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LOCALIZING CHILDREN'S PLAY SPACES THROUGH THE CHILD FRIENDLY CITY LENS: TOWARDS CHILDREN'S INCLUSIVITY IN MZUZU CITY, MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on a review of childhood discourses on child focused literature and content analysis of some of Malawi's planning instruments to argue that Mzuzu City is not a child-friendly city. Specifically, the planning instruments which include the planning law, national urban policy, planning guide book and Mzuzu city structure plan which dictate public space apportioned for various activities are noted to fulfill the needs and aspirations of adults at the expense of children's play needs. Furthermore, despite the fact that a malleable definition of childhood is likely to accommodate the lived experiences of children living in the City, child agency is conspicuously absent. This paper suggests that there is need to reframe these planning instruments as a way of reimagining the built environment to capture the needs and aspirations of children as it does for adults.

KEYWORDS Child friendly city, childhood, Mzuzu City, child agency and planning instruments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The child-friendly city concept is evident in narratives, research reports and other endeavors that promulgate inclusivity in cities. A child friendly city is defined as one committed to improving the lives and aspirations of children as espoused by the UN Convention on Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC) (See UNICEF,2002). Article 31 of this CRC clearly states that children have the right to partake in play and recreational activities (Chin Hai & Tat Low 2019). By signing Article 31 of the CRC, central governments and local governments are encouraged to proactively establish infrastructure that children can use to meet their needs for growth and development (Budiyanti & Djaja (2016). Specifically, child friendly cities are expected to enact legislation, formulate policies and institutional frameworks promoting children rights and welfare (UNICEF,2002). One of the rationalities behind the child-friendly city campaign is to increase children's play and green spaces in cities because of their health benefits (Herrington and Brusson, 2015) such as reduced risk of psychiatric disorders (Engemann, et al. 2019). The number of children in urban areas in another rationale. According to UNICEF (2002) about half of the global population of children live in urban areas but often in poverty, with unmet needs and neglected rights. While the child friendly city campaign appears to have succeeded in raising awareness, its practicality has been elusive. In many countries there is mere cherry picking of the elements that constitute child friendly city concept (Chan, et al 2016) Specifically, despite the framing of the CRC, many cities lack child-oriented facilities (Van Melik & Althuisen 2020). Malawi, as a signatory of the treaty, is also expected to create children's imaginative and material spaces in cities, but like in other cities these are not adequately followed by appropriation of spaces for children's play spaces. Although the population of children is increasing in Mzuzu City (NSO, 2019), the child friendly city narrative is thus more on paper than practical.

This paper argues that to establish and increase play spaces that capture the socio spatial imagination of children, there is need to reframe Malawi's urban

planning instruments to suit the lived realities of urban environments where children are growing and living. Since childhood is a contested and negotiated concept (Aiken 2001), the child friendly city concept must shift boundaries of the 'global child' as perceived by global north oriented narratives including the content of Article 31 of CRC. If the term African city is problematic to codify because of its diversity (Myers 2011), then establishing play spaces for children is likely to vary in time and space. Therefore, there is need to reconstruct and reimagine the current urban planning instruments to accommodate the lived realities and the experiences of children in the urban space.

The study used the case of Mzuzu to illustrate the challenge of implementing child friendly cities concept and to illuminate how child agency can make a contribution to achieve the goal of child friendly cities. The paper had three objectives. Firstly, it sought as a pacesetter for localisation research in children's geographies in Malawi, which is a realm that is largely ignored in urban research activities, despite the countries being a signatory to conventions and protocols meant to protect the rights of children including the child friendly city concept (Robson 2004). Secondly, the paper sought to contribute to on-going research on city inclusivity but through the lens of the child-friendly city. Thirdly, the paper sought to put forward children's play spaces as an agenda in urban planning that could contribute to the realization of inclusive cities as expected by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 11 which, according to Kates et al 2005) emphasizes on creating cities and human settlements as inclusive, safe, resilient spaces. Thus, the paper is premised on the synthesis of childhood leading to the localization of designing and planning for children's play spaces through the lens of a reframed concept of child-friendly city.

2. THE CHILD FRIENDLY CITY CONCEPT

A child friendly city is defined as spaces in the city where children's rights and perceptions are accommodated, appreciated and recognized (Gleeson and Sipper 2006). According to UNICEF

(2018) child friendly city includes the need to integrate needs, rights and voices of children in law, policies, regulations and projects, and budgets. It is one of the layers of urban inclusivity which emerged from the 1996 Istanbul Conference on human settlement with the logic being rooted in decentralisation wave, rights-based approaches to development rapid urbanisation, and (UNICEF, 2018). Brown et al (2019) argue that a child friendly city is fitted with infrastructure that children use to fulfill their needs and future aspirations. It is a concept whose "aim is to make cities worldwide more livable for children," (Chan, et al 2006: 2). Importantly, the child friendly cities attempt to achieve the following 12 cardinal points (Rismanchian and Rismanchian 2007):

- i. influence decisions about their city;
- ii. express their opinion on the city they want;
- iii. receive basic services such as health care and education;
- iv. drink safe water and have access to proper sanitation;
- v. be protected from exploitation, violence and abuse;
- vi. walk safely in the streets on their own;
- vii. meet friends and play;
- viii. have green spaces for plants and animals;
- ix. live in an unpolluted environment;
- x. participate in cultural and social events;
- xi. participate in family, community and social life;
- xii. be an equal citizen of their city with access to every service, regardless of ethnic origin, regional, income, gender or disability.

The twelve cardinal points as contained in the Habitat II Agenda 21 stipulate the conceptual framework which guides city managers, planners, mayors and community organizations on the practice of child friendly cities. According to Gokemen & Tasci (2016) child

participation is central to the realisation of the child friendly city. Thus, from the twelve initiatives, it can be said that the main essence of CFC concept is to proactively improve children's imaginative and material play spaces in urban environments through engaging children's perceptions on how public spaces should be appropriated. The establishment of children's imaginative and material play spaces is essential for the health, body and mind (Yuniastuti & Hasibuan 2019; Aji et al 2016; Van Melik & Althuizen 2020). As noted by Brown et al, (2019, p.1), play is the building block of child health and 'if a city is a healthy place for children, it is a healthy place for everyone.' Thus, if applied in its totality, the CFC leads to the creation of consumption spaces in cities that fulfil not only the needs and aspirations of children, but also those of adults and everyone.

3. CONTEXTUALISING CHILDHOOD

If childhood is a social construction (Harton & Krafft, 2006; Harton & Krafft, 2006a, Holloway 2014) children's realms vary not only in time and space but also from one city to another. The shift in childhood narratives from traditional approaches to biosocial models (Holloway 2014; Tisdall & Punch 2012), means as argued by Tisdall & Punch (2012) the transferring of 'global child' discourses derived from Western Europe to the cities of the global South has failed to accommodate the socio-economic realities of such urban environments. The metaphor of a globalized child has lost its universal meaning and application.

"These norms are being globalized when in fact even in the Minority World (Western Europe) they exclude large swathes of children and young people who work, who do not live with their biological parents or who are otherwise excluded (e.g by ethnicity or sexual orientation) or are out of place e.g. street, travelling families those that apply for asylum or refugee status. Thus, these minority World norms are very particular notions of appropriation participation for children and young people and not even universal in their contexts (Tisdall & Punch 2012:254)

The modern models of children's geographies and childhood studies define and characterize childhood as a social construction. As such, childhood is supposed to be contextualized to accommodate children's lived experiences from different urban cultural norms and practices. Fundamentally, this paper advocates for the child-friendly city that is malleable and able to accommodate the rights and child agency according to the social, economic and political contours of different urban environments. It further argues that if normative models of childhood have failed to apply in cultural environments different from the global north where such models originated and popularized, then the concept of the child friendly city should also be unpacked and distilled to accommodate the economic, social and political spheres of African cities. While the child-friendly city's implementation shapes the urban environment where children are growing and playing, its successful applicability is likely to be reshaped by socio-spatial contexts of urban places. As population of children in cities increases, their lives will be determined by their interaction with the various components of the urban environment (Krishnamarthy 2019).

There are many legal instruments that define childhood in Malawi. In 2017, the childhood bar was raised from 16 to 18 years (Kwamula 2017; African Child Policy Forum, 2013). Although the use of the scientific approach provides objective approaches when dealing with childhood issues, its reliance on the Piagetian models of child development is problematic because childhood is also shaped by socio-economic conditions that vary in time and space. Piagetian model argues that the relationality of children corresponds with their age with the sensorimotor being the first stage and formal operational being the last stage in a four-stage model (Huitt & Hummel 2003). It also implies that children who are not yet 18 years as argued by Holloway; Tisdall & Punch (2012) are irrational, immature, therefore, cannot exercise their rights and agency. Standardization of childhood through importing definitions leads to childhood narratives and discourses prevailing in developing countries to be sidelined to the periphery. There is a groundswell of

research activities that have questioned the applicability of Eurocentric models of childhood to other social settings (Ansell 2016, Ansell 2009 and Robson 2004). Although the 18 years bar is a quantitative measure of childhood that has been adopted by many countries in the world including Malawi, qualitatively, childhood should be shaped by different socio-economic settings. In any case, when the age bar is used, even within the same country there are varied practical definitions of childhood. For instance, in Malawi different legal instruments apply different ages as bars of childhood.

Generally, in Malawi childhood definitions and constructions are a reflection of the Eurocentric approaches to childhood. Children who may be considered too young to work in the global north are active participants in food and income generation in the global south. For instance, studies on child exploitation in the tobacco industry in Malawi (ILO 2018; Otanez,etal 2006; See also report by Centre for Social Concern, 2015) child domestic workers in Malawi (ILO 2013) and child headed households (Phillips 2011) show that the drivers of child exploitation in the mentioned scenarios were seen through the lens of the global north where childhood is defined as a passive stage that lacks autonomy and rationality, therefore should be locked up in schools. This approach neglects the fact that childhood has many layers of complexity and ambiguities, and hence its definition and construction are not a fit-all model but vary depending on the socio-economic contexts. For example, it has been reported that some urban children are partaking in street vending as a livelihood strategy (Chirwa 2015). The existence of independent child migrants in Malawian cities who live unaccompanied by their parents or legal guardian has been reported by Mpaka (2020). Children also work as care givers in sub-Saharan countries where the formal health systems have collapsed (Robson 2004). In such situations, as argued by Phillips (2011), the right to alternative care in which a child is seeking to survive through certain livelihood strategies should be accommodated by a definition of a childhood.

4. CHILD AGENCY IN URBAN SPACE

Child agency has been recognised in literature though with varying definitions (Montreuil and Carnevale, 2015; Sirkko, et al, 2019). Child agency points to a rejection of previously dominant understanding of children ‘as goods consumed by adults’ (Lundberg et al, 2009, p.1) or as passive objects of social services...’ (Sorbring and Kuczynski, 2019,p.3). It rather reflects the ability for children to make choices and decisions to influence events and to have an impact on children own welfare. Child agency is considered as a part of identity and also as a foundation for learning and wellbeing (Mashford-Scott, et al 2011). Recognition of child agency is a departure from global north discourses in which childhood was conceptualised from adult perspectives focused cultural and historical practices of control and not listening to children (Haring et al,2019).

The importance of child agency is explained not only in the attention given to it by the UN Convention of 1989, but also in literature. A full issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* (Sorbring and Kuczynski, 2019) was dedicated child agency. The journal's main thrust is that child agency is not just for the individual children themselves but also for others in family, school and society. Among the ways to support child agency is to provide for children the needs of their choice. When this fails, they make choices for the improvement of their welfare or to reduce their vulnerability. For example, Aufseeser (2017, p.1) point to children moving to become street children ‘as part of an active strategy to mitigate or avoid some of the violence in their lives.’ There can be many ways in which children seek to participate in city life that planners and policy makers may not be aware. Failure to incorporate children’s play spaces in polices and urban plans is one way in which the child friendly city concept has failed to benefit from positive aspects of child agency. Therefore, in the absence of support to child agency and child friendly city initiative, children will appropriate opportunities that adults might consider disorderly, libelous, unsafe or hazardous. For example,

children will use metaphysical imagination to play in any areas of their choice, such as busy streets, sidewalks and drainages, or garbage sites (see Freddy, et al 2017), which may sometimes be to the detriment of their safety and health. In the family setting child resistance might be overt or covert to show their autonomy in decision (Kuczynski, 2019). The above shows that context is central in the understanding child agency. While Sorbring and Kuczynski (2019) cite culture, acculturation, poverty, school and family relationships as key contents, one can argue that the agency of children in global north context will be different from that in the global south context.

5. METHODOLOGY

Mzuzu City is the third largest urban centre in Malawi. The city covers are area of 143.8 km² and has 15 political Wards. The City’s population was estimated at 221,272 in 2018 (NSO, 2019) having grown from 133,968 in 2008. With a growth rate of 4.4% per year, Mzuzu is the most rapidly growing urban area in the country which is followed by the Capital City Lilongwe at 4.3% per year. The demographic split of the city’s population shows that children constitute about 44% (table 1 refers). The city was founded in 1945 when a small tung estate was established and has since then largely grown informally except for enclaves of formerly colonial residential areas and the central commercial core. Due to its colonial and post-colonial planning practices, conflicts of rationality are a major contributor to urban character of urban space that currently obtains.

Table 1: Population by age in Mzuzu City

Year	children	Other	Total
1998	-	-	87,030
2008	61,265	72,703	133,968
2018	98,177	123,095	221,272
2025 est.	-	-	522,000

Source: National Statistics Office (2019); (2010)

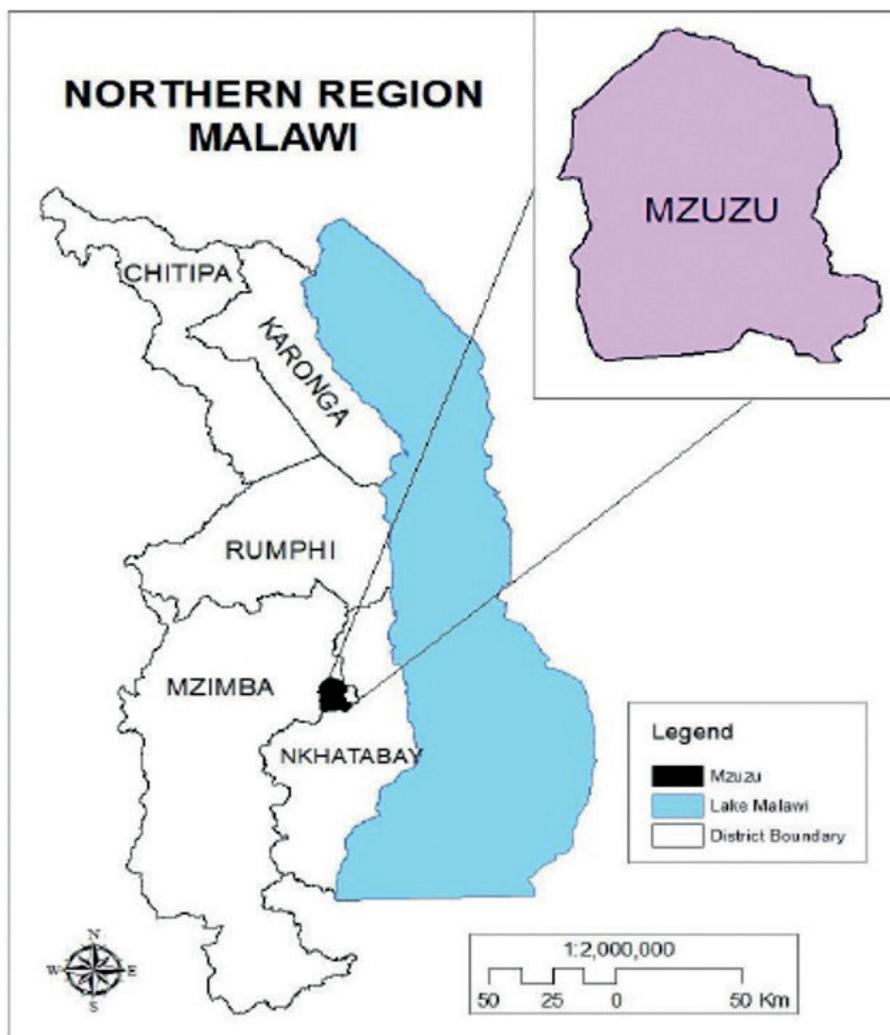


Figure 1: Location of Mzuzu City, Northern Malawi

Source: Mzuzu City Council, 2014. Urban Structure Plan.

The study used a qualitative descriptive design (Wenger, et al 2021) and content analysis to investigate the extent to which the planning instruments, the Planning Law of 2016, National Urban Policy of 2019, Land Use Planning and Development Management (Planning Guide Book of 2014) and Mzuzu Urban Structure Plan of 2014 that are used for the apportionment and designing of space in the city accommodate children's material and imaginative spaces. Child-friendly city (CFC) and childhood theoretical narratives and parameters were systematically reviewed to determine the compatibility of urban planning practice with the CFC initiative. Indicators from the UNICEF Report (2007) were used as the yardstick for determining the extent to which the planning instruments are compatible with the CFC initiative. Furthermore, the concept of child agency was used to understand children's interests and rights and how these are incorporated in understanding the spatiality and complexity of childhood when linked to the diversity of the socio-physical environment of Mzuzu City.

6. ANALYSIS OF PLANNING INSTRUMENTS

Mzuzu City like all others in Malawi are guided by four key instruments. These instruments are (a) the National Urban Policy, 2019; (b) Physical Planning Act, 2016; (c) Planning Guidebook (2014), and the Mzuzu urban structure plan (2014)

- a. *Physical Planning Act, 2016:*
 The law was approved in 2016. Among the key provisions are the levels of planning. The types of plans that can be prepared are national physical development plan, district physical development plan and local physical development plans. For purpose of child play spaces, only local physical development plans are relevant here. Local plans can be urban structure plan, detailed layout plan, civic plans and subject plans. Subject plans are special plans for specific sectors such as, even though not named, child play spaces, but not been obligatory to local governments. By section 35 (3) The commissioner has power to require the inclusion any matter in the plans, but there is no record of the office instructing planning authorities to that regard, except rarely as comments on missing out of child play areas in the detailed layout plans.
- b. *National Urban Policy:* the development of national urban policy is expected to set the urban agenda for planners and local governments as well as stakeholders interested in urban development. According to (Schinlder, et al 2018, p1) the role of national urban policies and plans may have potential to foster sustainable land-use systems but only at the national scale, while they are contradictory at the local level. For example, national governments may seek to reduce urban sprawl, while stakeholders situated at the local level 'are typically incentivized

to expand urban land use.' This contradiction obtains in Mzuzu in relation to provision of child play and green spaces. A youth sports whose sponsorship is central government is being constructed on a commercial plot not formally designated by the Mzuzu City Council itself and without consultation with children.

- c. *Planning Guidebook:* The guidebook is complimented by the local government guidebook (GoM, 2010) which clearly states need for participatory planning processes to be bottom-up starting with the lowest planning level (neighbourhood or village) where citizens submit their development priorities. These priorities are then incorporated in city wide development plans. The committees responsible for this process at Village, Area, and District levels, serve a three-year term and comprises men and women of different categories including councillors, chiefs and members of parliament, but children are excluded, either by design or default. While the guide book provides room for appointment of special interest groups only gender and disability have been considered in the past.

- d. *Mzuzu Urban structure plan:* While the policy, guidebook and law are national level, the urban structure plan is a city level policy and legal framework for guiding the appropriation of space for various uses and activities. In terms of the guidebook, the process of planning requires the participation of all key stakeholders. Prepared in 2014, the plan earmarks land uses for various activities including housing estates, commercial, afforestation and wetlands, industries, institutions and offices. The plan also proposes the preparation of an Open Space Master(subject) Plan and designate a hierarchy but this has not been implemented

as planned. At detailed land use planning level, play spaces can be clarified, but when this is done it is mainly in high income locations and schools. Existing play spaces are left to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance and security lapses, or are converted to other land uses e.g. the site for Mzuzu shoprite. An attempt was made recently to rehabilitate the open space along M5 through private-public partnership arrangement. However, the open space is located in high income area and away from the areas where most children reside in informal settlements.

Even if all these planning instruments had been effective, the challenge would still persist. This is because the majority of children live in informal settlements where space for play is scarce and open defecation due to their location in marginal flood prone sites is widespread leading to high exposure to pathogens that cause diseases such as cholera. These children cannot access the designated spaces as their parents cannot afford the transport cost while travelling alone would expose them to traffic related risks.

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

7.1 CHILDREN AT THE FRINGE OF URBAN PLANNING IN MZUZU CITY

Malawi's population structure is predominantly young (GoM 2013). The spatiality of the demographic profile shows that cities in Malawi are dominated by children. For example, about 49 % of Mzuzu City are children (NSO 2018). Children are therefore a key component of Mzuzu City which should form part of the process and outcomes of urban planning in the discourse of the child friendly city. Results show that the planning tools have explicitly down played the role of play spaces to the development of the body and mind of children. There is a wide and deep literature on the importance of play spaces to the development of the physical and social spheres of children

(Akhter 2018; Arts 2013; Kaymaz, Oguz & Hugul 2017; Lail & Low 2019). Despite the emphasis of research on the importance of children's play and recreational spaces in cities, Malawi's planning instruments, have imported social exclusionary geographies which were practiced during the colonial period that were blind to children rights and welfare. What is more visible in policy and planning documents is marginalization by age and children are the most marginalized. For example, the social objective of planning as stated in the Planning Guidebook of 2014 "to ensure the provision of social services and facilities to meet present and future needs of the population including people with disabilities and the elderly," (GoM 2014: 5) evidently pushes children to periphery. It can, therefore, be argued that the built environment of a city would only respond to the needs and aspirations of adults (UNICEF 2018) at the expense of how.

Results further reveal that children's imaginative and material spaces have not been captured by the Urban Policy as well. Although the Urban Policy captures the need for social inclusion as a strategy for urban development in Malawi (GoM 2016), Mzuzu City inclusive, a deliberate effort to create play spaces has not been made by city managers and planners. The Urban Structure Plan of 2014, the main practical document for implementation has also not given adequate recognition to the children's needs. In many cases it is expected that child spaces can be provided at the stage of detailed layout planning. However, such spaces tend to be rezoned for other uses, usually housing and commercial activities. Thus, construction of play and recreation spaces for children has been implied through the establishment of playgrounds in primary and secondary schools. The establishment of playgrounds in schools do not adequately accommodate the daily behavioral and mobility patterns of children. As argued by UNICEF (2013) children spatially grow at home, street and the neighborhood. As such, school playgrounds do not adequately capture the play needs of children because of three reasons. First, school playgrounds do not accommodate the everydayness of children as they walk or get driven

to school and after knocking off from school business. Horton & Kraftl (2006) argue that children's everyday material geographies should be given more space than hitherto. The reason is through a close examination of the everydayness of children that one can discern play and recreational patterns of children especially after school hours. Children do not stop playing after school hours. As they walk home, they play in informal playgrounds such as stagnant water which is unsafe and hazardous to their health. Second, children who are out of school for various reasons, may not be playing in school playgrounds because such playgrounds might be far away from their homes. Third, some school playgrounds are regulated spaces for play, therefore, accessibility may not be granted especially after business hours. Therefore, school playgrounds do not fully cater for the play needs of children.

7.2 REINVENTING THE WHEEL: CO-CREATING A CHILD FRIENDLY MZUZU

It is evident from content analysis of planning documents that play spaces cannot be part of Mzuzu City built environment unless the child friendly city concept is adopted. Adoption of child friendly cities in Malawi also entail adaptation of the meaning of childhood to reflect the lived experiences of the children in the context of global south cities like Mzuzu as opposed to importation of child discourses constructed in the global north (Ansell (2017; Robson 2004). Parents who are living in low-income cities of the global south perceive the lives of their children differently, therefore, they cannot provide resources to their children according to the standard definition of a child (Ansell 2017). The fact that some children are involved in livelihood activities like child vending (Chirwa 2015) means that autonomy should be bestowed upon a child who is living in a city like Mzuzu. It should be noted that the exposure of children to activities that are perceived to belong to the adult world would shape the cognitive and psychosocial spheres of children in Mzuzu City. Such children are likely to be actors in decisions pertaining to the location and type of play spaces. Thus, the establishment of play spaces should reflect the cultural histories and

geographies of children living in Mzuzu City.

In order to realise this, child agency, involvement of children in decision making in the planning child spaces should be considered beyond the child-adult binary. As Mzuzu City is demographically a child dominated city, the policy processes and documents that guide the appropriation of play spaces should recognise child agency. Ansell (2009: 5) argues:

“That recognizing children’s agency increases understanding of their lives, helps avoid inappropriate policies and practices, and enables policies to build on their strength such as resilience, rather than seeing them as simply requiring protection,”

Recognizing child agency provides a basis for weaving policy and legal documents that provide an opportunity for an “engagement with children living in poverty and other challenging situations” even though child agency is more celebrated than practiced (Ansell 2009:6). Furthermore, children's inability to pay taxes and cast votes subdues their voices in development policy (Brown, et al 2019).

A peep into the institutionalised planning structures, that is, planning committees and community level committees, reveal clear bias towards adults thereby hindering children's choices and aspirations. The neglect of child agency goes against principles of good governance institutionalised in the decentralisation and local government laws and guidelines such as the need for social inclusion. Commitment to child agency would reveal itself in 'all aspects of urban life, from planning, policy making and budgetary decisions, to service provision and the introduction of participatory structures,' (UNICEF,2002, p.3). In addition, in the absence of child focused civil society institutions to advocate for spaces for child representation in planning committees, it is difficult to achieve the child friendly city. The absence of children in various planning and spatial organization committees which are outlined in the planning and governance guide books clearly show that children

face socio-spatial marginalization. As argued by Freutel (2010), children's participation should not be replaced by adult but should be combined with adult participation. The result of neglecting child agency in law, policy and practice is that children appropriate any available spaces. It is therefore not uncommon for Mzuzu Children to play games on the road or to swim in unclean wetlands or abandoned fish ponds despite the risk of accidents, drowning and diseases. At their level, the children exercise the right to play and socialize among themselves.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper argued that Mzuzu City is not a child-friendly city and did so by reviewing child focused literature and analysed the key planning instruments which dictate public spaces apportioned for various activities. These planning instruments were noted to have excluded the agency of children. Thus, the implementation of the child friendly city should be done beyond child-adult dichotomy where children are viewed as active actors in decision making. Furthermore, reframing the city's planning instruments requires a process that puts children's human rights at the centre of programs and projects that will lead to the construction and reconstruction of children's play spaces in the city. This can reimagine the future of Mzuzu City from the perspectives of of adults as well as of children, where children's infrastructure become part of the built environment. The paper suggests that, as present institutional structures are adult dominated, localizing the child- friendly city concept should be followed by a deliberate creation of city sponsored participatory spaces that would, despite their known limitations, redefine and characterize childhood that resonates well with socio-physical environment of Mzuzu City. Child representatives should be intrinsic members of such committee because children could become partners in local governance. To that end, material geographies of children would become part and parcel of the policy and practice of urban planning. The open space master plan envisaged in the Mzuzu city plan could in this way spell out how play spaces would be located, constructed and reimaged to the benefit of all in the city.

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