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# play

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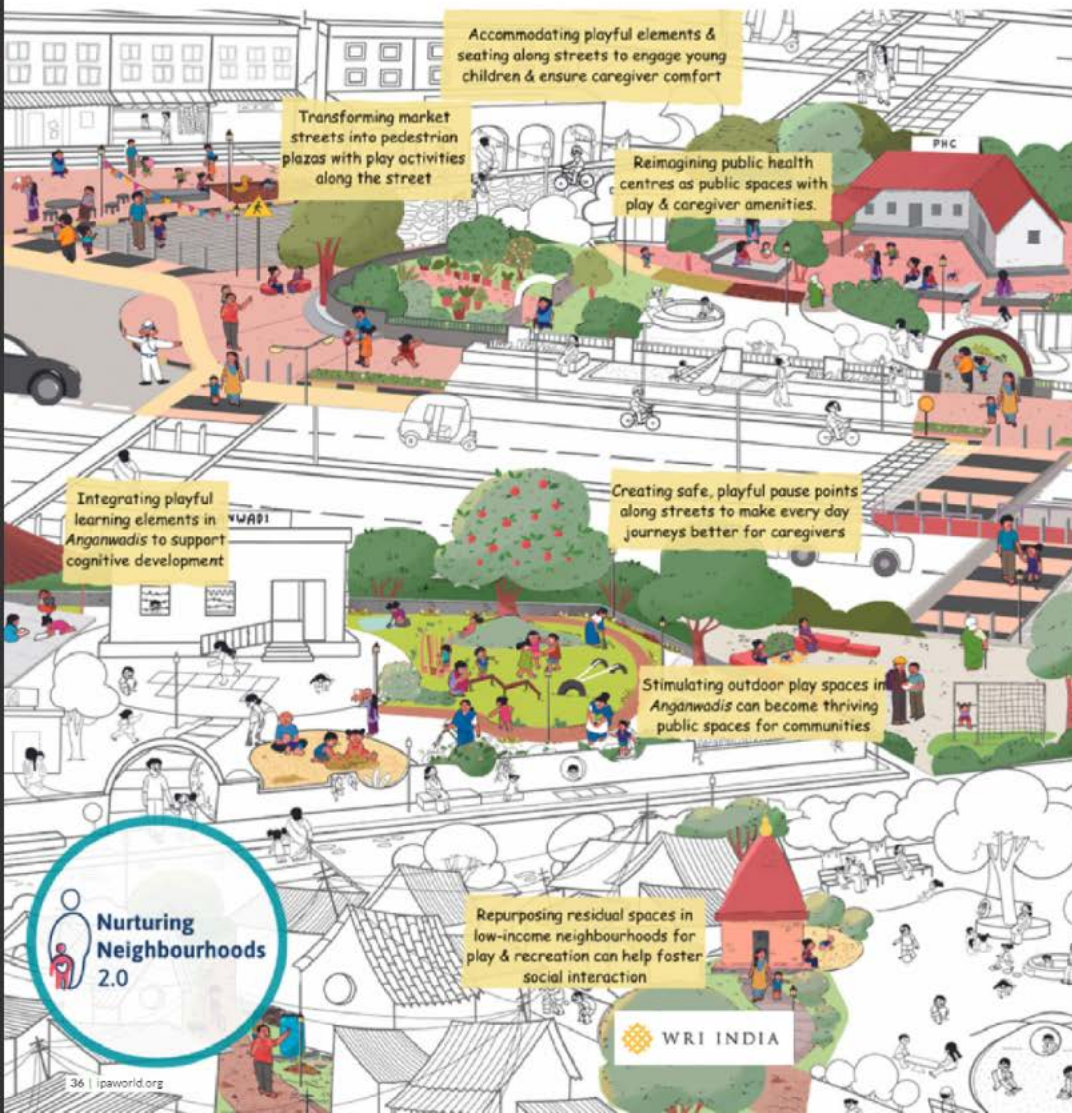
Nurturing  
Neighbourhood  
Challenge in India

Multi-level play  
system in  
New Zealand

*Policies  
for play*

**FOCUS ON  
NATIONAL  
GOVERNMENTS**





PLANNING FOR PLAY IN INDIA:

# National Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge

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In this article, the authors discuss the Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge in India, which uses urban planning to work in smaller cities to plan, implement, scale up, and sustain play opportunities for young children by leveraging the National Smart Cities Mission and by converging funds from diverse government programs.

## The Crisis of Public Spaces for Children in India

India's rapidly expanding cities are facing a crisis of public spaces in general and insufficient local play spaces in particular. The master plans of cities, the only statutory urban plans in Indian cities, typically only designate space for parks, open spaces, and playgrounds as part of the land use plans they prepare. However, planning and design guidance for play provisions in public spaces are not sufficient. Implementing planned play provisions is often problematic due to unclear land ownership and contested occupations of land, the most contested resource in Indian cities. The problem gets worse when local governments allocate land for public spaces far from where children live to develop facilities for them. Moreover, many parks and open spaces in Indian cities actively discourage play as these are perceived as peaceful restorative environments to be protected from the nuisance of children's play. When play is allowed, it is strictly defined and controlled through long lists of prohibitions (Chatterjee, 2022). Lack of accessible public spaces robs children of everyday opportunities for playing out and in turn hinders children's well-being and development.

Many parks and open spaces in Indian cities actively discourage play as these are perceived as peaceful restorative environments

Nurturing Neighbourhoods 2.0

WRI INDIA

Through its technical partners, NNC has adopted a three-pronged approach to create accessible play spaces.



### Unlocking Land

Mapping, identifying, and converting underutilized government-owned vacant land into parks and gardens to create a city-wide network of smaller, strategically placed play areas within neighbourhoods.



### Reclaiming Liminal Spaces through Design

Transforming leftover, informal spaces, typically known as liminal spaces, as identified within neighbourhoods, into play spaces. Through strategic design and community engagement, these reclaimed spaces are being revitalized to provide much-needed play areas for children.



### Optimizing Existing Facilities

Integrating play within city parks, healthcare centres, and other government facilities for children, such as the extensive network of early childhood development centres (ECD). By optimizing such existing facilities within neighbourhoods, cities are increasing access to play opportunities without a significant need for additional land acquisition.

Despite national guidelines recommending 10-12 square meters of open space per person in cities, as set by the Urban and Regional Development Plans Formulation and Implementation (URDPFI) framework, large

metropolitan cities like Bangalore and Mumbai fall short, offering only 2.01 and 1.24 square meters per person of open space, respectively (Ministry of Urban Development, 2014). A 2019 study by the National Institute of Urban



Photo credit: Indian eye/Stock

Only 16 percent of children can access nearby planned play areas in Indian cities.



Photo credit: WRI India

Reclaiming underused spaces for play in a neighbourhood park in Warangal, Telangana.

Affairs (Gudgudee and NIUA, 2019) found that only 16 percent of children can access nearby play areas in Indian cities. Young children require a safe and stimulating physical environment to support their rapid growth and development. According to research from Harvard University in 2007, play is especially crucial to brain development for young children, as 90 percent of brain development occurs by the age of five, with meaningful neural connections forming in the growing body (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007). However, young children have limited independent mobility and depend on caregivers and mobility aids such as strollers and bikes that need safe, short paths to everyday play spaces. The lack of proximal play provisions near homes thus hinders young children's access to play.

Urban planning in India is starting to recognize the importance of public spaces. However, it needs to understand better the significance of having different play spaces for children of various ages and gender in close proximity and address the lack of planned provisions for children's play across Indian cities. To tackle these issues, specific strategies are required to ensure that high-quality play spaces are evenly distributed and easily accessible for young children within walking

distance. The Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge (NNC) in India is a national initiative under the Smart Cities Mission, involving at least ten cities planning to create better play opportunities for young children in local areas using local area planning strategies (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2024).

### Nurturing Neighbourhoods Challenge

The NNC is a 3-year initiative hosted by the Smart Cities Mission, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Government of India. It is in collaboration with the Van Leer Foundation and with the technical support of WRI India. Launched in 2020, this challenge is a competition for 100+ cities nationwide and is a unique initiative. Often, the specific needs of young children (aged 0-5) are not recognized by policymakers or are grouped with the needs of older children. NNC emphasizes the urgent need to acknowledge and integrate the specific needs of young children into neighborhood-level planning to ensure that all young children have access to suitable play and learning environments near their homes (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Bernard van Leer Foundation, WRI India, 2022).

The state governments typically undertake

Neighborhood-level planning to ensure that all young children have access to suitable play and learning environments near their homes



Residual space along a street transformed into a play space at Forest colony park, Kohima, Nagaland.

urban planning in India through their development agencies, as local governments lack adequate planning capacity. Still, designing, implementing, and maintaining play spaces becomes the responsibility of local governments that lack adequate resources for these functions or guidance to do the right thing. NNC is supporting cities by providing advice and inputs such as project identification and formulation, young-children-centric design guidelines, and stakeholder mobilisation.

Cities have adopted these strategies and are developing contextual plans for scaling play spaces. We discuss a few examples below.

## KOHIMA

### Doorstep play space in every community

Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, is a mountainous city in northeast India. It has a population of approximately 100,000 but is witnessing rapid urbanization. Kohima has retained its unique tribal heritage while embracing urban amenities and infrastructure, making it a vibrant and dynamic city. However, due to its hilly topography and the fact that most of its land is privately owned, Kohima faces constant challenges in acquiring land to develop parks and play spaces.



Nagahospital courtyard and waiting area enchanted for play in Kohima.



A new play space in the heart of a marginalized leprosy community in Rourkela, Odisha.

## ROURKELA

### Equal play opportunity across the industrial city

But Kohima recognizes the importance of play in young children's lives and play areas close to homes and encourages caregivers of young children to spend more time outdoors, closer to nature. To implement this vision, the city has been working towards providing one pocket park in each ward by reclaiming residual spaces in neighbourhoods and developing them into play spaces, redeveloping schools and healthcare centres with exciting play spaces, reclaiming rooftops of public facilities and opening them to the public. Since most of Kohima's land is privately owned, the Kohima Municipal Corporation (KMC) engaged with local community members through workshops and forged partnerships with ward-level governments to identify potential sites for developing pocket parks in each ward. KMC sent letters to ward committees in all 19 wards, requesting they identify potential areas for development and explore financial collaboration. Subsequently, ward committees responded with identified land and are working with KMC and Kohima Smart City Limited (KSCL) to develop those into pocket parks. Kohima's strategy of co-creating pocket parks with the community has ensured that the community takes ownership of the upkeep of these places, resulting in high use by caregivers and children. This also leads to on-ground demand generation for play spaces in neighbourhoods, with communities collectively supporting the local agencies in their development.

Rourkela, in the northwestern part of Odisha, India, is a major industrial city with a population of 600,000. Despite its economic significance, about 55% of the city's households live in vulnerable settlements. Through NNC, Rourkela has improved play spaces in underprivileged neighbourhoods by renovating Early Childhood Development (ECD) facilities and primary health centres (PHCs) and creating new public spaces. The city has identified and mapped existing public spaces and facilities that children use to prioritize them in development efforts. Rourkela Smart City Limited (RSCL) and the planning cell of Rourkela Municipal Corporation (RMC) have institutionalized this mapping process and are using it to enhance play spaces in 81 locations across the city.

In Rourkela, the Rupatola Slum has been transformed into a multi-functional public space, focusing on providing specific play opportunities for young children and women in this vulnerable community. The city created a cluster of facilities, including mobile libraries, play areas for children, and micro-community centers for women's self-help groups. This community-driven transformation was funded by various government programs at national and state levels, providing essential services for marginalized communities and renovating existing child care centers. The convergence of funds

Rourkela has established 'play' spaces and provided basic services in vulnerable settlements, including those housing the most marginalized communities, such as those with a history of leprosy.



A vacant land transformed into a government childcare centre with a play garden in a low-income neighbourhood in Indore.

from multiple levels of government has assisted the city in establishing play spaces and providing basic services in vulnerable settlements, including those housing the most marginalized communities, such as those with a history of leprosy. The process involved community-led construction of new child care centres or *anganwadis* and renovating existing ones.

## INDORE

### Network of green play havens

Indore is a bustling metropolis in the central state of Madhya Pradesh. It is known for its rich history, vibrant culture, and thriving industrial landscape. With an estimated population of over 3.5 million, it is one of the largest cities in the state. Indore has witnessed rapid development in recent years, with a focus on infrastructure, education, and healthcare.

Indore aims to develop a network of blue-green infrastructure across the city. Under NNC, they identified 500 parks across the city, promoting the use of natural materials to develop play spaces for young children. The city has created a plan to scale open spaces and play opportunities by converting government vacant land into parks and gardens, adopting data-driven mapping, and identifying potential spaces. City officials from Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC) identified citywide vacant land verified ownership and feasibility for development. They prioritised the conversion of government-owned lands into parks and play areas. During this process, they collaborated with and mobilized Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) of all wards, inculcating a strong sense of ownership and making them custodians of protecting the spaces.

To support the establishment of these spaces, city-level programs such as *'Abhiya Van'*, which focuses on developing

400+ nature-based open spaces, and *'Umang Vatikas'* (Gardens of Joy), which aims to develop 40+ all-ability parks, are being implemented across the city. These open spaces create a conducive environment for young children and families to thrive in the city. Additionally, the city has established a carpentry workshop and allocated dedicated funds in the municipal budget of 2023–2024 to upcycle excess felled local wood for the development of age-specific, customized play equipment for public spaces. This sustainable model helps mitigate expenses and ensures a sustained supply of natural play equipment and materials for all the city's play spaces and public space projects. To institutionalize this approach, the city has created 'park design toolkits and checklists' for the city's garden department.

### Sustaining and scaling play spaces created by NNC

Under NNC, 10 Indian cities are developing a promising approach to scaling and sustaining play opportunities for children (WRI India, 2023). The strategies that have allowed cities to succeed in their mission include:

■ **Setting up a Nurturing Neighbourhoods cell in each city:** A group of officials is responsible for coordinating, planning, and monitoring public spaces for young children across the city. The group includes representatives from different departments such as education, health, and horticulture within municipal corporations, the state Department of Women and Child Development, and the traffic police. The heads of the Urban Local Body and the Smart City lead the group. These cells are the main drivers of inter-departmental coordination and are instrumental in laying out a plan to create more public spaces for young children across the city.

■ **Strengthening Internal Stakeholder Capacity:** The NNC program provides technical capacity building, supports the design of pilot projects, facilitates city officials' exposure visits to other cities nationally and internationally, and shares data collection tools, design guidelines, and resources with participating cities. Through these trainings, the NNC program has sensitized and equipped over 2000 officials and 1000 frontline workers to address the specific needs of young children and caregivers.

■ **Building Partnerships and Strengthening Engagement with Local Stakeholders:** Involving community members, including caregivers of young children, early childhood educators, and healthcare staff in various stages of the project cycle has ensured that the projects are responsive to user needs and has enabled the community to develop a sense of ownership. This, in turn, has positively impacted the maintenance of the transformed public spaces. Over 7,000 young children and caregivers have been directly involved in the process through campaigns, focused group discussions, engagements, and capacity-building sessions.

■ **Leveraging convergence with other national, state, and city programs:** This has emerged as a critical strategy for cities to

implement and scale interventions. For example, the city of Warangal leveraged budgets allocated under its 'greening fund' to scale parks and open spaces for young children and their caregivers, the city of Jabalpur leveraged funds under the National Clean Air Program to implement green open spaces, Rourkela leveraged state funds from the JAGA Mission (a slum upgrading programme of the state government).

The cities discussed in this article adopted data-driven decision-making processes to assess and plan for play spaces across targeted play-deprived neighbourhoods. The NNC experience demonstrates that local area plans are more suitable than city master plans for promoting play opportunities for local children. Master plans often focus solely on land use planning, whereas local area plans facilitate the creation of demand-driven, co-designed play spaces. This approach encourages communities to work closely with local governments, especially in smaller cities across India, to ensure the needs of children are effectively met. Going forward, the NNC cities plan to forge partnerships with various local organisations, including non-governmental organisations, and community groups and conduct play-based activities, events, and programs to build a stronger culture of outdoor play.

Involving community members, including caregivers of young children, early childhood educators, and healthcare staff in various stages of the project cycle has ensured that the projects are responsive to user needs and has enabled the community to develop a sense of ownership.

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