

CIHR Planning Grant Stakeholder Consultation Summary Report

Introduction

As part of the CIHR Planning and Dissemination Grant (FRN 204960), HealthBridge Foundation of Canada and its international partners undertook a series of stakeholder consultations to better understand opportunities, challenges, and research priorities related to children's outdoor play in low- and middle-income countries. The consultations were designed to inform future collaborative research initiatives and build a shared understanding of how outdoor play can contribute to child health, development, wellbeing, and community resilience across diverse contexts. They also provided an opportunity to identify implementation challenges, evidence gaps, and potential areas for future collaboration among researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and community organizations.

The consultations build on growing international recognition of the importance of outdoor play for children's physical, mental, emotional, and social development. While a substantial body of evidence exists from high-income countries, research from low- and middle-income countries remains limited despite rapid urbanization, changing childhood experiences, and increasing concerns regarding children's health and wellbeing. The stakeholder consultations therefore sought to explore how outdoor play is understood and experienced within different cultural, social, and urban contexts and to identify priorities for future research and action.

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in seven countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Ghana, India, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and Vietnam. Each country focused on a different setting relevant to children's everyday experiences, including streets, schoolyards, parks, informal settlements, early childhood centres, and informal urban spaces. Participants represented a wide range of sectors and perspectives, including local and national government agencies, urban planners, educators, researchers, universities, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, environmental organizations, child-focused organizations, professional associations, private sector representatives, and community leaders. Collectively, the consultations engaged individuals working in child development, education, public health, urban planning, environmental management, social development, local governance, and community development.

Although the consultations explored different environments and local priorities, several common themes emerged. Across countries, stakeholders emphasized the importance of outdoor play as a contributor not only to children's physical activity, but also to learning, creativity, social inclusion, community cohesion, environmental stewardship, mental wellbeing, and healthy childhood development. Participants also highlighted persistent challenges related to access, equity, governance, maintenance, safety, urbanization, and long-term sustainability. The findings presented in this report summarize the key insights that emerged across the seven consultations and provide a foundation for future collaborative research and action.

Bangladesh Stakeholder Consultation Summary: Streets as Spaces for Outdoor Play

Overview

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in Bangladesh to explore opportunities and challenges related to children's outdoor play in streets and neighbourhood spaces. Participants included representatives from local government, transport, urban planning, schools, community organizations, NGOs, and academia. Discussions focused on barriers to outdoor play, opportunities for scaling and sustaining interventions, partnership requirements, evidence gaps, and priorities for future research.

A high degree of consistency emerged across stakeholder groups. Participants described a rapidly urbanizing environment in which children have increasingly limited opportunities for outdoor play due to shrinking public space, traffic-related safety concerns, social changes, and inadequate policy support. At the same time, stakeholders identified a range of promising strategies that could be implemented through collaboration among communities, local governments, schools, planners, and civil society organizations.

Main Barriers to Outdoor Play

Stakeholders consistently identified the shortage of safe and accessible outdoor space as the most significant barrier to children's play. In dense urban areas such as Dhaka, vacant land is scarce and often subject to competing uses. Existing public spaces are frequently overcrowded, inaccessible, commercialized, or reserved for specific groups. Many neighbourhoods lack parks or playgrounds entirely, while school grounds and institutional open spaces are often unavailable for community use.

Road safety was identified as a second major challenge. Streets are dominated by traffic and designed primarily for vehicle movement rather than children's activities. Heavy traffic, unsafe crossings, poor pedestrian infrastructure, and concerns about accidents limit children's independent mobility and discourage parents from allowing outdoor play.

Stakeholders also highlighted several social and institutional barriers. These included declining community cohesion, reduced trust among neighbours, increasing parental concerns about safety, growing academic pressures on children, and increased reliance on screens and indoor activities. Several participants noted that childhood has become increasingly structured and supervised, leaving less time for spontaneous outdoor play.

Equity considerations emerged strongly throughout the consultations. Girls were repeatedly identified as one of the groups facing the greatest barriers due to safety concerns, harassment, and social norms that restrict their use of public space. Younger children, children living in

informal settlements, children from low-income households, and children with disabilities were also identified as particularly disadvantaged.

Environmental factors were mentioned by several stakeholders, including extreme heat, air pollution, and the urban heat island effect, which further reduce opportunities for outdoor activity.

Approaches That Show Promise

Despite these challenges, stakeholders identified a number of approaches that have demonstrated potential for increasing children's access to outdoor play.

- Temporary play streets and car-free street initiatives were frequently cited as promising strategies. These initiatives create safe opportunities for outdoor play by temporarily restricting vehicle access and allowing children to use neighbourhood streets for recreation. Mobile playground programs were also viewed positively, particularly in areas where permanent play infrastructure is not feasible.
- Many stakeholders emphasized the importance of making better use of existing community assets. Potential opportunities include opening school grounds after hours, allowing community access to institutional open spaces, and converting vacant or underutilized sites into small-scale neighbourhood play areas. Several participants highlighted the value of localized solutions that place play opportunities within walking distance of children's homes.
- Community participation emerged as a critical factor in successful implementation. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the importance of involving residents, parents, local leaders, schools, and children themselves in planning, managing, and maintaining play spaces. Several participants noted that community-led initiatives and co-management models appear more sustainable than interventions implemented solely by external organizations.
- Urban planning and transport interventions were also identified as important opportunities. These include traffic calming measures, pedestrian-priority streets, improved walkability, safer crossings, and "slow street" approaches that balance mobility needs with children's use of public space.

Partnerships Required for Scaling

Stakeholders consistently emphasized that expanding children's outdoor play opportunities requires multisectoral collaboration.

- Local governments and city corporations were viewed as essential partners because of their authority over public space, infrastructure, and urban development. Schools and educational institutions were also identified as key stakeholders due to their access to open spaces and their ability to support community-based activities.

- Community organizations, neighbourhood committees, youth groups, and civil society organizations were seen as important partners for community engagement, stewardship, and maintenance. Urban planners, transport officials, researchers, and public health professionals were identified as important contributors to evidence generation and design processes.
- Several stakeholders also highlighted the need to engage religious institutions, local businesses, property owners, and resident associations to build broader community support and ensure long-term sustainability.

Overall, stakeholders emphasized that successful implementation will depend on strong partnerships that bridge government, community, educational, and civil society sectors.

Observed and Anticipated Outcomes

Stakeholders reported several positive outcomes associated with existing play initiatives, including mobile playgrounds and temporary play streets.

- Participants observed increased physical activity, greater social interaction among children, and reduced dependence on screen-based entertainment. Stakeholders also noted improvements in children's confidence, social skills, and overall wellbeing.
- Many participants described broader community benefits. These included stronger social connections among residents, increased trust between families and community organizations, greater community engagement, and improved perceptions of neighbourhood safety. Several stakeholders noted that children from different socioeconomic backgrounds were increasingly interacting and playing together.
- Girls' participation emerged as an important outcome. Stakeholders reported that girls were more likely to participate when activities were located close to home and organized within familiar community settings.
- A notable theme across multiple interviews was the role of outdoor play in strengthening social cohesion. Stakeholders frequently described play initiatives as opportunities not only for recreation, but also for rebuilding community relationships, trust, and collective responsibility within neighbourhoods.

Emerging Insight

One of the most important findings from the Bangladesh consultations was the consistent framing of outdoor play as a form of social infrastructure rather than simply recreational infrastructure. Stakeholders frequently linked children's play opportunities to broader issues of social cohesion, community trust, gender inclusion, safety, and neighbourhood resilience. This suggests that future research may benefit from examining not only the health and developmental outcomes of outdoor play, but also its potential contribution to stronger, more connected, and more resilient urban communities.

India Stakeholder Consultation Summary: Outdoor Play in Anganwadis (Early Childhood Care Centres)

Overview

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in India to explore opportunities and challenges related to outdoor play within Anganwadis (Early Childhood Care Centres). Participants included representatives from government departments responsible for child development, community organizations, educators, and planning officials. Discussions focused on barriers to outdoor play, opportunities for scalable interventions, partnership requirements, and priorities for future research.

Unlike several other country contexts that are focusing on public spaces, streets, or neighbourhood environments, the consultations in India centred on early childhood care settings and the role of outdoor play in supporting learning and child development. Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of play-based learning and highlighted the need for practical, affordable solutions that can be implemented within space-constrained facilities serving children from vulnerable communities.

Main Barriers to Outdoor Play

Stakeholders identified limited infrastructure and lack of dedicated outdoor play space as the most significant barriers to outdoor play within Anganwadis. Many centres operate in rented facilities with little or no outdoor space, making it difficult to provide children with regular opportunities for active play.

Participants also noted a shortage of age-appropriate and safe play equipment, insufficient funding for outdoor play infrastructure, and limited technical guidance on the design and implementation of child-friendly play environments. Safety concerns and inadequate monitoring systems were also identified as challenges.

A recurring theme was the lack of evidence-based models and documented examples that could support policy advocacy, funding decisions, and wider adoption of outdoor play initiatives. Stakeholders noted that decision-makers often require stronger evidence demonstrating the benefits of outdoor play before investing in new approaches. Children from low-income households, informal settlements, and other vulnerable backgrounds were identified as facing the greatest barriers to accessing safe and stimulating outdoor play opportunities.

Approaches That Show Promise

Stakeholders identified a number of practical approaches that could help address space and resource constraints within Anganwadis.

- Portable outdoor play spaces emerged as one of the most promising solutions. Stakeholders viewed portable and adaptable play environments as particularly suitable for urban centres where dedicated outdoor space is limited. Low-cost, flexible models that can be replicated across multiple centres were viewed as especially attractive.
- Participants also emphasized the importance of integrating play-based learning into routine Anganwadi activities rather than treating outdoor play as a separate or occasional activity. Efficient use of existing indoor and outdoor spaces, combined with age-appropriate equipment and structured play opportunities, was viewed as a practical strategy for expanding children's access to play.
- Capacity building for teachers and Anganwadi workers was identified as another important component of successful implementation. Stakeholders highlighted the need for training and technical support to ensure that play activities contribute to children's development and learning.
- Community involvement was repeatedly identified as a factor contributing to the success and sustainability of play initiatives. Stakeholders noted that support from parents, teachers, and local organizations can help strengthen implementation and increase acceptance of outdoor play activities.

Partnerships Required for Scaling

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of partnerships between government departments, local authorities, community organizations, researchers, and private sector actors.

- Government agencies responsible for child development and early childhood education were identified as critical partners because of their role in managing and supporting Anganwadi centres. Local government institutions can also play an important role in facilitating implementation and providing access to resources.
- Universities, child development research centres, and academic institutions were viewed as valuable partners for evidence generation, evaluation, and documentation. NGOs and community-based organizations were identified as important contributors to implementation, community engagement, and capacity building.
- Stakeholders also highlighted the potential role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in supporting infrastructure, equipment, and innovation. Parents, volunteers, and community groups were viewed as important partners in ensuring local ownership and long-term sustainability.

Observed and Anticipated Outcomes

Stakeholders reported a range of positive outcomes associated with existing play-based initiatives.

- Participants observed improvements in children's engagement, happiness, participation, and social interaction. Outdoor play was viewed as contributing positively to children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Several stakeholders reported

that attractive and engaging play environments increased children's interest in attending Anganwadis and participating in activities.

- Teachers and caregivers reported positive behavioural changes among children participating in outdoor play activities. Stakeholders also noted that even relatively small interventions can have meaningful impacts on children's wellbeing and learning experiences.
- Community participation was viewed as contributing to stronger acceptance of outdoor play initiatives and increasing the likelihood of long-term sustainability.

Emerging Insight

One of the most significant findings from the India consultations was the emphasis on scalability through existing systems. Stakeholders consistently focused on practical, affordable, and replicable solutions that can be integrated into the existing Anganwadi network rather than relying on major infrastructure investments. This suggests that future research may benefit from examining how low-cost play interventions can be embedded within government early childhood development systems and delivered at scale to reach vulnerable children. The consultations also highlighted the close relationship between outdoor play, early learning, and child development, suggesting that play-based approaches may offer opportunities to strengthen both educational and developmental outcomes within early childhood care settings.

Brazil Stakeholder Consultation Summary: Outdoor Play in Schoolyards

Overview

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in Brazil to explore opportunities and challenges related to outdoor play within school environments, with a particular focus on naturalized schoolyards. Participants included representatives from government, academia, civil society organizations, school leadership, and early childhood development initiatives. Discussions focused on barriers to outdoor play, opportunities for transforming school environments, partnership requirements, scaling strategies, evidence needs, and priorities for future research. The consultations revealed a strong consensus that the primary challenge is not simply the physical design of schoolyards, but the broader educational culture that shapes how schools understand childhood, play, learning, and outdoor environments. Stakeholders consistently described outdoor play as a fundamental component of children's development and learning rather than a recreational activity separate from education.

A recurring theme throughout the consultations was the need to transform both physical environments and institutional cultures. Participants emphasized that creating naturalized schoolyards requires changes in pedagogical approaches, leadership practices, governance structures, funding mechanisms, and public policy. Outdoor play was frequently linked to broader goals related to child development, health, climate adaptation, environmental education, social inclusion, and community wellbeing.

Main Barriers to Outdoor Play

Stakeholders consistently identified school culture as the most significant barrier to outdoor play. Participants described educational systems that remain strongly influenced by control, discipline, productivity, performance measurement, and classroom-based learning. In many schools, outdoor play is viewed as secondary to formal instruction and is often confined to short and highly regulated periods.

This culture of control manifests in several ways. Stakeholders noted that children are frequently expected to remain seated, follow highly structured routines, and engage primarily in classroom-based activities. Outdoor spaces are often underused, while opportunities for exploration, experimentation, risk-taking, and autonomous play are limited.

Several participants also identified fears related to dirt, accidents, safety, and parental reactions as important barriers. School staff and families may be reluctant to support outdoor play because of concerns about injuries, cleanliness, or disruption of established routines. Physical barriers were also discussed. Many schools lack adequate outdoor spaces or have heavily cemented environments with little vegetation, shade, or natural elements. Existing outdoor areas are often treated as residual spaces rather than educational environments designed to support learning and development.

Stakeholders also highlighted operational and financial barriers. Schools frequently lack dedicated funding for transforming outdoor environments, while local governments may face challenges related to procurement, implementation, maintenance, and long-term management. Participants emphasized that many schools do not have access to technical expertise or specialized staff capable of designing and maintaining naturalized environments.

Territorial inequality emerged as another significant concern. Stakeholders noted that children living in vulnerable communities often have limited access to green spaces, nature, and safe outdoor environments outside of school. In these contexts, schools may represent children's primary opportunity for meaningful contact with nature.

Approaches That Show Promise

Stakeholders identified several promising approaches for expanding outdoor play opportunities within school settings.

- One of the strongest themes was the importance of changing how educators and school leaders understand outdoor play. Participants emphasized that outdoor environments should be viewed as educational spaces where children learn through movement, exploration, creativity, social interaction, and engagement with nature. Several stakeholders described outdoor learning as an extension of the classroom rather than a separate activity.

- The transformation of existing school spaces emerged as another important opportunity. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that schools do not necessarily require major infrastructure investments to create meaningful outdoor play opportunities. Small-scale interventions, including the introduction of vegetation, sand, water, loose materials, gardens, and exploratory play areas, were viewed as practical and scalable approaches.
- Naturalized schoolyards were consistently described as offering multiple benefits. Participants highlighted opportunities to support children's autonomy, creativity, social interaction, physical activity, environmental awareness, and emotional wellbeing. Naturalized environments were also viewed as important responses to climate change, contributing to shade, cooling, biodiversity, and environmental resilience.
- Training and professional development emerged as critical components of successful implementation. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of supporting educators, school leaders, and school staff in developing new understandings of childhood, play, learning, and nature-based education.
- Several participants also highlighted the value of collecting local data regarding children's access to nature, outdoor play opportunities, and environmental conditions. These data were viewed as useful tools for advocacy, planning, fundraising, and policy development.

Partnerships Required for Scaling

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of partnerships across multiple sectors.

- Government institutions were viewed as essential partners at municipal, state, and national levels. The Ministry of Education and the National Fund for Educational Development were identified as particularly important actors for supporting large-scale implementation through policy frameworks, funding mechanisms, and technical guidance.
- At the municipal level, participants emphasized the importance of collaboration among departments responsible for education, environment, infrastructure, urban planning, health, and strategic planning. Stakeholders repeatedly noted that naturalized schoolyards should not be viewed solely as an educational initiative but rather as an intervention with implications for climate adaptation, public health, child development, and urban quality.
- Universities, research institutions, and academic networks were identified as important contributors to evidence generation, training, evaluation, and knowledge exchange. Civil society organizations and community-based organizations were also viewed as critical partners because of their experience with implementation, innovation, and engagement with local communities.
- Stakeholders further highlighted the importance of involving families, school communities, architects, urban planners, environmental professionals, foundations, and private sector partners. Several participants emphasized that children themselves should be viewed as active contributors to the design and transformation of school environments.

Observed and Anticipated Outcomes

Stakeholders identified a wide range of outcomes associated with naturalized schoolyards and outdoor play initiatives.

- Participants reported that outdoor environments support children's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. Outdoor play was linked to increased autonomy, creativity, problem-solving, exploration, social interaction, and engagement with learning.
- Several stakeholders emphasized the potential for outdoor environments to improve children's relationship with nature, particularly for those living in highly urbanized or vulnerable contexts with limited access to green space. Schoolyards were viewed as important opportunities for environmental education and for fostering stronger connections between children and the natural world.
- Participants also highlighted broader institutional and community outcomes. Naturalized schoolyards were seen as contributing to healthier school cultures, stronger relationships between schools and families, increased community engagement, and greater recognition of children's rights.
- Climate-related outcomes emerged frequently throughout the consultations. Stakeholders noted that greener school environments can improve thermal comfort, reduce heat exposure, increase biodiversity, and contribute to climate adaptation goals.

Emerging Insight

One of the most important findings from the Brazil consultations was the consistent framing of outdoor play as a pedagogical transformation rather than a physical infrastructure project. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that changing schoolyards requires changing how educational systems understand childhood, learning, autonomy, and the role of nature in development. This suggests that future research should examine not only how school environments are transformed, but also how educational institutions adopt, normalize, and sustain new approaches to outdoor learning and play. The consultations also highlight the potential for naturalized schoolyards to serve as a nexus connecting child development, educational quality, climate adaptation, public health, and urban resilience.

Sri Lanka Stakeholder Consultation Summary: Parks and Public Play Spaces

Overview

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in Sri Lanka to explore opportunities and challenges related to children's outdoor play in parks and public play spaces in the Jaffna region. Participants included representatives from local government, academia, social development organizations, and youth-focused organizations. Discussions focused on barriers to outdoor play,

opportunities for improving public play environments, partnership requirements, strategies for scaling interventions, and priorities for future research.

The consultations highlighted broad recognition of the importance of outdoor play for children's physical, mental, emotional, and social development. Stakeholders emphasized the need to improve the quality, accessibility, and inclusiveness of existing parks and public spaces while strengthening community engagement and evidence-based planning. Particular attention was given to the needs of vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, children living in poverty, and children experiencing emotional or psychological challenges.

Main Barriers to Outdoor Play

Stakeholders identified a range of barriers that limit children's access to safe and engaging outdoor play opportunities.

- A primary concern was the condition of existing parks and play spaces. Participants noted that many play environments lack suitable and inclusive equipment, while existing facilities often suffer from inadequate maintenance and safety concerns. Poorly maintained equipment and hazardous conditions reduce both children's participation and parental confidence in allowing children to use public spaces.
- Financial constraints were also identified as a significant barrier. Stakeholders reported that limited funding restricts the ability of local authorities and community organizations to upgrade facilities, conduct regular maintenance, and introduce new play opportunities.
- Several participants highlighted broader institutional and social challenges, including limited government attention to outdoor play, insufficient policy prioritization, low volunteer engagement, and inadequate community support. Stakeholders also noted that educational achievement is often prioritized over outdoor play, leading some families and communities to undervalue the developmental benefits of recreation and physical activity.
- Children with disabilities, children living in poverty, and children experiencing trauma, emotional stress, or other vulnerabilities were identified as facing the greatest barriers to participation in outdoor play activities.
- Another recurring theme was the lack of current data and research evidence related to outdoor play environments, children's play behaviours, and the condition and use of public play spaces. Stakeholders suggested that stronger evidence could help inform planning and strengthen support for future investments.

Approaches That Show Promise

Stakeholders identified several opportunities to improve children's outdoor play environments and increase participation.

- A major priority is the upgrading of existing parks and public spaces. Participants emphasized the need for safe, clean, well-maintained, and inclusive play environments

that are attractive to children and families. Accessible play equipment, sensory play features, and infrastructure designed for children with disabilities were highlighted as particularly important improvements.

- Stakeholders also identified opportunities to strengthen the educational and developmental value of play spaces. Suggestions included incorporating innovative play activities, nature-based learning opportunities, reading areas, and spaces that support relaxation and social interaction. Many participants viewed outdoor play environments as opportunities not only for recreation, but also for supporting children's learning, creativity, mental wellbeing, and social development.
- Schools and public parks were identified as important community assets that could play a greater role in supporting children's outdoor play. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of increasing awareness among parents and communities about the benefits of outdoor play and encouraging greater community participation in maintaining and supporting play environments.
- Several stakeholders noted that outdoor play initiatives can help foster leadership skills, teamwork, discipline, confidence, and social interaction among children, creating benefits that extend beyond physical activity alone.

Partnerships Required for Scaling

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of multisectoral partnerships in creating and sustaining high-quality outdoor play environments.

- Local government authorities, particularly municipal councils responsible for parks and public spaces, were identified as key partners because of their responsibility for infrastructure development, maintenance, and policy implementation.
- Schools and educational institutions were viewed as important partners for expanding access to play opportunities and integrating outdoor play into children's daily lives. Universities and research institutions were identified as valuable contributors to evidence generation, evaluation, and planning.
- Community organizations, youth-focused organizations, parent groups, and community centres were also highlighted as important partners for mobilizing volunteers, building community ownership, and strengthening long-term sustainability.
- Stakeholders further emphasized the potential role of NGOs, development organizations, private sector partners, and sponsors in supporting infrastructure improvements, technical expertise, research activities, and financial sustainability.

Observed and Anticipated Outcomes

Stakeholders reported a range of positive outcomes associated with existing outdoor play initiatives.

- Participants observed increased participation in outdoor activities, improved social interaction among children, and stronger relationships within communities. Several stakeholders noted that outdoor play initiatives had contributed to improved mental

wellbeing, increased confidence, and greater opportunities for children to develop friendships and social skills.

- Stakeholders also reported growing community trust and stronger parental support for outdoor play activities. Increased recognition of the importance of physical activity and outdoor play was viewed as an important outcome that could help support future investments and community participation.
- Beyond individual benefits for children, participants described broader community-level impacts, including stronger social connections, increased volunteer involvement, and greater collaboration among local organizations and institutions.

Emerging Insight

One of the most significant findings from the Sri Lanka consultations was the strong emphasis on inclusion and wellbeing. Stakeholders consistently viewed outdoor play not only as a means of supporting physical activity, but also as a mechanism for promoting mental health, emotional wellbeing, social inclusion, and community connection. Particular attention was given to ensuring that vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, children experiencing poverty, and children facing emotional challenges, are able to access safe and welcoming play environments. This suggests that future research may benefit from examining outdoor play as both a developmental and social inclusion strategy, with potential benefits extending beyond recreation to broader wellbeing and community outcomes.

Vietnam Stakeholder Consultation Summary: Outdoor Play in Informal Urban Spaces

Overview

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in Vietnam to explore opportunities and challenges related to children's outdoor play in informal urban and peri-urban spaces. Participants included representatives from local government, national government, academia, urban planning, community organizations, and local residents with direct experience managing community play spaces. Discussions focused on the role of informal spaces in supporting children's outdoor play, barriers to access, opportunities for scaling interventions, partnership requirements, evidence needs, and priorities for future research.

A central theme emerging from the consultations was the growing importance of informal spaces as a response to increasing urban density and competition for land. Stakeholders described informal spaces as temporary, adaptive, and multifunctional environments that fall outside formal planning systems but can nevertheless serve important recreational and social functions. Examples included alleyways, vacant lots, communal yards, school grounds, temple compounds, riverbanks, leftover parcels of land, apartment courtyards, and other spaces that can be temporarily or informally used for children's play.

The consultations highlighted both the challenges and opportunities associated with these spaces and emphasized the importance of flexible, community-based approaches that recognize children's ability to creatively use a wide range of environments for play.

Main Barriers to Outdoor Play

Stakeholders identified several interconnected barriers limiting children's opportunities for outdoor play.

- Traffic safety emerged as the most frequently cited concern. Participants described increasing motorization, unsafe alleyways, high-speed delivery services, and a lack of traffic-calmed shared spaces as major factors discouraging parents from allowing children to play outdoors. Younger children were particularly affected because they depend on adults to accompany them and navigate traffic safely.
- Competition for land and encroachment of public space were also identified as significant barriers. In densely populated urban areas, spaces that might otherwise support children's play are increasingly used for vehicle parking, commercial activities, or other adult-oriented purposes. Stakeholders noted that children's needs often lose out in competition for limited urban land.
- Participants also identified maintenance and sustainability challenges. Informal play spaces frequently rely on temporary infrastructure and community initiative. Extreme weather events, flooding, equipment deterioration, and lack of maintenance funding can undermine the long-term viability of these spaces. Administrative changes and turnover among local officials were also identified as risks because projects often depend on supportive relationships and local champions.
- Several psychosocial barriers were highlighted. Stakeholders described weakening neighbourhood social networks, declining community cohesion, increasing academic pressures, and the growing attraction of electronic devices as factors reducing children's participation in outdoor play. Parents often perceive outdoor environments as unsafe and increasingly prefer indoor activities.
- Girls, children with disabilities, and children under eight years of age were identified as facing the greatest barriers to participation. Stakeholders noted that concerns about safety, social stigma, inaccessible environments, and dependence on caregivers significantly limit these groups' opportunities for outdoor play.

Approaches That Show Promise

Stakeholders identified a number of practical approaches that have proven effective in creating outdoor play opportunities within informal urban environments.

- One of the strongest themes was the value of flexible use of existing spaces. Rather than seeking new land, stakeholders emphasized negotiating access to underused spaces such as schoolyards, temple grounds, communal facilities, office compounds, and public courtyards during periods when they are not actively being used.

- Participants also highlighted the effectiveness of small-scale, low-cost interventions. Examples included painted games, murals, temporary installations, and simple modifications that transform neglected or underused spaces into child-friendly environments. Stakeholders noted that even modest interventions can significantly improve children's access to outdoor play.
- The use of natural and recycled materials emerged as another important theme. Stakeholders consistently observed that children often engage more creatively with sand, soil, water, leaves, branches, tires, bamboo, and recycled materials than with expensive manufactured equipment. These approaches were viewed as affordable, adaptable, and environmentally sustainable.
- Community self-management and local ownership were repeatedly identified as important contributors to long-term sustainability. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of engaging residents in maintaining, protecting, and managing play spaces while also recognizing that local governments must provide ongoing support for larger repairs and infrastructure improvements.
- Participants also highlighted the value of multifunctional spaces that serve multiple generations. Spaces that support children's play while also providing opportunities for adults and older people to socialize were viewed as particularly successful because they increase natural supervision, strengthen community connections, and enhance the overall value of public space.

Partnerships Required for Scaling

Stakeholders emphasized that scaling informal play spaces requires collaboration across multiple sectors and levels of government.

- Local governments were viewed as the most important institutional partners because of their role in land management, permissions, planning decisions, and community engagement. National government agencies responsible for health, culture, sports, and children were also identified as important partners in creating supportive policies and legal frameworks.
- Community-based organizations, neighbourhood leaders, Women's Union representatives, Youth Union representatives, and local residents were identified as critical actors in mobilizing support, maintaining spaces, and preventing encroachment.
- Technical organizations, social enterprises, NGOs, planners, and designers were viewed as essential sources of expertise in safe design, community engagement, and implementation. Stakeholders also highlighted the importance of private sector partners, philanthropists, and local businesses as potential sources of funding and maintenance support.

Observed and Anticipated Outcomes

Stakeholders reported that outdoor play spaces generate benefits that extend well beyond children's recreation.

- Participants observed that children are highly adaptable and capable of creating rich play experiences even in modest environments when given safe opportunities to do so. Several stakeholders noted that outdoor play spaces can stimulate imagination, creativity, independence, and practical life skills.
- A particularly important finding was the role of children's play spaces in strengthening community cohesion. Stakeholders described play spaces as catalysts for social interaction that encourage adults, older people, and children to spend time together in shared environments. These interactions help strengthen neighbourhood relationships and increase informal social support networks.
- Participants also reported that outdoor play spaces can contribute to children's physical and mental wellbeing, while simultaneously increasing community participation, strengthening local ownership of public space, and improving perceptions of neighbourhood quality.
- Several stakeholders noted that multifunctional and intergenerational spaces can generate broader social benefits by providing opportunities for social interaction, relaxation, and community engagement for residents of all ages.

Emerging Insight

One of the most important findings from the Vietnam consultations was the idea that cities do not necessarily need large amounts of new land to support children's outdoor play. Instead, stakeholders emphasized the potential of identifying, adapting, and connecting a network of informal spaces that already exist within the urban fabric. This perspective shifts the discussion from building playgrounds toward creating playable cities, where streets, courtyards, alleyways, school grounds, riverbanks, vacant lots, and other overlooked spaces collectively contribute to children's opportunities for outdoor play. The consultations also highlighted the importance of flexibility, community ownership, and multifunctionality in creating sustainable and widely used play environments.

Uganda Stakeholder Consultation Summary: Outdoor Play in Informal Settlements

Overview

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in Uganda to explore opportunities and challenges related to children's outdoor play within informal urban settlements. Participants included representatives from local and national government, academia, urban planning, schools, and community-based play initiatives. Discussions focused on barriers to outdoor play, opportunities for scaling interventions, partnership requirements, governance challenges, evidence gaps, and priorities for future research.

The consultations highlighted the complex relationship between children's outdoor play and broader issues of urban development, poverty, land management, infrastructure, governance, and social inclusion. Stakeholders emphasized that children living in informal settlements face

multiple and overlapping barriers that limit their opportunities for safe outdoor play. At the same time, participants identified significant opportunities to strengthen community-managed play spaces, improve planning and policy frameworks, and integrate children's play more effectively into urban development processes.

A recurring theme throughout the consultations was the need to move beyond short-term projects and develop sustainable systems for planning, managing, financing, and maintaining outdoor play spaces over the long term.

Main Barriers to Outdoor Play

Stakeholders consistently identified the lack of accessible and safe outdoor play spaces as one of the most significant challenges facing children living in informal settlements. Rapid urbanization, land scarcity, informal development, and competition for land have reduced the availability of open spaces suitable for children's play. Participants noted that many informal settlements have little or no dedicated recreational space and that available land is often under pressure for commercial or residential development.

Infrastructure deficits were also identified as major barriers. Poor road networks, inadequate drainage systems, weak sanitation infrastructure, and unsafe pedestrian environments limit children's ability to access play spaces safely. Stakeholders noted that long travel distances to existing facilities create additional challenges for children and caregivers.

Safety concerns emerged repeatedly throughout the consultations. Participants identified crime, violence, child protection risks, substance abuse, traffic dangers, and social insecurity as important factors limiting children's outdoor activity. Girls were identified as facing particularly significant barriers due to safety concerns, cultural expectations, and gender norms that restrict their mobility and participation in outdoor activities.

Poverty was highlighted as another important constraint. Many families face competing economic pressures and may prioritize work, household responsibilities, or income generation over children's recreational activities. Stakeholders noted that some children are expected to contribute to household livelihoods or caregiving responsibilities, reducing the time available for play.

Several vulnerable groups were identified as facing particularly severe barriers, including children living in informal settlements, children with disabilities, street-connected children, girls, and children from the poorest households. Stakeholders emphasized that children with disabilities face additional challenges related to inaccessible infrastructure, lack of inclusive equipment, and persistent social stigma.

Institutional barriers were also highlighted. Stakeholders noted that children's play is not consistently incorporated into urban planning, development policies, or city design processes.

Limited evidence, weak policy frameworks, and insufficient government prioritization were identified as contributing factors.

Approaches That Show Promise

Stakeholders identified several promising approaches for improving children's outdoor play opportunities in informal settlements.

- Community-owned and community-managed play spaces emerged as one of the strongest themes. Participants highlighted the importance of building local ownership and involving residents in the planning, management, and maintenance of play facilities. Existing examples demonstrated that community stewardship can contribute significantly to sustainability and long-term success.
- Structured play programming was also identified as an important strategy. Stakeholders noted that organized activities can improve participation, increase safety, promote inclusion, and encourage greater engagement among girls and vulnerable groups.
- Participants emphasized the importance of improving the quality and functionality of existing facilities through infrastructure upgrades, rehabilitation of play areas, improved sanitation, better maintenance systems, and the introduction of more diverse and age-appropriate play equipment.
- Improving safety around play spaces was another priority. Suggested approaches included restricting vehicle access near play areas, improving lighting and fencing, strengthening supervision systems, and creating safer routes for children traveling to and from playgrounds.
- Stakeholders also identified opportunities to strengthen community engagement through volunteer participation, awareness campaigns, local management committees, and collaborative planning processes. Several participants noted that play spaces can serve as broader community assets that strengthen social interaction and civic participation.

Partnerships Required for Scaling

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of multisectoral partnerships for creating and sustaining outdoor play opportunities.

- Local governments, particularly Kampala Capital City Authority and municipal authorities, were identified as critical partners because of their responsibility for land allocation, planning regulations, infrastructure development, and maintenance. National government institutions were also viewed as important actors for embedding children's play into urban planning standards, child welfare policies, and national development frameworks.
- Community organizations, local leaders, and residents were identified as essential partners because of their role in mobilizing support, managing facilities, and maintaining community ownership. Schools were highlighted as important contributors through

shared use of grounds, integration of play into educational activities, and support for community-based programming.

- Faith institutions were viewed as particularly valuable partners due to their strong community presence, trusted leadership, and potential role in providing safe spaces for children, especially girls.
- Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of partnerships with researchers, universities, development organizations, NGOs, technical experts, and private sector actors. These partners were seen as critical for evidence generation, design support, training, funding, and the dissemination of best practices.

Observed and Anticipated Outcomes

Stakeholders reported a range of positive outcomes associated with existing outdoor play initiatives.

- Participants observed that when safe and inclusive play spaces are available, children demonstrate strong demand for outdoor recreation and social interaction. Existing projects revealed that children's play opportunities were often far more limited than communities initially recognized and that participation increased significantly when child-friendly spaces were introduced.
- Stakeholders noted that outdoor play spaces can improve children's wellbeing, provide opportunities for social interaction, and create greater inclusion of girls, younger children, and families within public spaces. Several participants observed increased parental involvement, stronger parent-child interaction, and greater community participation when play spaces were developed.
- A particularly important finding was the ability of children's play spaces to transform how communities use and perceive public spaces. In one example, a facility previously dominated by adult male football activities evolved into a more inclusive community space serving women, children, and families. Stakeholders reported that this shift strengthened community ownership, reduced conflicts over space use, and increased social cohesion.
- Participants also identified broader community benefits, including stronger relationships among residents, increased trust between communities and local authorities, cleaner neighbourhoods, greater civic participation, and increased awareness of the importance of public spaces in urban development.

Emerging Insight

One of the most significant findings from the Uganda consultations was the framing of outdoor play as an issue of urban governance rather than simply recreation. Stakeholders consistently linked children's play opportunities to broader questions of land management, infrastructure provision, poverty, social inclusion, child protection, and urban planning. The consultations also highlighted the importance of community ownership and long-term stewardship in sustaining outdoor play environments. Together, these findings suggest that future research may benefit

from examining how children's play can be institutionalized within urban development systems and informal settlement upgrading processes, rather than being treated as a stand-alone recreational intervention.

Ghana Stakeholder Consultation Summary: Parks, Outdoor Play Spaces, and Children's Wellbeing

Overview

Stakeholder consultations were conducted in Ghana to explore opportunities and challenges related to parks, outdoor play spaces, and children's wellbeing in Accra. Participants included representatives from government agencies, civil society organizations, professional associations, environmental organizations, cultural institutions, researchers, and private park operators. Discussions focused on the current condition of parks and green spaces, barriers to outdoor play, governance challenges, opportunities for collaboration, lessons from previous interventions, and priorities for future action.

The consultations revealed broad concern regarding the condition, accessibility, and sustainability of parks and outdoor play spaces within Accra. Stakeholders emphasized that while green spaces continue to exist within the city, many are poorly maintained, increasingly commercialized, and unevenly distributed across neighbourhoods. Participants repeatedly highlighted the need for stronger governance, greater community engagement, improved maintenance systems, and more coordinated action among institutions responsible for planning, managing, and protecting public spaces.

A recurring theme throughout the consultations was the importance of ensuring that parks serve children, families, and communities rather than primarily functioning as commercial venues or event spaces. Stakeholders emphasized that outdoor play should be viewed as an important contributor to child development, learning, literacy, community wellbeing, environmental stewardship, and urban quality of life.

Participants also stressed that many of the challenges affecting parks and outdoor play are not due to a lack of evidence, but rather to difficulties related to implementation, coordination, public awareness, and long-term institutional commitment. The consultations therefore highlighted the need for practical approaches that strengthen implementation, sustainability, and community ownership.

Main Barriers to Outdoor Play

Stakeholders consistently identified poor maintenance as one of the most significant barriers affecting parks and outdoor play spaces. Participants noted that many existing green spaces have deteriorated over time due to inadequate management, insufficient funding, and the absence of sustainable maintenance systems.

Commercialization of public spaces emerged as another major concern. Several stakeholders observed that parks originally intended for recreation, environmental conservation, and children's play have increasingly been converted into event venues, commercial facilities, or revenue-generating spaces. This shift often reduces opportunities for free and accessible outdoor play.

Urban development pressures were also identified as a significant challenge. Participants noted that rapid urbanization and rising land values have made it difficult to secure and protect land for parks and public recreation. Green spaces are often viewed as less important than residential, commercial, or infrastructure development, creating ongoing pressure on public land.

Stakeholders highlighted important equity concerns related to access. Parks and recreational facilities are unevenly distributed across the city, with wealthier neighbourhoods generally having better access to maintained green spaces. Children living in lower-income communities often have limited access to safe outdoor play environments. Even where facilities exist, transportation costs and user fees may create barriers for many families.

Governance challenges emerged as a particularly important theme. Participants described fragmented institutional responsibilities, weak coordination among government agencies, inconsistent enforcement of planning regulations, and bureaucratic barriers that delay implementation and weaken accountability. Stakeholders expressed frustration with overlapping mandates and the absence of clear leadership regarding the protection and development of parks and green spaces.

Stakeholders also identified low public awareness regarding the value of parks, outdoor play, and environmental stewardship. Many participants felt that communities are not sufficiently engaged in discussions about public spaces and may not fully recognize the developmental, social, environmental, and community benefits that parks can provide.

Approaches That Show Promise

Stakeholders identified several promising approaches for improving children's access to parks and outdoor play opportunities.

- Community-led demonstration parks emerged as one of the strongest recommendations. Participants emphasized the value of developing small-scale, child-friendly, and environmentally sustainable parks that can serve as visible examples of what high-quality public spaces can achieve. Community participation in planning, design, management, and maintenance was viewed as essential for long-term success.
- Public education and awareness-building were also identified as important strategies. Stakeholders emphasized that many residents have limited awareness of the benefits of outdoor play, environmental stewardship, and public green spaces. Schools, community events, storytelling, arts programming, social media campaigns, and opportunities for

direct exposure to successful parks were all viewed as promising approaches for building support and encouraging participation.

- Participants highlighted the importance of designing parks that reflect local social and cultural realities. In the Ghanaian context, parks are often used as communal gathering places that support a range of activities. Stakeholders emphasized the value of multifunctional spaces that accommodate children's play, cultural events, social interaction, environmental education, and small-scale economic activities.
- Regular programming and sustained engagement were viewed as critical components of successful parks. Stakeholders noted that physical infrastructure alone is insufficient. Ongoing activities, including outdoor learning programmes, reading and literacy activities, arts programming, sports, environmental education, nature-based activities, and community events, help attract users, strengthen community ownership, and demonstrate the value of public spaces. Participants emphasized that long-term success depends on creating positive experiences that encourage repeated participation and foster a sense of ownership among community members.
- Several participants also highlighted the importance of exploring innovative management arrangements that combine public, private, and community contributions while preserving affordability, accessibility, and child-focused objectives.

Partnerships Required for Scaling

Stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of multisectoral partnerships.

- Government institutions responsible for urban planning, environmental management, parks, local government, culture, education, and child wellbeing were identified as essential partners. Participants repeatedly stressed the need for stronger coordination among these institutions and greater alignment of policies and implementation efforts.
- Civil society organizations were viewed as important actors because of their ability to engage communities, facilitate participation, advocate for policy change, and implement innovative approaches. Professional organizations, environmental groups, cultural institutions, and arts organizations were also identified as valuable contributors to planning, design, programming, and community engagement.
- Researchers and academic institutions were highlighted as important partners for documenting lessons learned, generating evidence, evaluating interventions, and informing policy development.
- Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of involving communities directly in decision-making processes. Community leaders, residents, schools, parents, and children were viewed as critical contributors to successful implementation and long-term sustainability.
- Private sector organizations were identified as potential partners for financing, maintenance support, and implementation, provided that commercial interests do not undermine accessibility and child-focused objectives.

Observed and Anticipated Outcomes

Stakeholders identified a range of positive outcomes associated with high-quality parks and outdoor play spaces.

- Participants emphasized that parks can support children's physical activity, social interaction, creativity, learning, literacy, and overall wellbeing. Outdoor play spaces were viewed as important contributors to healthy childhood development and opportunities for children to interact with nature. Stakeholders also highlighted the potential of parks to support environmental education, cultural learning, imagination, and opportunities for informal exploration and discovery.
- Several stakeholders highlighted broader community benefits. Well-designed parks can function as gathering spaces that strengthen social connections, support cultural activities, foster environmental awareness, promote community pride, and improve neighbourhood quality of life.
- Participants also emphasized the potential for parks to support environmental goals through urban greening, biodiversity protection, environmental stewardship, and increased public appreciation of conservation efforts.
- A recurring theme was the importance of community ownership. Stakeholders observed that when residents participate in planning, programming, and management processes, parks are more likely to be respected, maintained, and used over the long term. Strong community engagement was viewed as an important foundation for sustainability, accountability, and long-term success.
- Finally, stakeholders emphasized that successful parks require more than physical infrastructure. Effective governance, public awareness, ongoing programming, and sustained institutional support were viewed as essential for ensuring that parks continue to generate benefits for children, families, and communities over time.

Emerging Insight

One of the most significant findings from the Ghana consultations was the recognition that access to parks is not simply an infrastructure issue but a governance and implementation challenge. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that the long-term success of parks depends on institutional coordination, community ownership, effective maintenance systems, sustained public engagement, and ongoing programming.

The consultations also highlighted the importance of viewing parks as multifunctional community assets that support children's wellbeing while simultaneously contributing to learning, literacy, social cohesion, environmental stewardship, cultural life, and urban resilience. These findings suggest that future efforts should focus not only on creating new parks, but also on understanding how governance, management, programming, and community participation influence their long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

Conclusion

Despite focusing on different environments and local contexts, the stakeholder consultations revealed a remarkable degree of consistency in how participants understood the value of outdoor play and the challenges limiting children's opportunities to engage in it.

Across all seven countries, stakeholders emphasized that outdoor play extends beyond recreation. Participants consistently linked outdoor play to children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development while also highlighting broader benefits related to community cohesion, environmental stewardship, learning, inclusion, wellbeing, and resilience. Whether discussing streets in Bangladesh, schoolyards in Brazil, parks in Ghana and Sri Lanka, early childhood centres in India, informal urban spaces in Vietnam, or informal settlements in Uganda, stakeholders viewed outdoor play as an important component of healthy childhoods and healthy communities.

At the same time, the consultations revealed that barriers to outdoor play are rarely limited to the design of individual spaces. Participants repeatedly identified broader challenges related to governance, planning, safety, maintenance, social norms, equity, funding, institutional priorities, and community engagement. In many countries, stakeholders emphasized that the issue is not simply a lack of space, but rather how space is planned, managed, protected, activated, and sustained over time.

Several cross-cutting themes emerged throughout the consultations. These included the importance of community ownership and participation; the need for stronger collaboration among governments, civil society organizations, schools, researchers, and communities; concerns regarding equitable access for girls, children with disabilities, and children living in vulnerable circumstances; and the growing recognition that children's outdoor play should be integrated into broader discussions related to urban development, education, child development, public health, and environmental sustainability.

The consultations also demonstrated that different countries bring complementary perspectives and expertise to this area of work. Collectively, the findings point toward a diverse but interconnected research agenda that includes questions related to healthy childhood development, mental wellbeing, learning, social connectedness, nature, equity, child-friendly cities, governance, and children's everyday play environments. These themes provide a strong foundation for future collaborative research initiatives and create opportunities for countries to work together while responding to their own local priorities and contexts. Ultimately, the consultations suggest that supporting children's outdoor play is not solely a question of providing recreational opportunities. It is also a question of how communities, institutions, and cities create environments that enable children to explore, learn, connect with others, engage with nature, and thrive. The insights generated through these consultations provide an important starting point for future research, policy development, and action aimed at creating healthier, more inclusive, and more child-friendly communities.