⁶ Gururaja, S (2000), "Gender dimensions of displacement", *Forced Migration Review*, <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR09/fmr9.5.pdf>.

survival mechanism for many refugee families, and that inadequate food rations in camps can encourage young girls to engage in sex to help their families. The power imbalance between children and aid workers can also result in unwanted sex.¹¹⁷ Far from being the temporary solutions they are designed as, these dysfunctional living arrangements can become the only reality many children have known.

Deepening poverty associated with climate change

Large disasters and conflict are more likely to attract attention because of their extreme nature. But gradually worsening physical conditions as a result of changing climate or conflict-related upheaval in many parts of the globe also have protection implications for children. The most significant effects are generally experienced by poor families and communities, which have the least infrastructure to protect them from such hardships as increasing and more intense rains or rising sea levels, and the least capacity to prepare, adapt and protect themselves. The results can include short term displacement, loss of work, rising prices for basics, and the greater time and energy required to cope with more challenging surroundings and daily routines.¹¹⁸ When families faces more pressure than they can easily adapt to, the effects for children can be significant. Aside from the increase in neglect and abuse that might naturally follow from gradually deepening poverty and stress, there is also the likelihood of more children being sacrificed to exploitative work.¹¹⁹

III Measures for addressing child protection

If there is anything that this focus on physical environment factors can highlight, it is the sheer range and complexity of the issues that are relevant to the adequate protection of children. The maltreatment of children arises out of situations involving the interaction of a range of factors – not just one simple cause leading in a linear way to a specific outcome. Nor can these issues easily be addressed by focusing on single causes.¹²⁰ Responding to particular environmental issues, from this perspective, cannot “solve” the problem of child maltreatment. However it might contribute to altering the complex set of interactions and realities that constitute the context for abuse and maltreatment. An environmental perspective also provides in many cases an especially constructive entry point in many sensitive situations, as will be discussed below.

¹¹⁷ UNHCR & SC-UK. (2002). *Notes for implementing and operational partners by UNHCR and Save the Children-UK on sexual violence and exploitation: The experience of refugee children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone based on initial findings and recommendations from Assessment Mission 22 October–30 November 2001*. Geneva: UNHCR & SC-UK.

¹¹⁸ Bull-Kamanga, L, K Diagne, A Lavell, E Leon, F Lerise, H MacGregor, A Maskrey, M Meshack, M Pelling, H Reid, D Satterthwaite, J Songsore, K Westgate and A Yitambe “From everyday hazards to disasters: the accumulation of risk in urban areas”, *Environment and Urbanization* 15(1), pp 193-204.

¹¹⁹ Bartlett, S (2008) *Climate Change and Urban Children: Implications for Adaptation in Low and Middle Income Countries*, Working paper, International Institute for Environment and Development

¹²⁰ Stevens, Irene and Peter Hassett (2007) Applying complexity theory to risk in child protection practice *Childhood* 14: 128-144

Comprehensive responses to child protection issues are staggeringly difficult in most low income countries. A good reality check on the scale of the problem comes from Kenya, a country which has taken many positive steps towards the creation of a national child protection system, and which still reels from the accumulation of risks faced by children and families:

“A comprehensive Children Act came into force in 2002. This led to the creation of a National Council for Children Services and Children’s Courts countrywide. In addition, there has been the formulation of national policies on Child Labour (2002), Education (2005), and Orphans and Vulnerable Children (2005). Guidelines and regulations on adoption have also been developed and were gazetted in May, 2005. Different arms of government departments have been trained and, in some cases, children’s rights information has been incorporated in the curricula of police and teacher training colleges. Corporal punishment has been outlawed in schools and judicial institutions...Despite these efforts to improve legislation and the policy framework to protect children, the resources needed to make a real difference are inadequate and unpredictable, both in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa ...Indeed, children’s issues are affected on a yearly basis dependent on the interests of donors. There have been many factors to overcome in the implementation of the Convention—in Kenya, the AIDS pandemic, a poorly performing economy that has seen the proportion of the population living below the poverty line reach 58%, a million children not in school despite the introduction of free primary education in 2003, 2 million children working, and 1.1 million orphans... In countries such as Kenya, the reforms instigated after ratification of the CRC provide a sound rights-based framework for the development of services for the protection of children and for promotion of their welfare. However, governments must be encouraged to control the process of implementation.”¹²¹

The serious imbalance between the scope of the problem and the resources available for addressing it calls into question the validity of a Northern model of child protection in settings where the majority of the population faces deep poverty. A study from South Africa points to the burnout and feelings of helplessness among social workers, the diminishing resources available to them and the general lack of credibility given to their profession, in the face of the huge volume of problems facing children.¹²²

Henderson speaks also of the inadequacy of categories of protection in situations where most children, whether they fall into these categories or not, face challenges that put them at risk in a variety of ways. She argues, for instance, that responses to AIDS orphans, which focus on this particular category of child in distinction to the many other children around them also in deep poverty, is an expression of ..”an obsessive fixation on points of violation or personal pain..” (p 306) in a context where pain and violence are

¹²¹ Onyango, Philista and Margaret A Lynch (2006) Implementing the right to child protection: a challenge for developing countries www.thelancet.com 367 February 25, 2006

¹²² Huskisson N (1998) [The avalanche of children requiring social services in the Western Cape](#). South African Medical Journal 88(4):437-9.

widespread.¹²³ While the media and various organizations see parental death as an indicator for a range of subsequent social pathologies, many poor non-orphaned children may live in circumstances not different from those of AIDS orphans. Labelling children in this way may even have negative implications for their self image and the way they are perceived by others. Henderson's analysis provides an argument for considering responses not to specific children who fall into particular protection categories, especially given the challenges in understanding the intricacies involved, but to a wider framework of protection.

This is an awkward recognition. Challenging as it might be to respond to specific categories of children who experience mistreatment by specific individuals, how much greater is the challenge of responding to the larger context within which maltreatment is embedded, and to the broad potential for neglect, abuse, exploitation that exists for large numbers of children in these situations? The psychopathological model of a dysfunctional mother, an alcoholic father, a cruel employer, is relatively speaking a far easier model to deal with.

Elizabeth Jareg, noting the relentless slide into dire poverty of many families in the countries where Save the Children Norway works, and the very limited capacity of the organization to respond effectively, suggests that "more research is needed into the dynamics of accumulating poverty and resource loss in families to guide the timeliness and types interventions appropriate".¹²⁴ This brings us, as always, to the recognition of how locally specific these problems can be, and to how essential the engagement of local people is in both identifying problems and developing solutions. There are some excellent examples, rare though their documentation may be, of responses to child protection that are firmly anchored in local communities and realities. One example, from Cebu City in the Philippines, involves a community-based diversion program for children in conflict with the law, an alternative to what had been a very harsh, top down system under which an estimated 58,000 children were being incarcerated each year in dangerous and dehumanizing conditions. The new system, neighbourhood-based although strongly linked to formal local governance structures and resources, focuses on mediation, restorative justice, peer education and an on-going relationship for child offenders with community volunteers. The collaborative link with local structures and the capacity for trained and committed neighbourhood people to work on rehabilitation solutions with children and families is key to the success of the program.¹²⁵

Another more general community response to child protection comes from South Africa and is an informal outgrowth of the activities of small local women's savings groups, members of which belong also to a larger federation of the urban poor. This example has

¹²³ Henderson, Patricia (2006) South African Aids orphans: Examining assumptions around vulnerability from the perspective of rural children and youth. *Childhood* 13: 303-327

¹²⁴ Jareg, Elizabeth Can developing countries afford social protection? Save the Children Norway, www.norad.no/default.asp?FILE=items/9560/108/Input%20NORAD%20seminar%20final.doc -

¹²⁵ Etemadi, Felisa U. (2005). "Community-Based Diversion for Children in Conflict with the Law: The Cebu City Experience." *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 319-341.

not been formally documented, but was described by an involved local federation leader.¹²⁶ These savings groups, designed in large part to promote the organization of members towards the goal of gaining secure land and housing, also tackle a range of other local issues in the course of their frequent meetings – such as getting children into school, dealing with community health issues, local waste management and so on. Part of what develops naturally from these meetings is an informal surveillance system regarding the welfare of neighbourhood children generally, often with specific attention to the threat of violence or abuse. In the course of addressing these local issues, some of these savings groups have become involved with an NGO focused on child protection, which has, for instance, offered training to some members to negotiate with parents in difficult situations. Savings group members help to run the NGO office, which also provides a physical place of safety for women and children when this is necessary. While the services provided by this NGO may not be that unusual, what *is* unusual here is the fact that local women are driving the agenda and drawing on the services of the NGO in order to further their own efforts in the area of integrated local development.

These two examples are not focused on the physical environment. They are presented here simply to make the case that community driven responses to the complex issue of child protection are not only viable but probably essential. Without local identification of issues, and genuine neighbourhood investment in, and commitment to, their solution, the efforts of social services agencies or organizations are unlikely to be more than patchy and ill-targeted. Their function ideally should be to support locally developed systems, not to impose their own.

There are practical reasons here for bringing this discussion back again to the physical environment and local living conditions, and, below, various constructive community based approaches to child protection through attention to this aspect will be discussed. First it is useful to consider a very particular added value to using the physical environment as an entry point.

A benefit of using the physical environment as an entry point for discussion

Discussing problems within the local environment in participatory, child inclusive, community-driven ways has the huge advantage of raising often sensitive protection issues in a non- invasive, non- threatening way. There appears to be a natural synergy between discussion of local physical conditions and the awareness of children's needs and well being. Talking about the need for street lights, for instance, can be a productive way in to into discussing issues of harrassment for young girls, which, once raised, can go in many directions. Following the tsunami, discussions in Tamil Nadu with local women on housing design, and the practicality of the one bedroom model proposed by aid agencies, gradually turned into very open discussion of the enormous challenges of managing sexual dynamics and violations in housing with no provision for privacy. Local NGO staff said these issues had never been raised before in their presence, and the women said they did not usually even talk to one another about these problems. Once the concern had been raised, several creative solutions were proposed which added little to the cost of these houses and which families could choose among. Other relevant problems

¹²⁶ Informal interview with Evelyn Benekane, South African Federation of the Urban Poor, 2008

were also raised and discussed – by men, women, girls, boys – in the course of a week of work in modifying the standard house plan. Toilets, for instance, were designed to be entered from outdoors; toilets attached to the house are still an unusual feature in this part of the world, and many considered it unhygienic and distasteful to have a toilet open into a house. Many young girls, however, said they felt embarrassed and vulnerable being seen by outsiders entering the toilet (a reality that causes many women and girls in South Asia to wait until cover of darkness to tend to their needs) and said they would find it far less threatening to have an inside door. Debating practical needs in this way can become an entry point into more loaded discussions and a shared awareness. As one grandmother put it: *“through this planning process we really started talking to each other and getting to know everyone. There's a lot of discussion now about everything. Now we frequently convene meetings on our own. ...There are still people in this community who are worse off – widows, people who are more vulnerable in different ways. We can't help them financially, but we are all much more concerned about each other now and can at least offer our friendship and support. And we're much more aware about what our children need and what they can do..”*(page 56)¹²⁷

Some points about the local identification of problems and solutions

“Participation” has become an essential ingredient of the programming of many organizations, an integral component of a rights-based approach. But participation can differ enormously in quality and intent. Too often, it is undertaken more as a rote response to the declared ideals of an organization, or as a “project” in its own right, rather than a way of genuinely engaging community members, young or old, in a process of identifying and acting on their own needs. Genuine participation involves a number of often uncomfortable realities for organizations. It has limited compatibility, for instance, with predetermined plans of action, log frame outcomes or free standing projects that are isolated from the more general development priorities of a group of people.

Even where there may be a genuine desire to listen to the priorities and concerns of local people, too often there is scant attention to supporting any form of follow up. A much cited (by this author) example from Johannesburg describes how even the most skilled and effective efforts to draw on children’s understanding of their own neighbourhood concerns, promoted by concerned people in local government, could later become lost in the realities of a bureaucracy where no one actually took responsibility for acting on identified problems and practical solutions. One of the more promising projects to act on behalf of children’s self-identified concerns came to nothing in the end, and resulted in considerable cynicism on the part of the children.¹²⁸ A recognition on the part of organizations of the complexity of practical follow-up can also encourage participatory activities that focus more on how children feel than what can be done about it, and there is a not uncommon sense that simply being involved in such an exercise is beneficial in its own right, or educational, and that no further justification is required.

¹²⁷ Bartlett, S and S Iltus (2007) *Making Space for Children: Planning for Post-disaster Reconstruction with Children and their Families*, Save the Children UK and Save the Children Sweden,

¹²⁸ Clements, Je’anna. (2005). “How crazy can it be? An assessment, three years later, of outcomes from a participatory project with children in Johannesburg.” *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 105-116.

Among children's organizations, it is also most common to conduct participation with children only. While the perspective of older children on issues of abuse and maltreatment is unquestionably critical, they are not the only important participants. Maltreatment is a family-wide and community-wide problem and it calls for a range of knowledge, skills and support. Unless children's concerns and priorities are integrated into the more general priorities of a community, they can easily get lost.

This is all to say that while it is easy to recommend and advocate for a participatory and local response to the issue of child protection, this is easier said than done. It takes skill, commitment, follow through, and an openness to allowing communities to set their own priorities for this to make a real difference.

What follows is a synopsis of some of the responses at different levels that can be, in relevant contexts, part of a broader effort to ensure the protection of local children, or even to function as an entry point to such an effort.

Within the home:

In any household or community planning process around building or improving housing, attention can be brought to the implications of privacy or the lack of privacy, and to cost effective ways to address these issues. For frank discussion to be possible, this almost surely means the opportunity for women, girls, men, boys to discuss these issues separately, and to gain the confidence to present their concerns and needs in more mixed planning groups.

Another issue calling for discussion is the capacity for crowded conditions to stimulate punitive and even abusive responses to children. It is not easy to address the problem of crowding, especially outside of a close working relationship with the many partners involved in the provision of adequate housing. But it is possible to become more aware of its impact, and for caregivers to support one another in dealing with the issue. There are also usually local ways to lessen the impact of density somewhat. An example would be advocacy to change regulations about building upward in dense settlements. Also, some homes, even if crowded, can be organized to allow for a small space that would allow a child or adult to escape from chaotic conditions for a while – something known in the child development literature as a “stimulus shelter”.¹²⁹ Ensuring there are alternative common spaces outside of home for people to go to in very dense conditions is also critical.

Protection in the home includes attention to safety; there are numerous measures that can be taken to protect children from preventable injuries. These too are often quite local in nature, and would call for the critical assessment of potential hazards. Safety is most often something that becomes seen as an issue after there is a problem, and people tend to be quite fatalistic about “accidents”, failing to view them as events that can be anticipated

¹²⁹ Wachs, T (1987). Developmental perspectives on designing for children, in CS Weinstein and TG David (eds) *Spaces for Children: the Built Environment and Child Development*. New York, Plenum Press.

and prevented. One possibility is home visits by local volunteers trained to identify hazards and suggest improvements. This could well be a role for a corps of older children. Some of the kinds of modifications that can make a lot of sense include the provision of safe storage for poisons and medicines; places to cook off the floor; barriers between cooking areas and the rest of the house; rails around flat roof tops, covers for wells and so on. Many useful items can in theory be recycled from household to household for use with children of the appropriate age.

At the level of neighbourhood and common space

The kind of “eyes on the street” neighbourhoods that make children safe and welcome and that encourage the growth of social capital are the product of many large and small components acting together – not a matter of a some universal simple fix like more playgrounds. But a number of simple fixes, locally identifiable, can help to sustain a strong social fabric. In settlements where housing is tight and households are overcrowded, common space outside of the home can provide an essential relief valve as suggested above. The availability of local spaces where both adults and children can get away from household tensions for some of their daily activities, and where social ties can be supported and strengthened, can be addressed in piecemeal ways or planned into both slum upgrading and new construction. Too often, common space is not something that is seriously considered as a critical part of site planning or it may be inserted by “planners” who have little insight into the way people actually use these spaces – for instance in playgrounds on the far edge of settlements. In most cases people create their spaces and opportunities informally – a water point where women congregate to talk as they collect water, a tea-shop where men meet at the end of the day. But sometimes these needs must be more actively identified and addressed – for instance, the common desire of young girls to have spaces where they can sit together and talk without being harassed or viewed with disapproval.

Space for children’s play is an important ingredient of common neighbourhood space, and should be met in ways that truly respond to local needs, recognizing, for instance, that caregivers may not feel uncomfortable if children are not close to home; or that the obsession of a group of young boys for cricket will not be satisfied by the provision of a chess table.

For young children in communities where people face difficult living conditions and the overburdened schedules that accompany them, the presence of a good early childhood program can make a huge difference. This is not exactly a physical environment modification – but it is a valuable response to many problems within the physical environment, lessening the potential for neglect, for abusive behaviour by overstressed parents, and for the exploitation of older siblings who may be prevented from attending school because of the need for childcare.

Local provision of basic services is, again, not something that can be quickly or easily addressed. But a recognition of the role that they play in child protection and the documentation of very specific requirements may be helpful as communities negotiate with government agencies for appropriate responses. The placement and design of a

community toilet may make a big difference to how comfortably it is used and how well it is maintained.¹³⁰ The local identification of places where street lights or crossing lights are needed could make a big difference to safety.¹³¹ The research by Liebermann and Coulson, cited above, makes it clear that trouble spots can be extremely specific and related to particular features of the local environment that may be easily addressed.

Liebermann and Coulson's work also reminds us that physical environment problems do not always call for environmental solutions. The solution to the problem of the dark alley where children were repeatedly mugged was to ensure that school staff were physically present there at times when children were going back and forth. The presence of playworkers (a common profession supported by local government in many European cities, but a role that can also be filled by volunteers) can make a big difference to parents' willingness to have their children playing away from home. As pointed out above, this can also be a way of addressing the bullying that can be such a protection issue for children in many schools. The documented threat that many children feel in passing alcohol outlets could also be minimized by the reliable presence of a local volunteer who is able to address harassment. Supportive community policing can be a major asset in any neighbourhood. In Mumbai, "slum police panchayats" at neighbourhood level are made up of ten local residents, 7 women and 3 men, and one police officer. The community representatives are authorized police assistants, selected by their communities, who work out of a room in their neighbourhood and serve as a liaison between local residents and the police. These panchayat members patrol their neighbourhoods, keeping a watchful eye out, staying alert to problems, helping to settle disputes, and only referring things on to the police when necessary. The implications for children are obvious, both in terms of family violence or dangerous conditions within the larger community.¹³²

Many of the protection issues related to children's safe use of public space come to the fore around the issue of getting to school each day, as noted in previous sections. One response to this has been the safe routes to school initiative, which has developed in different countries, primarily in the North.¹³³ In most cases, programs involve primarily making streets safer for biking and walking, and training children to become more active, aware and competent. But there has also been documentation of a Buenos Aires effort which involved far more local participation. Storeowners, neighbours, and schools were enlisted as volunteers to pay attention to children as they walked back and forth to school. Children were asked to use specific streets where merchants, neighbours, and police staff

¹³⁰ Burra, Sundar, Sheela Patel and Thomas Kerr (2003) Community-designed, built and managed toilet blocks in Indian cities, *Environment and Urbanization* 2003; 15; 11

¹³¹ Kruger, Jill Swart and Louise Chawla. (2005). "We know something someone doesn't know... children speak out on local conditions in Johannesburg." *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 89-104

¹³² A N Roy, A Jockin and Ahmad Javed (2004) Community police stations in Mumbai's slums *Environment and Urbanization* 16; 135-138

¹³³ For instance, <http://www.walktoschool.org/>

were ready to watch out for them. If they had problems, children were free to come into any participating stores that had placed a visible sign in their window, and to ask for help, or call their parents or the police if needed. By 2004, when the report was written, there were eight of these “safe corridors” used by 28,000 students walking to 59 city schools every day.¹³⁴ The critical components of such a program could certainly be widely adapted. A system like this unquestionably raises its own protection issues, providing a potential opening for predatory individuals. This would have to be carefully dealt with anywhere, but certainly the net gains could be substantial. Not all children live close enough to school to walk. Another helpful support could be the training of bus drivers, or the hiring of special staff to ride public transport during the relevant hours and to ensure that children are not harassed.

Protective measures in disaster and emergency situations

There is growing awareness of the impact of dysfunctional post-emergency environments for children, but comparatively little material on measures to counter the problems. One notable exception is the provision of “safe play areas” or “child-friendly spaces”, especially for younger children,¹³⁵ an effort in the turmoil of emergency camps and shelters to provide some supervised place where children will be safe and where they can relieve their distress and anxiety through play with other children. These spaces fill an enormously important role, and although they are designed to be very temporary measures, the duration of people’s stay in these camps in often abysmal physical conditions forces them to become longer term solutions.

The importance of people’s involvement in addressing their own environments becomes if anything more vital in these settings than any other. The chance to manage and improve their current conditions is an important and practical response to the demoralization of displaced people, for whom weeks and months can drag by without any sense of progress, or any opportunity to effect a change. The stress associated with losing control over life in this way can be particularly acute, and the opportunity, at the very least, to take active charge of camp or settlement conditions can be critical to encouraging the morale for people to provide the care and support their children need – not to mention a local setting that is less threatening. There is documentation, albeit anecdotal, of the difference in the mindsets of people who were passive recipients of NGO services after the tsunami, and those were organized within a camp to negotiate. Although priorities and the terms on which help was delivered.¹³⁶ A more pro-active, confident outlook makes it far more likely that social problems will also be more adequately dealt with. For children, too, there is ample evidence of the psychologically protective impact of problem solving, active involvement in improving the post-disaster environment and routines that provide predictable structure to the day and a sense of

¹³⁴ Moore, Robin and Nilda Cosco (2004). “Children’s Rights and Urban Development in Buenos Aires.” Unpublished document produced for Save the Children Sweden.

¹³⁵ The criteria for these are described, for instance, in Prabhu, Nina (2007) *International Donor Agencies Guidelines for Responding to Children in Emergencies*, Ryerson University, downloaded from <http://www.ineesite.org/ineeddownloads/viewall.asp?pid=1387&cp=21>.

¹³⁶ Bartlett, S (2008) *Climate Change and Urban Children: Implications for Adaptation in Low and Middle Income Countries*, Working paper, International Institute for Environment and Development

responsibility.¹³⁷ Among response organizations and agencies, however, in the pressure and rush to deal with chaotic post-emergency situations, the skills and resources of those affected are often overlooked and by-passed, to the detriment of all.

There are numerous specific responses that may be relevant as part of joint planning and activity: negotiated attention to the way space is allocated and divided to ensure optimal privacy; ways to make it possible to wash and dress without being watched or harassed, lighted ways to toilets, access to safe play spaces that goes beyond a few staffed hours a day; efforts to ensure that schooling and early childhood care is available; attention to waste removal, drainage, maintenance of sanitation and water points – not only for health but for general pride and morale.

Although more attention is given to conditions during displacement, many of the same principles are relevant to preparing for disasters in ways that are most likely to ensure the optimal protection of children – identifying potential problems along with communities, and taking joint steps in advance wherever possible, again allowing children an active role – for instance in preparing evacuation routes, provisioning potential emergency shelters and so on.

Conclusion

Numerous other measures could also have been considered here – the possibility of neighbourhood safe havens for children, greater attention to the stress-relieving qualities of vegetation, the benefits of decent private separate toilets for girls in school, ways for work environments to be made more conducive to the safety and protection of young workers, levels of provision that do not entail women becoming so bone weary that they cannot avoid neglecting their small children. The important point is that these issues be debated and discussed locally – both to raise awareness and to find productive responses, that problems be identified by those whom they involve and that solutions reflect local possibilities and visions.

This does not mean that broader, more generic solutions and approaches cannot be relevant – simply that they should be grounded in an understanding of local experience, not the other way around. Recently, for instance, at a board meeting for Slum Dwellers International, the umbrella for worldwide federations of the urban poor, the board discussed a strategy for dealing with AIDs. They felt clear, based on experience from many of their countries, that preventive solutions were closely tied to creating safe, secure spaces for young girls and women in their neighborhoods, and that there was a direct relationship to slum upgrading. Although this shared understanding can begin to shape the way upgrading happens in many places, it will evolve in different ways, and will become part of the on going discussions of these communities about the many issues they face, an integrated part of their understanding of their own situation.

¹³⁷ Boyden, Jo and Gillian Mann (2005) “Children’s risk, resilience, and coping in extreme situations”, in Ungar, Michael (ed) *Handbook for Working with Children and Youth: Pathways to Resilience across Cultures and Contexts*, Sage Publications, London, pp 3-27; .Guyot, Julie (2007). “Participation: children and youth in protracted refugee situations” *Children, Youth and Environments* 17(3), pp 159-178; Bo

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