INSIGHT EXCHANGE

Powering smarter municipal planning

Provocation Piece | September 2025

Proactive Planning: Missed Opportunities in Data for Children

Children make up a third of South Africa's population. Yet in municipal planning, they are often invisible. Service standards, data systems, and policy frameworks tend to assume a generic household or adult user. The result is a mismatch: children's needs (whether for safe transport, adequate sanitation, or secure housing) are sidelined, despite being central to community well-being.

This month's Insight Exchange explored how child-centred data can sharpen planning and service delivery. The message was clear: children's lives are deeply shaped by local government decisions, and there is both a moral and developmental imperative to integrate them into planning. The opportunity cost of failing to do so is immense: preventable injuries and health risks, avoidable learning gaps, and poorer long-term social and economic outcomes.

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The session surfaced several key insights:

Population change tells a story

Fertility rates are falling, household numbers are rising, and solo households are becoming more common. These shifts complicate service delivery; smaller households mean more service points, often with fewer resources to support children. Planning must account not only for population totals, but for household composition and care arrangements.

Urbanisation is uneven

Adults are more urbanised than children, leaving many children in rural areas with limited services while their parents migrate. Many children depend on grandparents and extended families in areas with weaker infrastructure and fewer services. Planning systems rarely account for this dynamic, even though it shapes demand for health care, grants, and schools.

Household structures matter

Nearly 60% of children live in extended households, yet housing and social policies remain geared toward nuclear families. RDP housing designs, for example, rarely accommodate multi-generational or skip-generation households that are the reality for many children. Ignoring these arrangements risks planning mismatches that can weaken both care and service delivery.

Thinking of children in context

Health workers may prescribe medication to be taken “three times a day after meals,” but 4.8 million children live in food-insecure households. A clinic might ask a child to “return for a check-up next week,” yet 4 million live more than 30 minutes from the nearest clinic. Social workers, still largely reliant on paper systems, face delays in responding to vulnerable children. These everyday contradictions highlight why granular, child-centred data is essential for realistic planning.

Mobility complicates service delivery

By age 15, more than a third of children have already moved households, often across municipal lines. Planning systems that assume static populations cannot keep pace with such fluid realities, undermining continuity in services such as grants, school enrolment, and health care.

Environment matters

About 1.6 million children live in informal settlements vulnerable to fire, flooding, and reliance on paraffin, coal, and other unsafe fuels for cooking and heating. Climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, while children’s access to safe housing, clean water, and sanitation remains uneven. Without integrating child vulnerability data into climate and disaster planning, risks will deepen.

Data is available but fragmented

Systems like the District Health Information System (DHIS), the Hospital and Emergency Centre Tracking Information System (HECTIS), education and ECD databases, and environmental monitoring each capture pieces of the picture. But without integration, blind spots persist, and children’s vulnerabilities are harder to see and act upon.

The opportunity cost of inaction is high. Every year we delay investing in child-centred data systems, municipalities miss opportunities to prevent harm, allocate resources more effectively, and build resilience for the next generation. Fragmented systems don't just create inefficiency; they impose long-term costs that deepen inequality and erode human potential.

Examples from practice show what is possible. **ChildSafe South Africa's** advocacy for 30km/h school zones demonstrates how injury and crash data can support targeted policy change. **The Walking Safely to School (WATCH) project** in Cape Town illustrates how linking pathology and trauma data can highlight risks where official road crash statistics are absent. **UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index** shows how mapping child-centred vulnerability can shape disaster preparedness and climate adaptation. Each of these examples demonstrates that better use of existing data can directly translate into improved safety and well-being for children.

Moving forward requires:

- Building interoperable, child-centred data systems (including secure, unique child identifiers)
- Establishing capacity for routine reporting by relevant departments on key child-focused indicators drawn from administrative data (build routine reporting targets into APPs)
- Making anonymised data available to researchers who can use it safely and effectively to support government departments with analysis
- Ensuring that Stats SA has sufficient budget and capacity to continue regular and nationally representative data collection
- Embedding child indicators in IDPs, SDBIPs, and spatial frameworks
- Developing child-friendly service targets and scorecards
- Strengthening interdepartmental and cross-sector collaboration
- Ensuring the voices of children and youth are present in planning

Children's well-being is not a "soft" add-on to municipal planning but foundational to the country's future resilience and development. By planning with children in mind and by using the data we already have more effectively, local governments can reduce risks, close service gaps, and unlock long-term developmental gains to better meet the needs of our children.

A call to action for South Africa's data scientists and civic tech developers to build interoperable, child-centred data systems

South Africa already has multiple systems that capture aspects of children's lives (from health and education to social protection and safety), but they remain fragmented and difficult to connect. For data scientists and civic tech developers, this is an opportunity to design systems that can safely link and harmonise these datasets, protect privacy through secure, unique child identifiers, and generate insights on which planners and policymakers can act. By drawing the threads together, we can build a fuller picture of children's realities, such as where vulnerabilities concentrate, which interventions work, and how resources can be better directed. Such data systems could guide interventions outlined in national frameworks such as the National Strategy for Accelerated Action for Children (NSAAC).

A call to action for the relevant line departments - From data collection to accountability

It is not enough to invest in building integrated data systems. Without routine analysis and visible outputs, these systems add little value for planning. To make child data meaningful, regular reporting targets must be embedded into Annual Performance Plans (APPs) and other accountability frameworks, ensuring that information collected is translated into insights and action.

Explore Tools and Data Resources

Children Count (UCT Children's Institute)

An interactive online resource with 40+ indicators on the situation of children, disaggregated by province, age, sex, race, income quintile, and settlement type. Widely used for policy, planning, and rights reporting.

Visit Website >

UNICEF's State of Children Dashboard

(hosted on the National Strategic Hub Portal)

Provides provincial-level data across themes such as WASH, social protection, ECD, adolescence, health, and education. Profiles and metadata are downloadable, supporting planners to benchmark and track child outcomes.

Visit Dashboard >

UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index & Disaster Risk Model

(coming soon on the National Strategic Hub Portal)

An interactive geospatial tool mapping children's exposure and vulnerability to climate hazards. Designed to inform risk-sensitive planning, disaster preparedness, and child-centred climate adaptation.

Take a look at **Kenya's CCRI DRM** *to get a taste of what's to come!*

Visit Dashboard >

NEXT MONTH

The New Urban Agenda and Localising the SDGs

Tuesday 7 October 2025

14:00 – 16:00

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