

Play, Participate, and Prosper: Children's Rights in Urban Park Governance

Kuan-heong Woo

Doctor, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang,
Malaysia

Abstract

This project examines the exclusion of children in urban park governance as an example of broader shortcomings in inclusive governance. Using Taman Jajar Sungai Ara in Penang, Malaysia, as a case study, the project investigates how urbanization, limited public participation, and adult-centric governance and decision-making processes affect children's rights to play and participate. Fieldwork was conducted with Taiwan Parks and Playgrounds for Children by Children, an NGO recognized for its child-centered urban advocacy, to identify strategies for fostering more inclusive governance. The findings highlight practical approaches, such as engaging political stakeholders and utilizing social media, that could support the development of participatory and rights-based models for park governance in Malaysia. It is argued that incorporating children's voices is crucial not only for fulfilling legal commitments under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* but also for creating urban spaces that are responsive, equitable, and genuinely public.

Keywords

Children's rights; inclusivity; participatory governance; urban park; Penang

Introduction

Urbanization has become a defining feature of modern society, accelerating the shift from rural to urban living. In 2007, for the first time, the global urban population exceeded the rural population (United Nations, 2019). This rapid expansion continues to reshape not only physical landscapes but also the ways in which people engage with space, community, and governance. While urban growth brings economic opportunities and infrastructure development, it also intensifies land-use conflicts and raises pressing questions about inclusivity in decision-making processes.

As someone working in the field of public administration and governance, I am particularly interested in how certain groups, especially those without formal power, are systematically excluded from shaping the public spaces they use daily. Children's exclusion from urban park governance exemplifies how governance frameworks, often designed for efficiency and expertise, can overlook the everyday needs and rights of even the youngest city dwellers.

Urban governance typically prioritizes immediate material concerns, such as housing and transportation, aligning with the lower tiers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Although green spaces and parks are essential for well-being, they are frequently neglected. While Maslow's model is not a planning tool, it helps illustrate this hierarchy of urban priorities: parks support "love and belonging" and even "physiological needs" by providing opportunities for social connection, physical activity, stress relief, and cleaner air. However, especially in compact urban environments, parks and playgrounds are often inadequate or entirely absent, limiting opportunities for outdoor play, social interaction, and overall well-being (UNICEF, 2018; West, 2012).

Children, although among the most frequent users of parks, are rarely considered stakeholders in the decisions that shape these spaces. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, ratified by 196 countries in 1989, affirms children's rights to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12) and to engage in play and leisure (Article 31) (UNICEF, 1989). However, planning and governance processes remain centralized and adult-centric (Au-Yong et al., 2022; Hajzeri, 2020), systematically excluding children's perspectives.

In this project, I use the case of children's marginalization in park governance to highlight a broader concern: that urban governance continues to fall short of being meaningfully inclusive. By foregrounding the rights of children, who are often invisible in policy discourse, I aim to provoke a rethinking of whose voices are valued in the shaping of urban public space and its governance.

The Study Site and Methodology

The struggle over land use is evident in many urban parks, including Taman Jajar Sungai Ara (TJSA) in Southwest Penang Island. To me, TJSA feels like my backyard garden, as my apartment is just a gate away from it. Originally built in 2015 by a housing developer as a modest park (Phase I), TJSA has since expanded to include an abandoned area (Phase II) and later incorporated a neighboring park across the river (Phase III), which was recognized as Penang's cleanest river in 2015 (Figure 1). In many ways, TJSA offers a calm, community-oriented charm. Every weekend, a coffee truck settles under the shade of rain trees by the riverside, creating a peaceful gathering spot where parkgoers linger, chat, and enjoy the natural surroundings (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Taman Jajar Sungai Ara: Three Phases



Figure 2. Taman Jajar Sungai Ara: Recreational Activities

As a community park in a rapidly urbanizing area, TJSA reflects the challenge of balancing development priorities with the need for accessible recreational spaces, especially for children. Despite serving as a public green space, TJSA lacks adequate facilities for children. As a regular park jogger at TJSA, I observed that the park contains only three sets of standards, less-appealing plastic play structures, one in each phase, designed for children aged six and below (Figure 3). Consequently, older children are left without suitable play options. On many occasions, I noticed older children and teenagers loitering around the park, often without meaningful ways to engage with the space. This pattern highlights a gap in age-appropriate recreational opportunities and raises broader concerns about all children's right to play and their access to safe, engaging outdoor environments.

Like many other urban parks in Penang, TJSA suffers from a lack of community input and the exclusion of children's voices in its governance. Acknowledging these governance shortcomings, I initiated this project to address the exclusion of children's voices in Malaysia's conventional park governance, using TJSA as a case study. To explore more community-inclusive models, I examined practices from Taiwan, specifically those of the Taiwan Parks and Playgrounds for Children by Children (PPFCC, 還我特色



Figure 3. Taman Jajar Sungai Ara: Play Facilities

公園行動聯盟 [特公盟]), an NGO actively advocating for children's right to play (PPFCC, 2025).

As a public administration and governance researcher and a resident living adjacent to TJSA, I occupy a dual position as both an academic observer and an everyday park user. This proximity has given me sustained exposure to the park's rhythms, community dynamics, and infrastructure limitations, particularly in relation to children's experiences. While my expertise lies in public administration and governance, this project allowed me to critically reflect on how exclusionary governance structures manifest in everyday spaces and how children's rights, though widely affirmed, are often sidelined in practice. My direct connection to the study site both enriches the research and requires reflexivity in how I interpret and present findings.

Aimed at informing the potential application of PPFCC's strategies and mechanisms to TJSA, I conducted fieldwork in Taiwan between September and December 2024. To gather practical insights, I participated in the NGO's community events and advocacy efforts and attended multiple sessions of a course offered by PPFCC at the University of Taipei, which deepened my understanding of their approach to educating young people on children's rights and inclusive park design. I also observed park playgrounds and street-play events in Taipei and Kaohsiung and conducted interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with relevant stakeholders.

In total, I engaged with 25 informants: 15 from Taiwan and 10 from Malaysia, including key PPFCC committee members, community representatives, experts, parents, and park users. I observed 11 featured parks (特色公園) in Taipei and Kaohsiung, which have been redesigned with age-appropriate facilities in line with PPFCC's advocacy. I also volunteered at two street-play events organized by PPFCC in Taipei and observed a large-scale street-play event in Kaohsiung. These research activities collectively provided a comprehensive understanding of PPFCC's approach and how it might be meaningfully adapted to the context of TJSA.

Urbanization, Children Rights, and Parks

To contextualize this project, I explored literature on urbanization, children's rights, and park governance.

Urbanization has led to challenges such as deforestation, gentrification, and rising land-use conflicts (Igini, 2023; Hwang & Ding, 2020). Open spaces in cities, once abundant, are shrinking, often triggering disputes when parks are proposed for commercial development (Saguin et al., 2017). As a result, communities sometimes struggle to maintain public spaces that serve everyone.

While adult community members already face limited opportunities to contribute to conventional park governance and planning processes (Au-Yong et al., 2022; Hajzeri, 2020), children, despite being regular park users, are even less likely to be involved in decision-making processes about park governance. This exclusion contradicts the principles of children's rights outlined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), which emphasizes children's right to participate in matters affecting them (UNICEF, 1989).

Article 12 of the CRC gives children the right to freely express their views on matters that affect them, with their opinions given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity (UNICEF, 1989). This underscores the importance of involving children in decisions about spaces like parks, which directly impact their daily lives. Article 13 supports their right to seek, receive, and share information, enabling meaningful participation in public discourse about urban planning. Article 15 guarantees their right to peaceful assembly and association, which are essential for community engagement and participatory governance. Finally, Article 31 recognizes play, recreation, and

cultural activities as integral to child development, placing them on par with fundamental services like education and healthcare (United Nations, 2016; UNICEF, 1989). These CRC articles emphasize the importance of children's voices in urban planning and recognize their need for safe and engaging spaces for play.

Despite this framework, the governance of parks in many urban areas remains a top-down process. Decisions are often made by adult stakeholders, such as urban planners, policymakers, and developers, without consulting the younger users these spaces are meant to serve. As a result, many parks fail to meet children's social, developmental, and recreational needs, leading to underused or inaccessible spaces.

From my experience with TJSA, I see how children's needs are often overlooked in park governance. This gap in governance results in spaces that do not fully meet their needs. Studies show that children offer valuable insights into park planning, from identifying safety concerns to voicing preferences for play equipment and highlighting the need for inclusive, accessible features (Danenberg et al., 2018; Freeman & Nel, 2024; Freeman & Tranter, 2011). When their voices are included, urban parks are more likely to reflect real needs rather than assumptions made by adults. Several countries have taken steps to integrate children's perspectives into urban planning through initiatives that promote youth participation (Global Alliance, 2025; Growing Up Boulder, 2025).

However, societal assumptions and structural barriers continue to limit children's participation in park governance. Overcoming these challenges requires a shift towards more inclusive, participatory processes where children are seen not just as users, but as active contributors to shaping the spaces they inhabit.

Strategies for Change: Lessons from Taiwan for TJSA's Children

Through observing featured parks, as well as conducting interviews and FGD, I identified several strategies employed by PPFCC that could potentially be applied to TJSA.

The concept of inclusive governance emphasizes the importance of recognizing and upholding everyone's rights, including those of children, in decisions that affect them. However, based on the responses from all

Malaysian participants, there is currently no mechanism that enables children to participate in the governance process of TJSA. This situation highlights the challenges children encounter when attempting to exercise their right to equal participation, which is a fundamental aspect of inclusive governance, within TJSA's governance and decision-making processes.

In contrast to the situation at TJSA, Taiwanese children have many opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes due to the efforts of PPFCC. In two interviews, one with a landscape architect and another with an urban planner who also led the pilot projects for featured parks, participants described how they collaborated with PPFCC to organize several participatory workshops. These workshops involved children and experts from various child-related fields and aimed to design parks that matched children's abilities and preferences while also incorporating the diverse perspectives of professionals. This child-centered approach was applied in several subsequent park projects, resulting in parks that feature diverse and age-appropriate play facilities (Figure 4).

As affirmed in the CRC, children have the right to express themselves and participate in decisions that affect them, including budgetary matters. During several interviews and FGD with key PPFCC committee members,



Figure 4. Featured Park Play Facilities in Taiwan

informants discussed the challenges they encountered while pioneering participatory budgeting processes to create playgrounds in featured parks. These efforts actively involved both children and parents.

The PPFCC team believes that promoting children's visibility and participation in budgeting and other governmental processes is essential for recognizing their rights within a child-friendly city. This belief has led to the development of two featured parks, Dun'an Park and Tianmu Sports Park (Figure 5), which align with the CRC's advocacy for incorporating children's voices in decision-making on projects that affect them.

One key strategy is PPFCC's emphasis on gaining the support of decision-makers and resource allocators, including both elected and non-elected public officials. This support has been crucial to their success in promoting children's right to play and advocating for inclusive urban park design and governance through child-centered workshops. By leveraging Taiwan's democratic system, PPFCC exerts pressure on authorities through petitions, protests, and strategic collaborations. These efforts have gradually raised awareness among political leaders about the importance of considering children's play needs in park planning. Over time, this has resulted in political action, with children's play rights being included in electoral manifestos to



Figure 5. Participatory Budgeting-Driven Featured Parks

appeal to parent voters. As a result, featured parks have become an increasing priority in urban development.

In my view, this highlights the significance of local elections, which Malaysia has lacked since their suspension in 1965. The ongoing call to reinstate local elections in Malaysia is not only a democratic issue but also holds the potential to promote more responsive and inclusive governance, particularly in addressing the needs of children and other often-overlooked groups.

PPFCC has also effectively utilized digital media platforms, such as Facebook, LINE, and others, for advocacy and outreach, demonstrating the value of these tools in raising public awareness and encouraging community participation. When I checked, I noticed that TJSA's Facebook page has been inactive since September 2021 (TJSA Facebook, 2025). Despite this, the page still has over three thousand followers, indicating significant potential as a platform for community engagement. I suggest that the TJSA Facebook page could be revitalized to support more participatory park governance. Regular updates on park activities, opportunities for community feedback, and shared success stories could help foster a stronger sense of connection and collective ownership among park users.

Ultimately, I believe that recognizing children's rights in urban park governance is not just about fulfilling legal obligations but about creating inclusive cities that reflect the needs and voices of even the youngest residents. My experience observing PPFCC's work in Taiwan demonstrated that when children are genuinely included, public spaces become more meaningful, engaging, and well-utilized. Parks like TJSA are essential to children's development, providing places to play, grow, and belong. However, governance practices often fail to address this adequately. By adopting participatory and child-inclusive approaches, similar to those championed by PPFCC, TJSA can become more than just a green space. It can evolve into a shared, fair, and responsive space for all. If Penang takes this approach seriously, it could become a leading example of building child-friendly urban environments that prioritize equity, creativity, and community.

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遊戲、參與和共融：城市公園治理中的兒少權利

巫群香

馬來西亞理科大学社會科學學院

摘要

本項目以包容性治理的缺失為個案，探討城市公園治理中兒少被排除的現象。此項目以馬來西亞檳城的新港公園為案例，檢視都市化、有限的公共參與，以及以成人為中心的治理與決策過程如何影響兒少的遊戲和參與權利。為尋找更具包容性的治理策略，本項目參與了臺灣「還我特色公園行動聯盟」（特公盟）的田野調查與相關活動。特公盟是一個倡導兒少權利的非營利組織。研究結果顯示，透過一系列可行的策略，包括與政治利益相關者的互動，以及善用社交媒體等方式，可為馬來西亞公園治理發展參與式和基於權利的模式提供借鑑。研究認為，將兒少的聲音納入治理過程，不僅對履行《兒童權利公約》下的法律義務至關重要，也有助於創建反應靈敏、公平且真正屬於公眾的城市空間。

關鍵字

兒童權利、共融、參與式治理、城市公園、檳城
