Changsha, China Puts Children’s Safety First

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“My city should be full of happy, colorful and clean, with my family, my friends and close to the nature”—a Grade 5 student in Changsha Yuelu No.1 Primary School

In Chinese cities, as in many growing cities around the world, the expansion of cities has been accompanied by rapid motorization, with a 17 percent annual growth in private car ownership from 2005 to 2014, reaching 124 million in 2014, and an increase in distances traveled and a steady decline in the percentage of biking and walking trips. Urban design has also given growing priority to cars in the streetscape. At the same time, China aims to transition to high-income status with 1 billion people, or 70 percent of the population, living in cities by 2030—adding a further 250 million people in the 13 years after that. While motorization initially brought gains in terms of mobility and convenience, it has also brought about adverse economic, environmental, and social impacts, including increased road accidents, traffic congestion, air pollution, fossil fuel consumption, social isolation, and disconnection among residents and their communities, and especially to children, the most vulnerable members of society.

Children, and other vulnerable members of society should be given priority and in urban planning and public policies. But according to the World Health Organization, more than 10,000 children under 15 years old die of traffic collisions in China every year—that’s 2.5 times the number in Europe and 2.6 times in the U.S. Among many other reasons, poor walking conditions are a key factor leading to these tragedies. Even worse, the urban environment in most Chinese cities is showing the same bias toward the “single male traveler” that has been well-documented elsewhere: There is a lack of accessibility to public space and few thoughts about diversity of age and gender, and public facilities are designed without consideration of their mobility needs.

While many cities around the world have started to address these issues, the first in China is the city of Changsha, in the south-central region of the country. Thanks to Changsha’s awareness of the importance of creating better transport infrastructure for children and ITDP China’s advocacy, the Changsha Urban Planning Bureau included a Child Friendly City (CFC) initiative in the Changsha Long-Term Development Plan 2050 and began to launch a series of transit improvement projects. With ITDP’s assistance, Changsha is not only the first to address the issue, it is the first city in the nation to officially enact CFC measures based on interaction with children. Many other Chinese cities are expected to follow Changsha’s footsteps to implement innovative actions and become child-friendly.

Child Friendly Cities was officially launched by UNICEF in the 1990s, to require cities to be livable for everyone, and especially for children. To support local national committees to develop and strengthen implementation of the Child Friendly City and Communities Initiative (CFCI), UNICEF has developed a CFC Toolkit that can promote a more harmonized approach across countries, strongly anchored in children’s rights. It provides practical guidance to promote implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child at local level and to encourage improved monitoring and evaluation of CFCI.
Since International Children’s Day in June 2016, ITDP China has been working for the Changsha CFC project with Changsha Urban Planning Bureau, Shenzhen New Land Tool (SZNLT), and many other local design institutes. ITDP China provided technical support, including preliminary training for government officials and local design institutes and the professional review for 10 pilot demonstration school proposals. The proposals included 186 implementation items: 121 short-term items with a 19.085 million yuan (2.8 million USD) investment and 65 long-term items with a 108 million yuan investment. These improvements consist of walking spaces, crossings, traffic organization, transport infrastructure, and public spaces around schools, all aiming to establish a better environment for children to study, live, and play.

The Changsha CFC School Area Urban Planning and Design Guide, mostly created by ITDP China and SZNLT, was issued by the Changsha Urban Planning Bureau to provide design guidelines at the city level for any newly developed or regenerated school development. Changsha city has also released Changsha CFC Action Plan, and Changsha CFC Planning Guidelines led by the City Urban Planning Bureau.

“The Child Friendly Cities and Communities Initiative is a powerful and strategic tool to strengthen awareness and implementation of children’s rights and, most importantly, to enable children’s voices to be heard,” explains Gérard Bocquenet, director of the Private Fundraising and Partnerships Division of UNICEF. He points out the significance of CFC compared to other pedestrian safety programs in the world, like Vision Zero.

ITDP China has also helped the Changsha Urban Planning Bureau and local design institutes to host a series of events to spread the word about CFC, such as classes open to the public in the Changsha Urban Planning Exhibition Hall and presentations to the Urban Planning Bureau, the Education Bureau, local design institutes, etc., to advocate for children’s rights. As a result, the city government responded strongly, with increased resources and plans, which created a lot of media and public buzz. One of the most exciting results from the campaign has been the public participation, particularly from the children, during the design process.

Within a year, the Changsha Urban Planning Bureau implemented improvements to a wider area around the schools, including a pedestrian refuge area on the street, parking demand management, traffic organization for peak hours, sign integration, and public space upgrades.

In early September 2017, the China CFC Construction Guideline draft for public comment was released, led by China Child-Friendly Community Work Committee. It provided 15 criteria and 46 metrics for all Chinese cities on three dimensions: policy, urban space, and service. Based on extensive consultations with local and international specialists, researchers, and representatives from various fields such as public policy, community management, urban planning, social work, and family education, this document will become a milestone in the Chinese CFCI program when interest in and the implementation of the CFCI becomes much higher in China.

Changsha’s contribution to CFC, including this project, which won the 2017 China’s CFC Community Service Projects Award issued by the China Child-Friendly Community Work Committee in April, has increased a lot of Chinese cities’ awareness of CFC. In the coming years, ITDP will continue to work with national and city-level local operators to ensure this success continues by building a closer relationship with national committees and local potential cities. ITDP will promote more CFC demonstration projects in other Chinese cities, assisting with scale-up of CFC guidelines around the country, and documenting best practices in China to share with UNICEF and other international audiences.