Summary
Introduction

Close to half of the world's population, both in developing countries and in wealthy nations, lives in urban areas. One of the characteristics of many urban settings is the concentration of problems related to quality of life and the availability of resources. Of the urban population living in impoverished and suboptimal conditions, children are at a particularly high risk, as disadvantaged living conditions have a deep impact on children's well-being and the effects of their childhood experiences run well into their adult life, determining almost every aspect of their development: physical, emotional, psycho-social, behavioural and cognitive.

Much of the literature on child poverty deals with the so called developing countries, but in recent years there has been increasing attention paid to child poverty in wealthy countries as well. Research initiatives have identified the range of problems that children living in poverty need to grapple with on a daily basis. Among these are lack of or unsafe playing spaces; inadequate housing; and parental unemployment. They also face scarcity concerning the food environment, leading – in combination with other factors – to high levels of overweight and obesity in segments of Western urban populations with low socioeconomic status (SES). While in developing countries adults and children of high SES groups are at risk of becoming overweight or obese, in wealthy countries a gradient can be observed whereby both adults and children of socioeconomically disadvantaged households are more likely to be overweight or obese.

Given the scale of urban dwellers worldwide and the gravity and complexity of challenges facing urban populations, in particular children, it is critical to come up with new and refreshing ideas on how to improve the quality of life and well-being of those affected, not only in developing countries but also in affluent Western countries. Multiple studies have pointed out domains in which action is needed by providing evidence of the harmful effects of growing up in poverty on children's well-being, health and opportunities. Both public and private initiatives have been developed, with varying results, aimed at improving lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, for example focusing on healthy diets for children and prevention of overweight/obesity. As we know that child participation can lead to better services, it is important to consider its potential for improving interventions aimed at enhancing lives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty. Furthermore, given the consequences of poverty on children, it is of great importance to consider what their lives look like in order to
understand how they can be better supported. This means taking a close look at specific domains and practices in which children are involved, such as playing sites, school and home. One of practices in which children in Amsterdam are involved is the Amsterdam school gardening programme. Studying the Amsterdam school gardening programme is also important as it represents a promising intervention to enhance vegetable intake and prevent overweight/obesity in Amsterdam.

In this thesis I examine the realities facing children growing up in poverty in Amsterdam from their own perspective. I introduce and develop a participatory approach whereby initiatives to address the issue of poverty can be informed by the perspectives of those who experience its realities. In taking such an approach I hope to make explicit children's narratives about their lives and to inform policymakers and practitioners of these perspectives. This study aims to contribute to understanding the perspectives and experiences of children with regard to growing up in contexts of poverty, and to examine their perspectives on the Amsterdam school gardening programme as an intervention to enhance vegetable consumption and prevent overweight/obesity and/or malnutrition. The main research question is framed as follows: How can child participation improve our understanding of what it means for children to grow up in contexts of poverty, and of what is needed to enhance their lives and well-being?

**Theoretical concepts**

By studying children’s lives, and incorporating participatory approaches, thorough insights are gained on the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty and what is needed to enhance their well-being. Both the process and the results of studying lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty are important subjects of study in this thesis.

Concerning the process of studying lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, four relevant concepts are highlighted: child participation, the child’s perspective, child agency, and lifeworld orientation and everyday life. Since the declaration and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), we have seen a significant increase of interest in child rights and child participation. The adoption of the UNCRC meant an increased interest in involving young people through a range of participatory initiatives and consultations in order to capture the child’s perspective, that is the child’s insider perspective, based on what he or she considers to be important. Furthermore, the UNCRC challenges traditional conceptions of childhood, as it considers children to be subjects of rights,
implying they are, like adults, holders of agency. **Child agency** comprises the social capacity of children to act and create, and to change practices in order to achieve personal purposes. Finally, as this thesis deals with the question of how children perceive child poverty and how the child's perspective on growing up in poverty can be grasped, a connection with the daily experiences of children is required. This is referred to as a **lifeworld orientation**, an interpretive paradigm that is rooted in theories of social pedagogy, and forms a methodological approach that takes into account the contexts in which children’s voices are produced and the circumstances of poverty that shape them. This contains a context-specific interpretation of children’s rights and interests, thus leaving room for different meanings, depending on these contexts.

In order to address the results of the study of the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, two concepts were incorporated in this thesis: policy dialogue and self-esteem. One key challenge of the current research was how to involve children effectively so that their stories are actually listened to and acted upon by policymakers. **Policy dialogue** is the process of adopting structured discussions into decision-making processes to help contribute to the development of evidence-informed policies. Local governments increasingly acknowledge the importance of taking children’s views into account to develop policies that fit their needs and daily reality, regarding them as stakeholders in their own right. It is necessary to design forms of dialogue and engagement that start from the position of the child. In light of this, we considered the importance of **self-esteem**. People are motivated to boost their self-esteem above their trait level and actively pursue self-esteem. In this study, we considered how child participation can contribute to children’s well-being. Since child poverty is a sensitive topic and there are indications that direct discussions on living in poverty can be challenging, we particularly explored how addressing child poverty and deprivation can be done in a positive manner that enhances rather than diminishes self-esteem.

**Research design**

The main research question that guides this thesis is:

*How can child participation improve our understanding of what it means for children to grow up in contexts of poverty, and of what is needed to enhance their lives and well-being?*
The main research question is further specified in the following sub-questions:
1: What is the child's perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?

2: How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?
   2a: How can child poverty be discussed with children who grow up in contexts of poverty?
   2b: How can photovoice provide us with insights into daily activities of children growing up in contexts of poverty?

3: Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?

4: What is children’s perspective on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child’s perspective, can it be improved?

The study described in this thesis consists of two separate researches, both mainly situated in Amsterdam.

**Study 1: Studying perspectives and experiences of children growing up in contexts of poverty**

An extensive study was conducted on disadvantaged children's lives and needs, resulting in three chapters of this thesis. In this study, we combined participatory action research [PAR] and ethnography, the former aimed at gaining knowledge about the children's needs in order to give direction for policies and interventions that fit these needs. As part of the ethnographic approach, we conducted participant observation while working and travelling with the children.

The study was carried out in two deprived neighbourhoods in the provincial town of Hoorn and the city of Amsterdam. We were, in particular, sensitive regarding how to introduce this project to children. Children were not selected and invited on personal grounds. Instead, we aimed explicitly for a social mix of children by inviting all children from well-known deprived areas to participate in ‘a photo project on their lives and neighbourhood.’ Children were asked to take part in the project by local youth workers in Hoorn and by three primary schools in Amsterdam.
Photovoice was employed as a central method. A total of 29 children aged 8-14 years took photographs of things and places in the local environment which were important to them. In weekly meetings, focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews were conducted in which the children were invited to reflect on their photographs. Recruitment from an area of deprivation meant that most children were likely to be poor, although this was not assessed on an individual basis. When the issue of poverty explicitly came up in children’s accounts, the opportunity existed for further discussions on the topic. At the same time, we were equally interested in the absence of reference to poverty. In order to contextualise the stories of children, the researchers also undertook informal conversations with parents, and conducted interviews with a primary school teacher, two youth workers and a policymaker.

The project was extended in Amsterdam with a dialogue between children and policymakers and a photo-exhibition. After the photo-exhibition, in the form of a photo stories table, stayed in the council office for a week for everyone to see and reflect on the photographs and the children’s stories, the table was also exhibited at two schools and at a local library. At these locations, the children had the opportunity to discuss their photographs with their peers, communicate the results to their own communities and to influence local professionals.

**Study 2: Studying children’s perspectives on the school gardening programme**

Two of the chapters in this thesis are dedicated to our study on children in low SES areas’ perspectives on the Amsterdam school gardening programme. In an ethnographic study approach, participant observation was employed to gain thorough insights into children’s thoughts on the programme and in particular how it affected vegetable intake, and their ideas for programme improvement. A naturalistic approach was assumed to enable the researchers to study children’s experiences with gardening and harvesting in a natural setting and interpret these in terms of the meanings they have for the children involved. In participant observation, the researcher collects data by taking part in research targets’ natural environments, and alternately adopting the role of active participant and observer.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select schools that had been participating in the Amsterdam school gardening programme for many years and that were located in city districts inhabited by the population of interest, i.e. children living in low-SES and high overweight and obesity...
contexts. Since the selected schools were both already part of a larger mixed-methods study they also represented a convenience sample.

Between March and November 2015 two participant observers were present at all school gardening lessons to observe what events took place, what the children did and how they reacted to what they saw and heard. While participating in the gardening lessons of both schools, the participant observers assisted children in gardening activities, conversed with them informally and closely observed their actions and behaviour. Furthermore, to deepen our insights into children’s perspectives on school gardening and the vegetables they cultivated, formal interviews were held with children from both schools. A FGD was held with the children from one of the groups to get a better understanding of the range of and variety in perceptions on school gardening and vegetable consumption. Finally, interviews were conducted with parents on what vegetables are eaten at home.

**Results**

*What is the child's perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?*

Children’s accounts of their lives provide insights into how children want to be approached. Poverty is surrounded by taboos and children who face deprivation tend to avoid using labels as ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ and sometimes get angry or upset when others, like researchers, use these terms. Furthermore, children’s accounts bring us to the realization that there are two ways to approach children’s lives, both of which have value and legitimacy. On the one hand children have inadequacies in their lives and on the other there are resources from which they can draw. One can emphasize the negative calling for intervention, or take notice of children’s active attitudes vis-à-vis adversity as manifestations of agency that should be supported. In the view of this research there is a need for a balanced perspective that takes account of both, which can be the most beneficial in terms of having an impact on change.

*How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?*

Different aspects concerning the approach and methods used in this study worked together and contributed to gaining insights into children’s experiences with and perspectives on growing up in poverty. As we chose to put children in the centre, time was needed for their personal development as well as their narratives on their lives to gradually unfold. The ethnographic
approach through which children were approached in their natural environment of living and the photovoice method facilitated an intensive process in which we had contact with the children for a long period of time, getting to know them and their living conditions. By adopting an agency perspective, considering children as active human beings not only in research but also in their social environments, we developed broader insights into their perspectives and needs.

**Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?**

Changes and improvements in children’s living conditions require the active involvement of children in the design, development and evaluation of policy and programmes. Both children and policymakers need time to open up to each other and for cooperation. Room for communication can be created and expanded by involving children in a challenging and fun process on the one hand and gradually fostering the interest of policymakers in the process and output, and thus in children’s lives and stories, on the other. Child participation is a two-way learning process and involves both children and adults. Whereas children’s process is more about growth of confidence, the policymakers’ is about becoming more receptive to children’s experiences and thoughts. These two aspects interconnect as children’s confident presentation of their experiences and thoughts can compel policymakers to listen, inciting them to action. By investing in children and stimulating their growth as well as the maturation of their narratives on their lives in their own pace, allowing them to uncover aspects of their lives as they see fit, self-esteem is enhanced and children are enabled to confidently enter into conversations with policymakers and others. Rather than starting out by connecting with and mobilizing policymakers, this research demonstrates an advantage in starting by empowering children to build their own narrative about their lives and neighbourhood.

**What are children’s perspectives on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child’s perspective, can it be improved?**

From our research on the Amsterdam school gardening programme we learned that participants are enthusiastic about school gardening. Eating vegetables and health interests are not primary aims for children. Also, children’s suggested improvements for gardening are not necessarily aimed at eating more vegetables and enhancing their health but at increasing enjoyment and the convenience of gardening, which might contribute
to more vegetable harvest and consumption. Combining school gardening with health education might strengthen the results of school gardening with regard to enhancing vegetable consumption by children living in poverty, but should not be at the expense of the freedom to cultivate their own vegetables as children consider this to be fun and it provides them with a sense of pride. For some children this might lead to a more lasting effect on vegetable consumption than education would, because it cultivates more intrinsic motivation to eat vegetables. Finally, given children’s call for more autonomy and room for experimentation, it might be conducive to use participatory techniques to research and design or improve school gardening programmes.

Conclusions and discussion
This thesis examined the significance of child participation in research and policy-making processes, its added value for understanding the child’s perspective on what it means to grow up in contexts of poverty, and on what is needed to enhance children’s lives and well-being. Our study showed that although children live in deprived conditions, which in some cases they themselves recognize and identify, they don’t consider themselves or their neighbourhood as ‘poor’. Moreover, both deficiencies and resources have a place in children’s self-perceptions and should be included in how they are approached.

It is most important to consider how children represent themselves and consequently adapt vocabulary and develop informed procedures to fit how children view their circumstances. Employing language indicating poverty and deprivation directly is of little use when children don’t feel addressed, or may be even harmful when children purposefully reject such labels. Rather than focusing consultations with children on poverty, discussions should, depending on the aim, concern specific themes or their neighbourhood as a whole. This does not mean that discussions about poverty should be shunned. Putting children in charge in a participatory process and employing a lifeworld orientation in which all themes are of interest allows room for all aspects of children’s lives to be discussed, including poverty and deprivation.

Child participation using a range of qualitative methods turned out to be a good approach to reveal the perspectives of children on growing up in a poor neighbourhood, as it enabled capturing the child’s voice. However, child participation is not without challenges. Among the questions that might arise are: How can children work with professional researchers on
equal, informed and unpressured terms? How much should professional researchers intervene to support children or to control the research? And who should have final control over the data and any reports, the children or adult or both jointly? The answers to these questions are not pre-determined, but are dependent on children's possibilities and preferences. Given the advantage of adult researchers in terms of power and experience and to avoid tokenism, appropriate conditions for children to find out about and communicate their wishes should be created by giving them the chance to participate in activities without feeling pressurised in any way. It is important to realise that putting children in charge might mean that they decide that their role is modest, perhaps even opting merely an informal and recreational commitment. At the same time, as children become more aware of the terms on which they want to contribute, it is critical to (1) give children who want to greater control over the agenda, (2) give them more time and space to talk about issues that affect them, and (3) enable children to interpret and explain their own data.

Participation processes involving children in contexts of poverty should target both children and adults, in particular policymakers. In part, separated trajectories are needed, since the challenge for both is different. While children need to grow as experiential experts articulating their needs and experiences, policymakers need to develop openness towards children and their thoughts, in part brought about by children’s compelling presentations. For this reason it is important to start with children, empowering them to speak up and working on their narrative on their lives and presentation abilities before addressing policymakers.

Gaining profound insights into children's lives and needs and bringing about meaningful encounters between children and policymakers takes time. It is of great importance to invest in children by setting up joyful and educational projects that are not only aimed at answering research questions and policy-making but also provide children with experiences they value, like travelling to other parts of the country for outings in which they are interested, playing ball and having informal conversations with researchers and other adults. Children appreciate attention and as relationships develop, more aspects of their lives are laid bare. In turn, time investments pay off as multiple goals are achieved and children's positive development is supported.

Finally, this study revolved around two projects of different natures, and it is good to consider their respective contributions to child welfare. While
the photo project is a new project taking as a starting point children's experiences and perspectives on what is needed to improve their lives, the school gardening programme has had a long history in Amsterdam and a specific aim. In order to contribute to children's well-being both types of project are important. Broad, open defined participatory projects aimed at understanding children's lives leave a lot of room for experimenting and gaining experiences together with children. The school gardening has a specific focus and more structure in order to achieve its aims. Opportunities to incorporate participatory approaches, both in learning processes during and in the design and improvement of such programmes, could be explored. Projects like the photo project that take as a starting point children's lives and have child participation as main focus, can serve as valuable testing grounds of how to do this properly.