

# Child-Focused Cities [CFC]: A Paradigm for Inclusive Urban Development

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## Abstract

The Child-Focused Cities (CFC) initiative brings together children and youth inclusion in local democracy in line with the principles embedded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It reflects on **why, when, how, where**, and under **what** circumstances children and young people are recognised as political subjects and crucial role-players in shaping their world. Through cross-sectoral exchange, research circles, and local partnerships with organisations that work with (and for) children, the research explored creative interpretation of the embryonic concept of Child-Focused Cities. It shed light on the multiple geographical and cultural registers around childhood, and provided the indispensable link between local politics and research. The project complements ongoing global initiatives that promote the localisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to curate local innovative solutions and interventions, while providing a unique perspective to the needs and interests of children and young people. This research resulted in a toolbox – a collection of practical instruments and protocols essential for advancing the Child-Focused Cities agenda in local governments.

**Keywords:** *Child-focused Cities, Child Rights, Child and Youth Participation, SDGs, Sustainable Future*

## Acknowledgements

The research is a product of a series of creative dialogues - Research Circles - with professionals and representatives of Municipal Partnerships of the ICLD Sustainable Futures Network and further tested in practice through local partnerships with reputable organisations that work with (and for) children. We extend profound appreciation to all of them for their indispensable contributions!

## Preface



**By Johan Lilja, Secretary General, Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy**

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is committed to strengthening local democracy and promoting sustainable development by supporting knowledge exchange, capacity-building, and international municipal partnerships. Our research programme plays an important role in this mission, generating evidence and practical tools that can help local governments advance inclusive and participatory governance.

This report has been produced within ICLD's Network for Sustainable Futures and authored by the Child-Focused Cities Working Group. The process brought together researchers and practitioners from different contexts and disciplines, united by a common goal: to support local governments in recognising and including children and young people as active participants in local democratic processes.

The report presents the research process and conceptual underpinnings behind the *Our Childhood Toolbox* — a practical tool developed by the working group to guide municipalities in fostering child and youth inclusion. It tells the story of how the toolbox was co-created through dialogue, participatory research, and collaboration with local governments, community organisations, and children themselves. In doing so, the report adds to ICLD's growing body of knowledge on participatory governance and the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

We hope that this publication and the accompanying toolbox will serve as useful resources for municipalities and local actors committed to building

democratic, sustainable, and inclusive communities — with and for children.

We would like to thank the authors, the members of the Child-Focused Cities Working Group, and all contributors who have made this publication possible.

Visby, Sweden

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Johan Lilja', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Johan Lilja,  
Secretary General, ICLD

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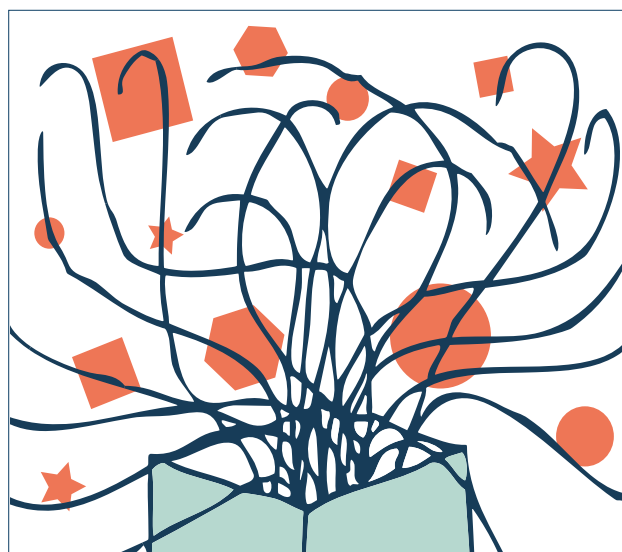
## Introduction

Urbanisation is one of the twenty-first century's most transformative trends, with estimates that the world's urban population is expected to nearly double by 2050 (United Nations, 2017). This means that populations (of all ages), economic activities, social and cultural interactions are increasingly concentrated in cities. Consequently, a greater number of young people will live and grow up in cities and urban contexts in the years and decades to come. UNICEF (2024) projects that children living in urban contexts will rise by 33% by 2050 from around 971 million rising to approximately 1.3 billion. This means close to 60% of the world's children will live in urban contexts by 2050, so it is vital for cities to prioritise children in their structure, form, planning and governance.

This research aims to strengthen the notion of Child-Focused Cities (CFC) and explore the implementation of a translational, intermediary framework, conducive to contextually specific, local level endeavours that recognise children and young people as key stakeholders and agents of change. At the heart of this notion is the elevation of the voices of children and young people, ensuring that they are heard and valued in shaping the present and future of their cities and societies. The current work builds upon our inception study conducted in 2022 which explored the involvement of children and young people in local governance and this research presents a collection of innovative interpretations of the CFC concept. At the very core of our research interests is the need to explore ways in which the CFC Analytical Framework can be creatively implemented within current planning, legislative and political affairs. This endeavour seeks to enhance child and youth participation in local decision making and ideation of their everyday environments. By questioning the needs of partnering municipalities on one side, and the ways of putting the CFC in practice with children on the other, the research attempts to determine available resources and relevant thematic domains, test creative ideas, and outline the obstacles for making a practical and applicable toolbox. We hope that this can enable local governments to use the CFC Analytical Framework in their attempts to create conducive conditions for participation of children and youth within

their respective territories, from rural to urban settings.

In the next section we introduce the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework, and its theoretical underpinnings. Key concepts related to children and childhood are explored, along with children and youth's critical contributions to sustainable futures, and the evolution from child-friendly to child-focused cities. The challenges and socio-ecological perspectives of child-focused cities are also discussed. In the Methodology section, we outline our research approach, including the Sustainable Futures Network meetings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the use of Research Circles, and our data collection and analysis methods. This is followed by the Themes Identified and Application section, which details key themes such as integrating children's rights into urban development, inclusive and participatory planning processes, addressing capacity gaps among duty bearers, shaping the Our Childhood toolbox, and ensuring practical solutions that reflect children's needs and perspectives in urban settings. The Test Sites section presents case studies and experiences from working with children and communities. The Results and Discussion section provides insights into the outcomes of our research, highlighting lessons learned when top-down strategies encounter ground-level realities. Finally, the Conclusions and Recommendations section offers concluding reflections and outlines next steps for advancing the CFC agenda.





## Introducing the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework

### *Germination of ideas*

The inception of our Child-Focused vision and associated analytical framework was first conceived at the ICLD's Local Democracy Academy (LDA) in June 2022. The array of thematic collaborative groups included a group focused on the concept of child friendly cities, developed by UN-Habitat and UNICEF in 1996, through which several of the research team came together to bring cases related to challenges of the child friendly city. This led to our contestation that *friendliness* does not go far enough. Interrogating the 'child friendly' concept, we reflected upon shortcomings around accountability and potential to sustain paternalistic constructions of children and childhood. A paradigm shift towards Child-Focused cities challenges children as passive receivers of adult agendas, repositioning them as active stakeholders (Crook, 2017). This moves beyond a focus on individual children encompassing 'a broader perspective that considers 'childhood' as a distinct phase of life characterised by unique needs, rights, and experiences, inextricably related to the sense of belonging to the world' (Cairns et al, 2024). United by the commitment to bridge research with practice, we planted the seed for a Child-Focused City Analytical Framework (CFCAF) that would be a meaningful tool to explore children and youth's uniquely valuable contributions to intergeneration and cross sectorial endeavours.

Whilst we draw our explorations from concepts of child friendly to Child-Focused cities, we consider the idea of 'cities' to reflect the everyday places and spaces encountered by children, without limitations to the urban environments. We imagine the concept of 'city' as reflecting the built, social and relational environment around children interrelated to socio-political infrastructures that intersect everyday experiences in childhood.

### *Planting seeds of change*

Following the connections forged at the Local Democracy Academy in Visby, the group continued to exchange ideas, leading to the development of a small impact project, funded by ICLD. Positioned as a '*stage zero*', the initial project explored our germinating ideas towards conceptualising a novel relational object to address the complex challenges that can be encountered when supporting and upholding children's rights to participate with a particular focus on local governance and the SDGs.

This project titled '*Let's get together and make change*' enabled exploration across and between contexts to foster a deeper exploration and refinement of our CFC Analytical Framework. The research team forged connections with various stakeholders and representatives from six ICLD partner municipalities with an explicit interest in supporting child and youth participation. These municipalities included Muranga in Kenya, Chobe in Botswana, Kinondoni in Tanzania, Håbo in Sweden, Livingstone in Zambia and Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. Three members of the research team were hosted by Livingstone municipality (Zambia) and Victoria Falls municipality (Zimbabwe) on a study visit, enabling a closer, more in-depth exchange of ideas and understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by local stakeholders committed to the inclusion of children and youth.

Key lessons are highlighted in our Working Paper (Cilliers et al, 2023). We learnt through our engagements with local stakeholders in their respective contexts, and this included the following challenges that must be considered in progressing the vision of Child-Focused cities and spaces:

- **Participation dynamics:** Projects, programmes and interventions often face precarious conditions like limited funding, creating tensions that affect both current innovations and long-term goals. Embedding children and youth in all project aspects (development, management, income genera-

tion) fosters ownership and stability.

- **Safety concerns:** In local communities, schools are safe spaces for children and young people. This is the lived realities in Livingstone, Zambia, and Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. Thus, youth outside the school system, especially ages 17-21, create their own spaces, and sometimes end up engaging in delinquent behaviours like substance abuse. These behaviours can be ways for excluded youth to find safety and a sense of belonging. Increasing safety and addressing exclusion factors is crucial.
- **Participation as protection:** Engaging young people in planning and governance matters at the local level creates a safe environment to address their challenges. Barriers that prevent many children from inclusion in decisions often act as stumbling blocks for dialogue between governing authorities and young people, exacerbating the vulnerability of young people to harm, violence and exploitation. Recognizing marginalised contributions provides insights into social and environmental protection.
- **Lifelong participation:** True and authentic participation requires a commitment to the potential of younger generations. For some, this means engaging in broad agendas, while for others, especially the disadvantaged, micro-level participation is foundational. Participation is a lifelong and intergenerational process and an intergenerational process that has to continuously evolve while improving the lives of everyone - ensuring that no one is left behind.

Collectively, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the SDGs (particularly Goal 11 on cities and urban communities) emphasise the importance of prioritising the needs of children in planning and governance. Yet, more work needs to be done to deliberately prioritise children in cities and local communities. We envision the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework as a vehicle to facilitate and help authorities prioritise children in decision-making.

## ***Nurturing growth and establishing roots***

Building on the findings from the inception study (*Let's Get Together and Make Change*), the research team proposed that the next phase of developing the CFC Analytical Framework for local governments adopt a more facilitative and engaging approach. The team worked towards setting up a platform for exchange across the Sustainable Futures Network – Research Circles – thus building internal capacity for the Networks future, while establishing partnerships with professional initiatives working with children and youth to test/creatively interpret the conceptual CFC framework. This provided an opportunity to build material evidence for the development of a toolbox for local governments.

## ***Reaching for the sky***

The vision for Child-Focused Cities transcends disciplinary and knowledge silos through curiosity and collaboration. The unique constellation of epistemologies and practice backgrounds of the research teams aims to reflect dimensions of children's everyday lives at the intersections of physical, spatial, social and relational realms. Our ethos weaves together research and practice, community and governance, learning and teaching, thinking and doing in local and global agendas. For many children, everyday experiences occur within a backdrop of 'slow violence' which 'occurs gradually, out of sight... a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon, 2011). As such, to fully safeguard the needs of children and to provide comprehensive solutions for Child-Focused Cities, children must act as critical partners and future caretakers of our shared planet. Together, we can reach the sky.

The fundamental ethos of child friendly cities is visionary and the impetus towards their realisation continues to gain traction internationally, but gaps exist including defining, measuring and monitoring child-friendliness in any given context which

remains limited. These gaps may be compounded by differing conceptualisations that intersect with the idea of ‘child friendly cities’ that are shaped by disciplines, role and/or priorities. This generates different relationships of interest in children and space that may contribute to tensions and gaps in understanding, measuring and action towards making these concepts ‘real’. Van Vliet and Karsten (2015) highlight the contrasting debates around child friendly cities, with some commentators airing differing concerns for children’s needs. Some are oriented to the social environment, and others to the physical environment of children. Furthermore, whilst some commentaries are focused on

neighbourhoods, others are focused on cities as a whole. The CFC initiative adopts a transdisciplinary approach that spans Urban Planning, Architecture, Social Design, Urban Studies, Law, and Social Work. The Research Circle seeks to bridge research and practice, creating innovative and novel approaches. Klein (2015) describes inter/transdisciplinary approaches as being ‘closely linked with innovation and novel approaches,’ aiming to ‘transcend the narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews’ and embracing new paradigms that recognize complexity and difference. A multidisciplinary blend provides a solid foundation.



## Theoretical framework

### Children and childhood

The concepts of ‘childhood’ and ‘children’ are dynamic, evolving across different territories, cultures, and historical periods. These concepts intersect with various levels of social practices and processes, from the micro-level of family interactions to the macro-level of global policies. Historically, childhood has often been viewed through a dichotomous lens: children are either idealised as passive, dependent, and innocent or marginalised as disruptive and undeserving (Bolotta, 2020). These views are deeply influenced by global inequalities and colonial legacies, which have shaped dominant ideas of childhood according to Eurocentric standards. James (2011) discusses how these powerful representations are enacted through both global and local systems. Different social and cultural conceptions of childhood are reflected in laws, policies, and institutions, which in turn shape children’s everyday lives.

Gillespie (2015) highlights the historical exclusion of children from urban planning, where norms around dependence and protection led to their segregation from adult spaces. This segregation underscores the culturally constructed nature of childhood and its impact on urban planning and governance. Matthew et al. (2000) echo this sentiment, noting the restrictions placed on children in public spaces, which confine them to “acceptable islands” of activity. In the same vein, Stavrides (2015) describes these as archipelagos of normalised enclosures, highlighting how children’s social and physical environments are influenced by these constructs.

Children’s vulnerability is compounded by their socio-legal status as non-political subjects. This vulnerability has been particularly evident, if not exacerbated, during the Covid-19 pandemic, which deepened human and child rights crises. Climate change poses another imminent threat to childhood. UNICEF (2020) estimates that over 1 billion children are living in “extremely high-risk” contexts due to climate change, a situation described as “unimaginably dire.” Hellden et al. (2021) remind us that present and fu-

ture generations of children, especially the vulnerable, will bear a disproportionate burden from climate change-related diseases. This portrays an image of the vulnerability of children from outside forces beyond their power, and yet in the reach of governments through proper planning and governance.

### Children’s contributions to sustainable futures

The UNCRC is a globally accepted and the most ratified instrument to safeguard children’s rights. In Article 12, the UNCRC makes a legally binding obligation that children’s voices must be considered in all matters concerning children, and importantly it translates to include in the implementation of all other rights. The practice of taking children’s views in planning, governance and decision making has gained momentum in global platforms. For example, in the development of the recently adopted UN General Comment No. 26 on children’s rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change, the views and perspectives of children were taken by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. It is noted that the views of children are critical to enhance the quality of solutions, and provide an opportunity for innovation.

The views of children should be integrated into the design and implementation of measures addressing long-term local challenges that impact their lives. States, through the different Ministries and Departments, are urged to establish age-appropriate mechanisms for regular consultation with children at all stages of local city-level decision-making. This includes legislation, policies, regulations, projects, and activities. For meaningful participation, children need human rights education, adequate information, time, resources, and a supportive environment. It is vital to emphasise that after sharing their views, children should be provided with feedback on how their views were considered and shape the outcome of planning and governance. Also, they must have access to complaints procedures when their rights are disregarded, violated or threatened at the local level.

## From child friendly to child-focused

The departure point of our conceptual journey from friendly to focused began with the pioneering work of UNICEF which articulated and operationalised a vision of a child friendly city. The notion of a child friendliness refers to urban environments that prioritise the well-being, rights, and needs of children in their planning and decision-making processes. A child friendly city promotes safety, inclusivity, and equal access to opportunities for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, or ability. This concept aligns with international frameworks like the UNCRC, which emphasises children's right to protection, provision, and participation.

The concept of child friendly cities as developed by UNICEF is defined as:

***'a city, town, municipality or any system of local governance committed to fulfilling child rights as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a city or municipality where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes, and decisions. Thus, a child-friendly city is a city that is fit for all'***

(UNICEF, 2022)

Child friendly cities aim to create urban areas where the rights of children, as established in the UNCRC, are actively upheld and integrated into the fabric of city life. It recognizes that cities are increasingly home to a growing number of children and that urban areas can present unique challenges, such as overcrowding, inequality, and limited access to green spaces. By focusing on children's rights and participation, the initiative ensures that urban development benefits children and, by extension, the entire community. In short, it strives to make cities places where children are visible, valued, and given the opportunity to thrive as active participants in society.

Child friendly cities envision cities where children not

only live but flourish, with their well-being, perspectives, and needs becoming central to urban planning, governance, and community initiatives. These cities treat children as vital members of society, ensuring they have opportunities to voice their opinions and influence decisions that affect their surroundings. Urban development, public policies, and services are designed with a focus on safety, access to education, health, play, and social inclusion, while also addressing inequalities to safeguard the most vulnerable children. Child friendly cities emphasize fostering environments that inspire a sense of belonging and empower children to thrive. By focusing on their needs, these cities aspire to build spaces that benefit not only young residents but the entire community, challenging traditional approaches to urban design and governance to create more inclusive and supportive living environments for all.

Efforts to develop child friendly cities face various challenges. There is a broad concept of child-friendliness which is viewed from how governments are investing in the lives of children. Bequele (2010) discusses the Child-Friendliness Index (CFI) developed by the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF), which assesses governments based on legal protections, budget allocations, and resource effectiveness for children's well-being. Interestingly, Bequele's analysis shows that child-friendliness is not correlated with a country's gross domestic product (GDP); some low-GDP countries perform well on the CFI, while some high-GDP countries do not. Mekonen (2010) identifies protection, participation, and provision as the pillars of a government's child-friendliness. In all this, local governments play a crucial role in translating national commitments into practical actions.

Cordero-Vinueza et al. (2023) highlight the importance of the spatial dimension in embedding children's rights, suggesting that this can be a good measure of a local government's performance. Malone (2015) stresses the importance of local authorities in sustainable development and the participation of children as central to this process. Children can be seen as leading protagonists in transforming their cities, challenging notions of passivity and helplessness. Derr (2015) argues for the recognition of children as competent participants in urban



planning. Van Vliet and Karson (2015) identify four roles for children in creating child-friendly environments: consumers, users, entrepreneurs, and co-producers. The latter role, where children act as citizens who investigate, deliberate, and collaborate, is particularly important for co-producing urban spaces that reflect their needs and perspectives.

Our contention is that friendliness does not go far enough - we do not discount the important and inspiring work towards child friendly cities but rather strive to expand and expose tensions that may inadvertently occur through the notion of 'friendliness'. Friendliness is a rather slippery notion and, whilst child-focused is not a conceptual panacea, it draws attention to the relational dimension between children and adults including **foreground the needs of children** as active citizens, rights holders and stakeholders whilst maintaining a focus of accountability and responsibility upon **adults as duty bearers**. There are real risks that notions of 'friendliness' obscure the responsibilities of all adults and all services in shaping the everyday social worlds that children navigate. Even when participation is supported, we must expand their valuable contributions beyond simply being heard towards commitment of inclusiveness where all young citizens know and understand the structures through which they can participate, engage and interact with to provide input in the governance of public affairs at the local government level. We aim to extend initiatives beyond adult centric meanings and benevolence by foregrounding children and youth agency and participation as well as respecting our mutual goals for social and environmental transformation.

By shifting from 'friendly' to 'focused' we also hope to expose the social context within which these agendas are situated. We approach concepts of children, childhood and child friendliness as socially constructed which changes across time, context and political agendas. By virtue of their age-related dependence on social and systemic infrastructures, children and youth are often dependent on how adults see them and expect them to behave. Children and youth are not a static, singular social group and moving from 'friendly' to 'focused' strives to highlight nuance, inequality and tensions that

shape children's experience of the world around them. We are concerned that working upon notions of friendliness may come into tension with children and youth who, individually and collectively, can be positioned in opposition to the child friendly city. An example of this is when children fall beyond the frame of dominant expectations such as adolescents who may fall into the conceptual shadows of child friendly agendas. In our impact project "Let's get together and make change" (Cilliers et al. 2023), we learned about a distinct vulnerability for children and youth who fall out of school systems, particularly those aged between 17-21, who may experience social and systemic exclusion which can lead them to create alternative spaces of mattering and belonging. However, in the context of exclusion and marginalisation, these spaces may be experienced as simultaneously safe and harmful. Therefore, the challenge is on increasing safety in these contexts whilst addressing the structural and systemic factors which lead to the social exclusion of this distinct group.

The UNCRC General Comment No. 20 (2016; 05) explicitly addresses attitudes to adolescents stating that the committee 'regrets the widespread negative characterizations of adolescence leading to narrow problem-focused interventions and services, rather than a commitment to building optimum environments to guarantee the rights of adolescents'. In a specific examination of the Child Friendly City, Iveson (2006; 50) highlights the distinction between the 'child' and the 'anti-social youth' where the former is understood as a 'future citizen in need of community protection' in contrast to the 'anti-social youth' which is understood as the 'anti-citizen from whom the community needs protection'. From a rights respecting perspective, such ambivalence around who counts as deserving of rights within the city becomes particularly problematic which compels moving from potential ambiguity and emotionality of 'being friendly' to a nuanced, contextual and accountable framework that focussed on all children and youth, regardless of how friendly we find them.

A child-focused city builds on the principles of the child-friendly city, but takes a more active approach by integrating children's perspectives into every aspect of

urban planning and local governance. This involves creating environments that are not only safe and nurturing but also appropriate and empowering for children to actively participate in urban life.

## Socio-ecological perspective

Socio-ecological theories, such as those proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977), emphasise understanding children's behaviour within their natural contexts. These theories suggest that children are embedded within interconnected and interdependent systems, including family, school, community, and broader societal structures. Each system influences the others, and children's experiences are shaped by interactions within and between these systems. This perspective highlights the importance of considering historical, cultural, and social contexts when addressing children's needs. It recognizes that children are active agents in their social environments, contributing to and being influenced by the world around them. Uprichard (2008) urges consideration of children as both "being and becoming," recognizing their potential agency in shaping their present and future lives. This view shifts the perspective from seeing children as passive subjects to active

contributors. Prout and James (2015) support this shift, arguing that children should be seen as active in constructing their social lives and the societies they live in.

As noted earlier, the global recognition of children as agents of change is commendable, exemplified by their participation in shaping the UN General Comment on children's rights and the environment, with a focus on climate change. The General Comment emphasises their historical contributions to human rights and environmental protection and calls for their demands for urgent action to be met. Taking the views of children in all matters includes considering their views in emerging issues such as the climate crisis. Currie and Deschenes (2016) posit that children should be central to discussions on climate change, as they have a larger stake in the outcomes. From a socio-ecological vantage point, we can see that children's lives are shaped by a complex interplay of local and global influences. Addressing these influences requires a comprehensive approach that considers the interconnected and interdependent nature of their social environments. This includes acknowledging the colonial legacies and power dynamics that shape who speaks for whom and striving for equity in giving children a voice in matters that affect them.



## Methodology

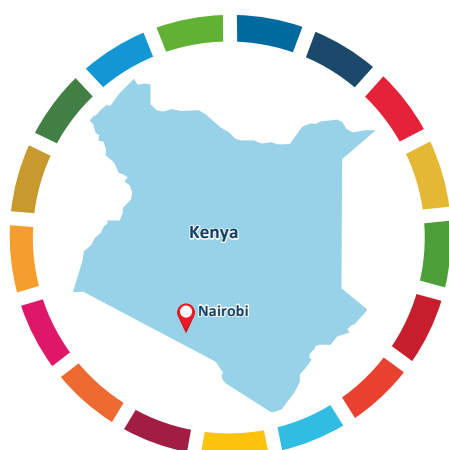
Understanding children within their socio-ecological contexts allows for more inclusive and effective approaches to addressing their needs. As we move towards child-focused cities, it is crucial to bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that children's voices are central to shaping their environments. This widened approach promises a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

This research engaged in collaborative efforts through ICLD's Sustainable Futures Network, including both in-person and virtual conferences. It also drew on the Research Circle methodology, which facilitated reciprocal knowledge exchange among diverse international participants. Lived experiences captured through Test Sites formed a crucial part of this section, ensuring that the resulting toolbox is responsive to real-world challenges and opportunities.

### Sustainable Futures Network - Nairobi and Dar es Salaam conferences

The Sustainable Futures Network (SFN) was established in 2023 to facilitate horizontal exchange among municipal partnerships, most in the eastern Africa region, who are in an existing relationship with counterpart municipalities in Sweden through ICLD. These key partnerships work within the focus areas of youth inclusion, children's rights, environmental advocacy and preparation for civic life. This network represents clear synergies with our endeavours, and we were invited to connect with the SFN to develop our research around developing a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework.

- **Initial engagement:** We began by joining the SFN inception meeting where we were introduced to key people across the collaborative network and learned about the different partnerships between East African and Swedish municipalities. We were also given the opportunity to share our journey together including reflections from our 'stage zero' impact project which helped us to navigate the progression of our vision for Child-Focused cities and spaces.
- **Nairobi conference (in person):** Two representatives from the research team attended the SFN conference in Nairobi, Kenya, in September 2023. The opportunity to engage with a network of municipalities from Kenya and Tanzania, both situated in an urban and rural context, shed more light to the gaps and challenges of the on-going project while providing practical knowledge on how to finalise the analytical framework in light of the needs to consider and/or deal with. During the course of the visit, the research team met with relevant key stakeholders for the child-focused cities initiative. Firstly, UN-Habitat colleagues at the UN complex to explore potential areas of collaboration with the UN urban thematic work and focus on youth in local governance. The opportunity demonstrated that the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework is innovative, and that it aligns with the ongoing work on child-responsive urban laws, policy and standards. Further, the team met with the City of Nairobi government to discuss a potential collaboration. The city acknowledged that while there is still a lot of work that needs to be done, including





investment in youth consultative processes, it highlighted that it finalised a Youth Policy which was tabled before the County Government Parliament - a progressive move to ensure child and youth inclusion. There is notable political will and commitment to include youths and young people in the governance of the city of Nairobi. Attending the conference presented the CFC team with the privilege to hold fruitful engagements and discussions with the Cities for Children Alliance, which had just started work in Kenya. The Alliance's Kenya chapter is working in various county governments, big and small, and this presents a strategic opportunity to reach more children and advance the rights and interests of children and young people in local governance in Kenya. Importantly, the CFC presentation unpacked the journey travelled, the field study visits, the findings and recommendations, as well as connecting the development of the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework to the research visits. The participants resonated with the findings from Livingstone and Victoria Falls, a manifestation of how political challenges relating to the participation of young people in local governance and the implementation of SDGs hold universal character across the African continent.

- **Dar es Salaam conference (online):** We also presented our evolving project online at the SFN conference hosted in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in April 2024. This gave us the opportunity to continue to foster our connection with the network, taking the members of the forum with us on our journey of development and sharing our progress (presentation available in appendix 5). It also created a valuable opportunity to share our hopes for our Research Circles and invite interested parties to consider joining us.
- **Incorporation of key themes and learning into research conceptualisation:** The in-person and online encounters with the SFN gave us rich insights into the collaborative endeavours developing through the network that generated reference points for our journey towards developing the "Our Childhoods Toolbox". There were several key themes and learnings that we incorporated into our conceptualisation. We noted that the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007)

served as a common organising principle around many of the projects which echoed our ongoing consideration of the utility of this frame to support safe and meaningful participation. We were inspired by the different ways this model was brought to life in the different contexts and projects. We also observed the different and diverse ways that projects bridged global development goals with local issues and aspirations. These demonstrated an array of thematic domains and related objectives that were particularly useful as we related these to the development of our knowledge. The creative working formats of the projects highlighted the importance of ensuring our evolving toolbox was flexible and responsive, fostering innovation and rejecting rigidity.

## Research Circle

The conception of the Research Circle methodology stems from the exchanges we had in our previous '*Let's get together and make change*' impact project which included field visits to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe and Livingstone, Zambia. The motivation for creating the space of a Research Circle was directly related to our deep respect for the 'practice wisdom' that was shared with us across the journey of this previous project. Intrinsically we recognise that there are many different ways of 'knowing' and respect 'practice wisdom' as 'constituted intersubjectivity' and grounded in personal contexts and local sites. Its sensitivity to situated context and its underlying values and assumptions about human nature and society (Chu and Tshi, 2008, p. 48-49). Exchanging ideas and reflections between research and practice, different contexts and professional roles proved incredibly rich and valuable. The aim of our Research Circle approach was to create space for similar exchanges which would engage in reciprocal relationships with local partners facilitating field work.

**Conception and implementation:** The concept of a Research Circle hails from Sweden and is understood as a participant-based method that aims towards the creation of knowledge and development of change in practice. Recognising the expanding nature of the CFC research, the establishment of a Research Circle as part of our research design seeks to break down hierarchies

that can exist between practitioners and research (Högdin and Kjellman, 2014) and is foregrounded in the belief that everyone's knowledge and contribution is equal. Harnsten (1995) describes this practice-oriented method as liberating people from conventional structures and can be a highly creative environment. Strengths to this approach may include fostering relationships between people and partnerships across ICLD partnerships and other collaborators, deeper participation in the process of knowledge production and can create change in practice through the process. Formation of the Research Circle also mirrors much of our intentions by embedding participation not just in what we say but also what we do. Situating our team and the project within a much wider context we acknowledge that it is deeply embedded in colonial and imperial practices of power, knowledge production and resource distribution. Whilst we cannot and should not remove ourselves from the ongoing legacy, we aimed to actively engage with issues towards knowledge democracy and power sensitivity to optimise South-South, North-South, and South-North exchange across our international project.

**Sessions and tools:** We facilitated three digital Research Circles between February and May 2024. Given the precarious nature of connectivity we also created a Padlet and recorded sessions to support participants who were unable to attend Circle meetings to foster the connection through the Circle process. The research circles brought together up to ten participants from Austria, Australia, Botswana, Brazil, Kenya, Serbia, Switzerland, Sweden, Scotland, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

**The structure of each Research Circle:** The Research Circles included an opening presentation on a dimension of the developing toolbox (full presentations available in appendices) which then resulted in a shared discussion supported by the Padlet board.

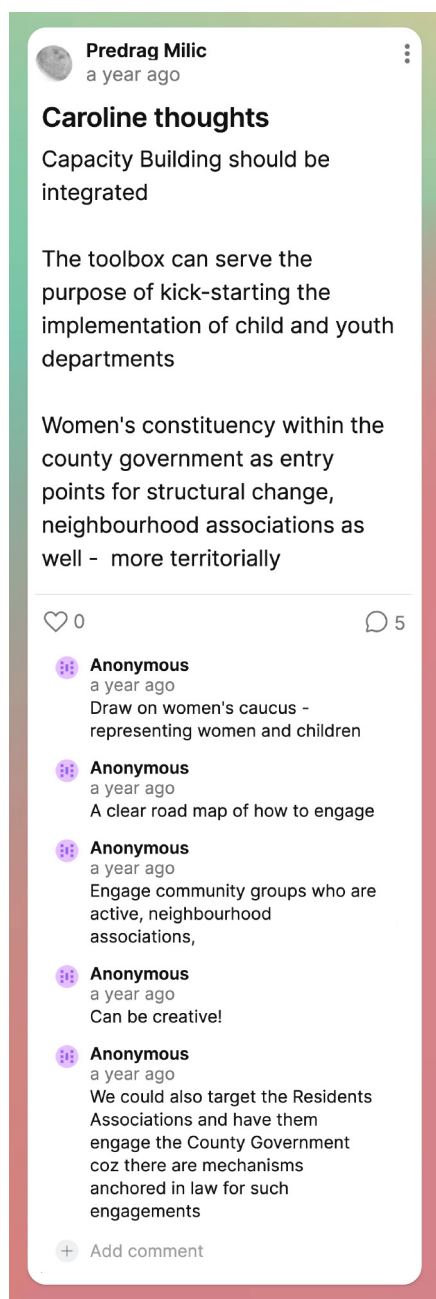
1. *The first Research Circle created space for introductions, including the introduction of the concept of a 'Research Circle' before sharing our journey that had led us to the development of the "Our Childhood" toolbox. Discussions unfolded around the challenges and opportunities encountered when supporting children to participate in contextual specific endeavours.*
2. *The second Circle presented the first iteration of the toolbox framework and tracing the connections made to existing frameworks and toolboxes. We then explored our contribution around 'Child-Focused' and social ecological dimensions as a critical aspect of our developing "Our Childhood Toolbox".*
3. *The third Circle shared the developments of the toolbox, further shaped through reflections from the previous Research Circles and messages from activities in the test sites, then exploring in depth how the toolbox connects to the collective Sustainable Futures Network. Rich and valuable feedback was gathered from Circle members including practice experience and ideas around potential entry points and implementation of our toolbox.*

Diversity and expertise: 'when we bring research and practise together we encounter opportunities!' (quote from Research Circle) Given the international and interdisciplinary participation, bridging research and practice, the Research Circle brought together varied perspectives from different contexts and professional backgrounds. Mirroring the ethos of the research team, the Research Circle brought together diverse perspectives, professions and geographies which recognises the power of thinking together about children and their unique potential and contributions to local challenges and global goals. This fostered rich exchanges on urban contexts and children's participation. It was a space to 'test out' our developing understanding of the toolbox as well as learn about the practical realities of working within various policy agendas, local and global, with various challenges and opportunities.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Research Circles were facilitated online and recorded, and supplemented with a Padlet page to enable asynchronous input. A Google form was used to gather preliminary information and perspectives to contribute to our understanding of specific contextual challenges.

Grounding findings and recommendations in participants' lived experience and expertise, the exchanges at the research circle enabled us to understand the contextual challenges experienced trying to foreground children, including their participation, in local affairs.



A Padlet extract summarizing a participant feedback during Research Circle 3

This was invaluable as it created a shared opportunity to explore the conceptual ideas relating to ‘Our Childhood toolbox’ at the interface of the lives and realities in different local contexts thus incorporating the different opportunities and challenges into the design process. This disrupts the tendency to hierarchical, linear

relations that often characterise research and practice towards a more circular exchange, akin to a feedback loop. It also aimed to create a more horizontal plan of exchange between different participants in the research circle, creating space for exchanging shared challenges, differences and ideas.

## Themes identified and Application

Reflections from Research Circles developed key themes around critical challenges which, in turn, were applied to the development of the toolbox. These included:

### *Integration of Children's Rights into Urban Development*

*“Children don't have a vote but they have opinions”*  
*“Children are empowered to share their concerns and contribution”*

There was rich discussion around the different obstacles that create barriers to children and their related rights being integrated in meaningful and timely ways into urban development. Examples of such barriers included cultural and societal stereotypes, lack of available policies, slow implementation of incoherent advocacy campaigns and lack of understanding why child issues matter and their impact. The lack of mechanisms and spaces for children to exercise their rights, including access to education was echoed strongly across the research circles. Different children will experience this in different ways including gender inequality, access to education, age and urban/rural contextual challenges.

### *Inclusive and Participatory Planning Processes*

*“Children have really important things to tell us, really important such as safety, walking to school, access to water, but we need to hear them”*

The Research Circles reflected upon the lack of mechanisms to include children in local governance and, when there were provisions, a sense of failure to practically interpret and utilise currently available frameworks including toolboxes. A strong call to action for a paradigm shift was expressed by several participants in the research circle aligned with the need to find creative ways to engage children.

## Addressing Capacity Gaps among Duty Bearers

*“Children need to be given voices and the voices need to be heard, there is an existing conversation, but people lack mechanisms”*

A clear need to address capacity gaps within duty bearers of children's rights was identified and discussed within the circles. Participants also identified the challenges of meaningful respect for rights which is highly contextual and exposes gaps between national and local levels which need to be navigated.

## Shaping the ‘Our Childhood Toolbox’

*“We need to build community awareness and position the toolbox in a society that highly regards leadership that values children's inclusion”*

The Research Circle strengthened our consideration of the need to ‘nudge’ perspective shifts around children and childhood across a range of diverse contexts and spaces. This included reflections on the utility of Child-Focused concepts to a range of context beyond urban spaces such as ‘from classrooms to rural areas’. Participants highlighted how communities and adults ‘see’ children through different lenses which intersect with cultural and social norms that can be deep rooted, requiring different gateways to help change perspectives. This underscores the need to consider the temporality dimension and the need for longer-term navigation as social change in meso-levels of children's social ecologies takes time and persistence. Innovative reflections around key gateways and guardians were also highlighted that shaped the need for the toolbox to be accessible and practice based. Ideas of gatekeepers who could utilise the vision of the toolbox, sparking more structural and territorial change included engaging active community groups, neighbourhood associations, youth stakeholders, women's constituencies within local governments and women's caucuses who represent women and children.

Furthermore, people in close proximity to the everyday lives of children were also recognised as valuable guardians of childhoods including caregivers, schools, student councils, youth clubs, child protection officers

and resident associations. Not only may these stakeholders find utility in “Our Childhood Toolbox” but the Research Circle recognised that they could also act as conduits and intermediaries in grassroots governance such as county governments as there are often mechanisms anchored on law for such engagements.

The dimensions of our toolbox to bring together and complement existing frameworks, acting as a translational and intermediary tool, rather than introducing yet another new tool was welcomed within the Research Circle.

## Ensuring practical solutions that reflect children's needs and perspectives in urban settings

*“But people ask, ‘tell me what to do?’”*

The Research Circle shared support for ensuring that the toolbox contributes to tangible solutions that reflect the needs and perspectives in their everyday environments. Precious reflections upon a potential road map for implementation were shared which gave us food for thought. One participant shared reflections from a local context where there is not an established children's department commenting that the toolbox could help people better understand children's needs and contributions – *‘people may lack understanding, stay with old systems of working, feel disillusioned when things don't work so discard.....refreshing as could offer new ways of doing things’*

## Test Sites: Coming together with Children and Communities

Paralleling our exchanges in the Research Circle, we facilitated three ‘Test Sites’ aiming at exploring ways of putting the concept of child-focused cities into practice with children through collaboration with people aligned to child and youth inclusion. Given the important ethical considerations around engaging children in research, in the context of a time-limited project, we evolved our approach to maximise the project results whilst benefiting from the already established trustful relationships and ethical standards that are in place on the level of our proposed research partners<sup>1</sup>. These existing local initiatives who

1 Securing ethical approval to work with children takes time, and partnering with organisations already working in the field ensures field activities to be carried out in the allowed timescale.



work with children and youth therefore provided valuable insights and informed the work of our core team in our attempt to translate lessons learned into context-responsive toolbox for local governments to promote and facilitate child-focused initiatives.

The three local partnership ‘Test Sites’ included:

- Škograd in Belgrade, Serbia:** ŠKOGRAD is a participatory action-research based collective from Belgrade (Serbia) committed to disentangling structural discrimination against marginalised children of the urban periphery of Belgrade and beyond. The team brings together experts from the fields of psychology, pedagogy, art, design, architecture, and urban studies. Through post-disciplinary work, they engage themselves creatively with urban co-production practices with marginalised children and youth that manifest the potential to positively affect the quality of life in the city. In response and recognition of the shared historical and context-specific characteristics of societies across the Balkan Region, Škograd is a founding member of the RE:PLAY Network Balkans. The Network gathers professional organisations across the Balkan Region (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Albania) and is engaged in rethinking play as a distinctly human capacity which is currently underrated by urban design practices. The Network highlights the significance of designing spaces with children and pioneers a nature based co-creative design process, involving children as its primary collaborators.



Final Workshop with adults, discussing workshop results. Source: Škograd



Workshop process and results, using the Our Childhood Framework. Source: Škograd

- PROTO & Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte, Brazil:** Since 2018, service-learning courses inter-connected with research activities at Morro do Papagaio, one of the oldest and biggest favelas in Belo Horizonte, have forged the living lab PROTOotyping places with children (0-18 years old), run by Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), a highly respected educational institution in Brazil. Service-learning courses that involve children and youth as active participants in processes of research, planning and design are on the rise in this institution. PROTO aims to co-make with and for children valuable outputs—e.g., physical interventions, reports, research findings, pedagogical e-books, tools, etc. PROTO is supported by local public schools, artists, and community leaders from Morro do Papagaio. The placemaking initiative, Escadaria dos Artistas (The Stairs of the Artists), was a product of the co-de-

sign studio Espaço Protótipo (Prototype Space) at the Escola de Arquitetura of Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). Since 2022, this initiative has equipped students with the skills to co-design with children, experimenting with various tools to ensure all parties are active co-designers. The studio has fostered partnerships with Escola Municipal Ulysses Guimarães and grassroots community groups.



Children transforming their drawings into mosaics with the architecture students' support. Source: @protoufmg

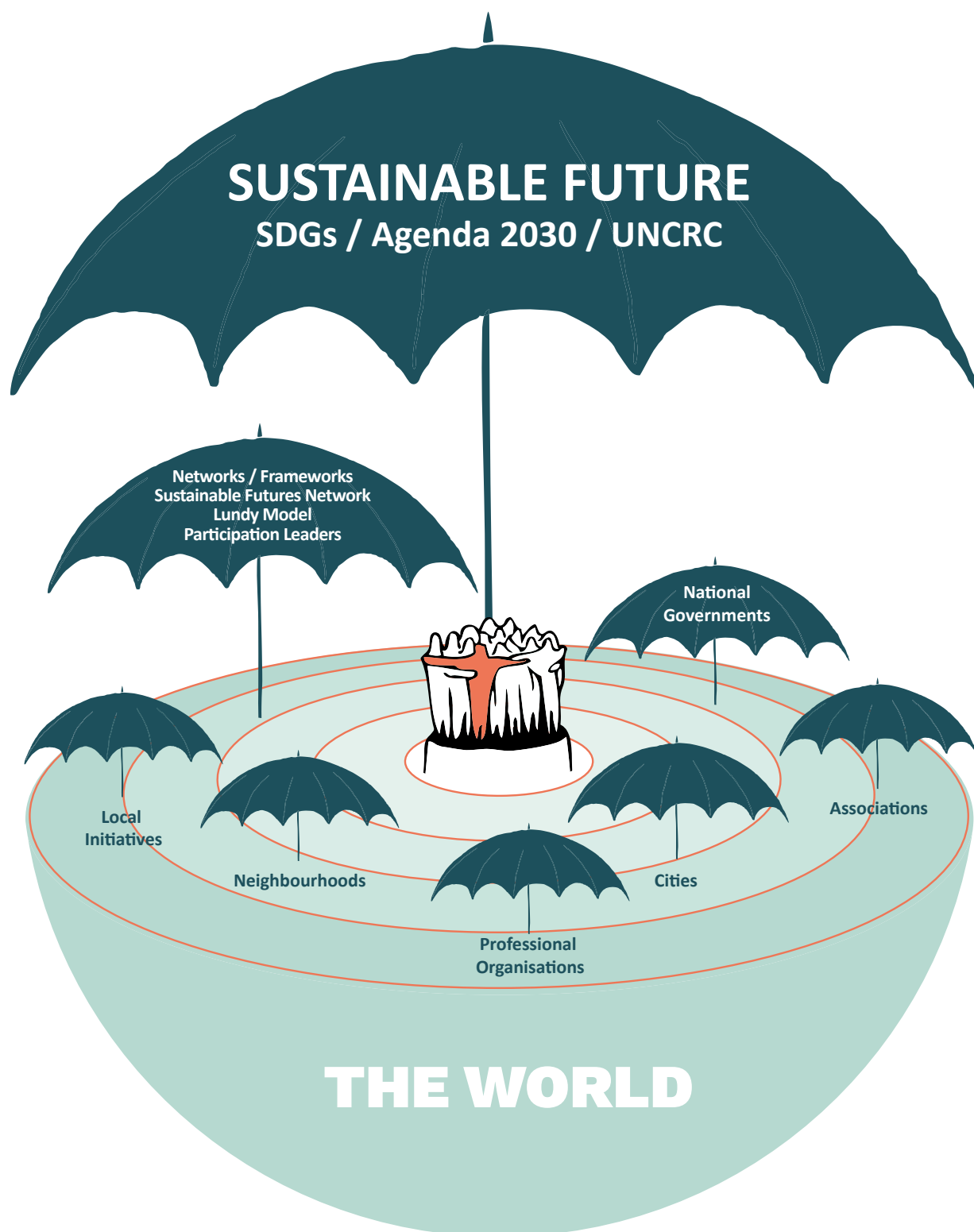
- Naleppo in Emboreet, Tanzania:** Naleppo is an NGO developed in June 2023 under the leadership of Executive Director Alois Porokwa. Naleppo is based in Emboreet village, in the Simanjiro District in Tanzania. The name Naleppo – a Maasai word for prolific, sufficient, or plenty – was chosen to reflect the objective to work together with the whole community for the development of all its members. It is also an abbreviation: Natural Resources, Livestock, Education, Peoples (tradition and culture, health and wellbeing, women, youth and children), Production and other Options for livelihood. Naleppo's goal is to improve community life standards, alleviate poverty and improve social, economic and environmental services in the community including to increase the inclusion of children's rights and perspectives.

Encounters with children through local partnerships supporting our endeavour to develop the “Our Childhood toolbox” were illuminating. Resisting imposing a top-down, one-size-fits-all scope to explore children's perspectives through participation in their local con-

text, we encouraged partnerships to come together with us to consider child-focused spaces that were aligned with bringing alive global agendas of children's rights and SDGs in very localised spaces. These were rich, dynamic and responsive to the practice wisdom of the collaborative projects. There were many commonalities but also differences in the themes explored in the different ‘test’ projects allowing for contextually and culturally sensitive and responsive endeavours. The reflections from the test sites are testament to the immersive and creative small-scale initiatives, including explorations in rural and urban environments, united through artistic methods to engage children within their communities and everyday social worlds. Each test site produced in depth and informative reports collated in Appendices.



Workshop with children preparing the poster presentations for stakeholders. Source: Naleppo





## Results and Discussion

### Our Childhood Toolbox<sup>2</sup>

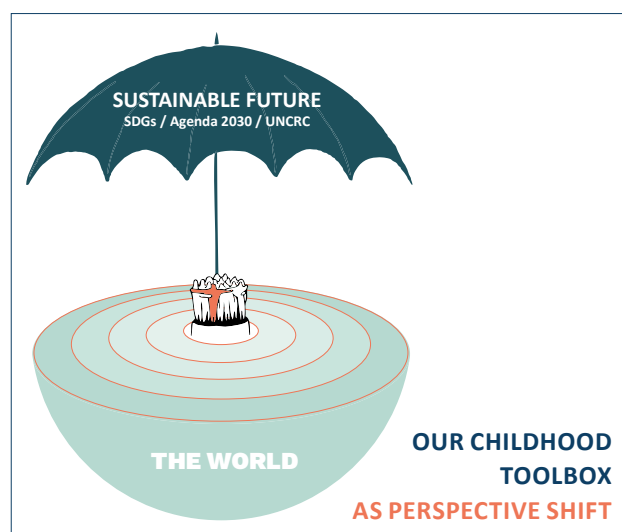
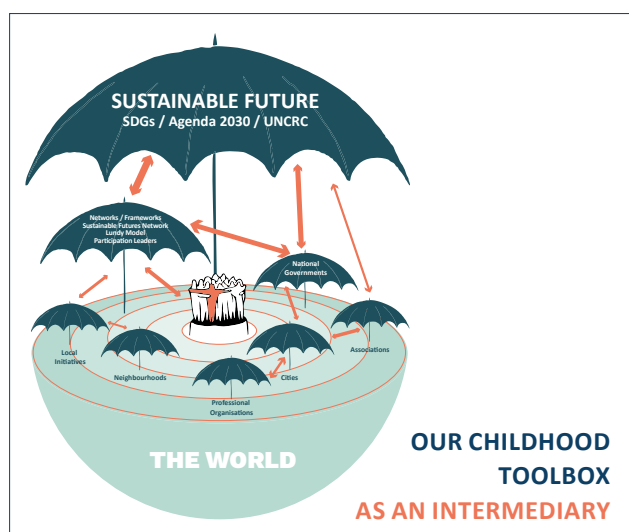
Our vision for the toolbox is foregrounded in the perspective of a local government or similar entity in its own location, faced with its own resources and challenges which may have allies with other local governments on shared priorities. An example of these priorities includes the constellation of local municipalities in ICLD's Sustainable Futures Network working closely with different local initiatives, neighbourhoods and within the frameworks, including the Lundy Model, serving as reference points to evaluate local projects with regards to the level of inclusion of children and young people.

We recognised that such constellations and/or frameworks often exist in parallel with other actors who are equally interested in the position of children and youth in society, including different 'levels' of government, government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and an array of different associations and professional organisations. These endeavours are often organised around global agendas such as frameworks including the SDGs, Agenda 2030 and NUA, as well as international human rights treaties such as the UNCRC. These represent broader global ideas founded upon concepts of sustainability and sustainable futures that are often constructed at meso levels yet implemented at local levels.

Considering the challenge of local governance, and other similarly positioned actors, and children together, three critical dimensions of the 'Our Childhood Toolbox' are conceived.

Firstly, it is an intermediary object - instead of being yet another entity, "Our Childhood Toolbox" rather serves as a tool to help different existing entities relate to each other. Our aim is that it can provide transnational aspects and points of reference to reach across contexts and agendas. We do this by offering key pre-existing documents that we have recognised as being valuable resources. The toolbox thus serves as an intermediary object that contributes to connecting existing resources towards enhancing children's perspectives, wellbeing and needs in local, context-specific contexts that are aligned with more macro, global agendas.

Secondly, "Our Childhood Toolbox" strives to bring about perspective shifts by bringing to the fore the position of children when considering all local projects that are related to global frameworks, particularly sustainable futures. This perspective shift occurs through a reflexive process that first considers what sustainable development and sustainable development goals mean to and for children in their everyday lived realities<sup>3</sup> and lastly by finding ways to develop and draw upon children's

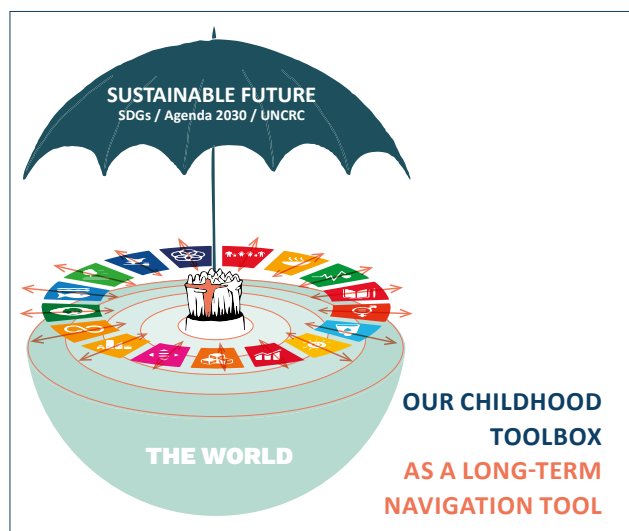


<sup>2</sup> The full document provided in Appendices

<sup>3</sup> The children from the favela Morro do Papagaio need to learn the SDGs. However, they value natural elements, health, etc. The bottom-up approach, which includes interpreting and associating what children value with the SDGs, makes a lot of sense.



perspectives, experiences and ideas. In this sense, it serves as a ‘bottom-up’ dynamic in what can often be a ‘top-down’ process simultaneously both with the macro global agendas and the socially organised hierarchical relationships between adults and children. Thirdly, the toolbox has been developed with a temporality aspect, which connects to our hope that it can meaningfully serve as a long-term navigational tool. As the collaboration has evolved, we have learned about the precarity and fragility surrounding children’s participation which creates time limits and deadlines on projects, resources and spaces that children can actively participate in and be included. We believe that “Our Childhood Toolbox” can recognise these conditions and potentially encourage longer-term perspectives and weave together time-limited projects to consider the evolution and growth that continuously improves the position of children. This also takes into consideration our reflections on participation as being a life-long process.



In a nutshell, “Our Childhood Toolbox” aims to support local governments in their attempts to include children in local (political) affairs while pursuing the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The guiding premise of this toolbox is that childhoods around the world, as everyday social, economic, and cultural realities, are shaped by adults’ decisions. Despite being often excluded in decision-making processes relevant

to them and their communities, children have unique insights and perspectives that position them as valuable allies in intergenerational endeavours for a sustainable future. On top of that, children have the right to participate in all matters that affect them: “respecting children’s views is [...] a legally binding obligation.” (Lundy 2007; 930).

With its simple, step-by-step structure, the toolbox guides local governments by revealing what counts for children while, throughout the process, guaranteeing the following critical rights stated in the UNCRC: respect for children’s views (Article 12), freedom of expression (Article 13), health (Article 24), education (Articles 28 and 29), play and cultural/artistic activities (Article 31). “Our Childhood Toolbox” differs from the existing toolboxes, in that it acknowledges that Article 12 cannot be viewed in isolation. Children’s rights are indivisible, interdependent, and interconnected. As such, the realisation of their rights depends on involvement throughout decision-making processes.

‘Our Childhood Toolbox’ expands the Lundy’s participation model, developed for understanding Article 12 of the UNCRC, by showing how freedom of expression, learning, fun, and well-being, a key component of health, can be achieved concomitantly with children’s right to participate. The identification of common barriers to the implementation of Article 12, such as a lack of adult commitment to involving children meaningfully in decision-making processes, guided the development of Lundy’s model, structured in four interrelated key concepts: Space (children must be allowed to express a view), Voice (children must be facilitated to express their views), Audience (the view must be listened to) and Influence (the view must be acted upon, as appropriate).



Our Childhood Toolbox Matters Circle: summarising key aspects to be considered when working with children

### ***Respect for children's views matters (Article 12)***

"Our Childhood Toolbox" expands the understanding of Article 12 of the UNCRC proposed by Lundy and further developed by our approach. 'Space', which refers to the need to offer a safe space for children to express their views (Lundy, 2007), connects to 'time' because recurring meetings and long-term goals enhance trust and proximity, feelings found to be critical for children to feel comfortable in expressing their views. 'Voice', which is about facilitating

children's expression of their opinions (Lundy, 2007), is interrelated with 'private' (children must be encouraged to relate to the world around them) and 'relevance' (focusing on the topics children have interest in). 'Audience' brings those with the power to make decisions while 'influence' secures respectful responses and follow-up with children (Lundy, 2007). 'Influence' is interconnected with 'deeds' (keeping promises and leaving traces of activities) and 'celebration' (empowerment through acknowledging success).

## Learning matters! (Articles 28-29)

“Our Childhood Toolbox” also aims to guarantee children’s right to education (Articles 28-29) throughout the decision-making process. Children must be given the information required to form a view on that subject. By making the SDGs widely known, “Our Childhood Toolbox” would be a learning tool for all parties involved. It is vital that adults around children, such as their parents, teachers, and other family members, understand the importance of achieving the SDGs. Systematic and ongoing training is required to increase understanding of the localised SDGs. ‘Language’, which is about sharing ideas and information in a simple and accessible way, connects with ‘learning’.

## Freedom of expression matters! (Articles 13, 15 and 17)

Children must be allowed to express themselves in different ways, in line with Article 13. This is closely linked to Article 15 (freedom of association) and Article 17 (access to information). Therefore, offering distinct ways, including artistic and playful ones, for children to express their views is encouraged because these can elicit fun and a sense of well-being, a key component of health.

## Fun matters! (Article 24)

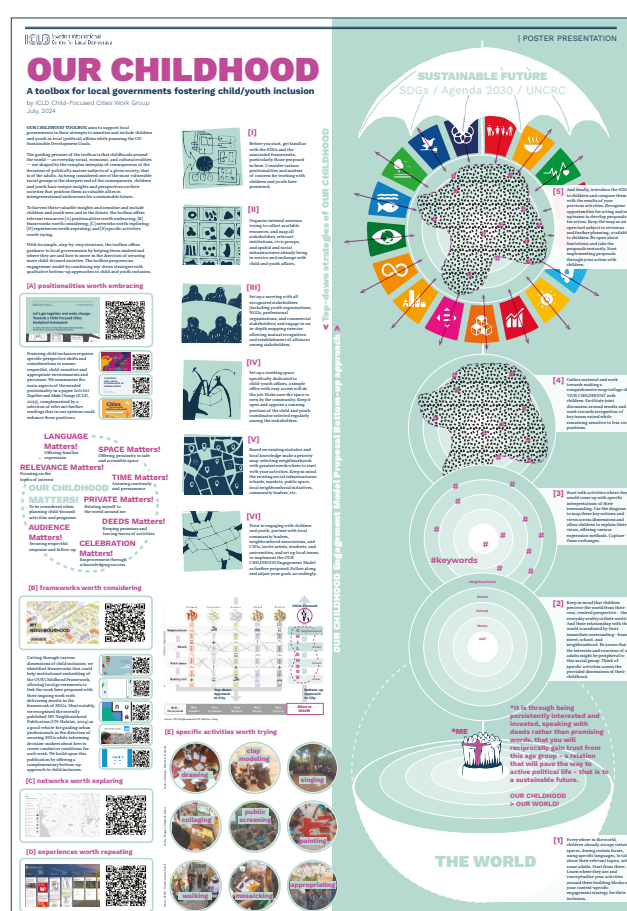
Children have the right to play (Article 24), and “Our Childhood Toolbox” acknowledges that decision-making processes can be playful, depending on the tools used to engage children. Play is also a very important way for children to experience, explore and experiment themselves in their social world which is vital for learning and communication.

## Health matters! (Article 31)

Positive emotions (e.g., fun, safety, trust) improve children’s well-being, a key component of health, one of children’s rights (Article 13). Therefore, “Our Childhood Toolbox” stresses the importance

of providing a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere throughout the decision-making processes to guarantee this right.

To sum up, all dimensions of “Our Childhood Toolbox” are interrelated and aim to guarantee the children’s rights stated in the UNCRC.



Our Childhood Toolbox poster presentation, summarising its key components and working mechanic. (file available in full resolution in Appendices)

## When top-down strategies encounter ground

“Our Childhood Toolbox” offers step-by-step guidance for local governments and associated stakeholders who happen to be on the spectrum between strategic and context-specific in their attempts to foster child participation. This cross-dimensional approach requires a simultaneous general understanding of the inherent mechanics behind the strategic documents (SDG, Agenda 2030, UNCRC), the positionalities needed for working with children, and the specific locations and communities where such agendas are to be applied.

By bringing together the big *why* (macro), with the middle *how* (meso), and the small *where, what and with whom* (micro), “Our Childhood Toolbox” aims to enable various engagements that derive from a specific position of its users, allowing everyone to find their own way. The provided sequence of steps invites the readers – users of the toolbox – to position themselves, according to their specific situation and navigate their way around accordingly, skipping those steps already realised while prioritising others still to be achieved. In that sense, the provided list should be seen as a list of potential steps subject to further contextual elaborations.

The toolbox achieves this by: (a) linking itself with the frameworks deriving most notably from the Agenda 2030, the recently published MY Neighbourhood publication (UN-Habitat, 2023) and its particular spatial approach<sup>4</sup>, (b) expanding it with the complementary positionality publications on child inclusion offering valuable insights for how to work with children such as Children and Local Governance in Urban Areas (Global Alliance – Cities 4 Children, 2021) or Steps To Engaging Young Children in Research (Education Research Centre, University of Brighton, 2014), and finally, (c) relating it to the empirical evidence co-produced in partnership with the three well-established organisations working with children on the spectrum from urban (UFMG in Belo Horizonte, Brazil), over suburban (Škograd in Belgrade, Serbia) to rural settings (Naleppo in Emboreet, Tanzania).

Being conceived at the intersection between these multiple dimensions and with an idea to offer links rather than being an entity itself, the horizon of Our Childhood Toolbox remains open for further discoveries, allowing a global dialogue among constituencies that did not find its way to the current version of this document. However, we conclude our work in a state that we hope proves its intentions and that as such will be recognised by local governments in their attempts to enhance child participation.

## Lessons learned

Throughout this process of learning by doing (or re-searching by acting) with collaborators with different experiences and perspectives, several lessons are worthy noting. First, it confirms that children’s rights are violated in different contexts, hindering the achievement of the SDGs. Focusing on the CFC analytical framework, it proved to work in different geographic and cultural contexts (rural and urban), robust enough to reveal that SDGs and local aspects matters to children in different contexts, and its refinement would benefit from ongoing tests with researchers from different fields and collaborators from different ages, experiences, and cultures. Gender matters in the identification of what SDGs count for children. Lundy’s model has proved to be a helpful guide to promoting meaningful participation between children and adults and My neighbourhood proved to be a helpful framework for spatializing what matters to children.

All these key lessons and experiences gained can be summarised in some tips for policy-makers and others keen in applying Our Childhood Toolbox.

- Before starting working, know and understand the context. Map out the allies and other relevant actors.
- Throughout the process, be flexible, creative, and aim for genuine interactions with children, but be aware that to comply with Article 12, children have the right not to participate.

<sup>4</sup> Other highly relevant resources include Arup, [Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods](#) | Arup  
UN Habitat, [Child-responsive urban policies, laws and standards: a guidance](#) | UN-Habitat ([unhabitat.org](http://unhabitat.org))

- Playful activities are key to keep children engaged in the process, plan for fun. Offer different art-based methods for children to express their ideas. This diversity is critical to include children with varying personalities and preferences in the process. Use the artistic outputs as dialogic artefacts to help children feel more comfortable in expressing their views—use the artistic outputs to prompt exchanges of ideas, experiences, feelings, perceptions etc. Be aware that unexpected artistic ways of expression may emerge in the process (e.g., songs).
- To propel responsive changes, bring together children and those who have the power to make those to happen is critical (e.g., policymakers, architects).
- Facilitators are essential to make all collaborators feel comfortable in expressing their views while respecting different perspectives.
- Researchers from different fields are needed to evaluate the process and its outputs from different angles as part of a strategy to achieve novel solutions for complex problems. Evidence is required to (i) refine the CFC analytical framework, and (ii) guide the development of evidence-based collaborative policymaking, placemaking and any other relevant decision-making process.
- Bring graduate and undergraduate students to collaborate because, as future professionals, they need to learn how to involve children in the process meaningfully.
- Bringing a range of people together in decision-making processes is challenging but offers a range of advantages, such as: disseminating children's voices and promoting collective learning. Our Childhood Toolbox is not about achieving consensus, but respecting diversity and learning from each other. Preferably work in spaces known by children to make them feel safe to express their views (e.g., schools).
- Children's expressions of what is meaningful for them can be analysed under different frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and My Neighbourhood, directed to different social groups (e.g., parents, educators, policy-makers), and used to inform different decision-making processes that will affect children (e.g., placemaking and policymaking).
- Be aware that although some children in some contexts may have never heard about the SDGs it does not mean these do not matter for them. "Look closely and you will see, listen carefully and you will hear": achieving the SDGs counts for children across the world. The Sustainable Development Goals and children's rights are intrinsically connected.



## Conclusions and recommendations

### Opportunities and limitations

The development of the “Our Childhood Toolbox” is an important moment in our evolving story, growing from the initial seeds planted at the Local Democracy Academy in Visby into a vision that reaches into the sky, towards transcending disciplinary silos and geographical barriers. It reflects a collective movement and motivation to disrupt the dominance of adult-centric and top-down directives in favour of intergenerational, interdisciplinary and international collaborations situated at the exciting intersections of global and local, place-based needs and innovations. Our conclusions are derived from the iterative research process bringing together our core interdisciplinary research team, collaboration with Sustainable Futures Network, focussed exploration with expert practitioners through the Research Circles and reaching into local partnerships with children in communities through our ‘Test Sites’. This created a dynamic space to interrogate and refine our conceptualisation towards a ‘Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework’ emerging as “Our Childhood Toolbox”.

We acknowledge that there are limitations to our collaborative approach, many of which echo the grossly unequal landscape of power, claims to knowledge(s) and distribution of resources that the Sustainable Development Goals acknowledge and seek to redress. The Research Circle was an important interface for our knowledge exchange yet was overwhelmingly centred on participants who could speak English. Further, many participants encountered challenges around digital accessibility and our timings were heavily weighted towards certain time zones creating very early morning and late nights for our committed colleagues, particularly in Brazil and Australia.

### Towards circles of collaboration

Despite these challenges, we worked to create a space where diverse contexts, disciplines, roles, and agendas could come together as a collective. True

learning comes not only from the ‘results’ of our project but from the process of thinking and creating together. This, in itself, is a key outcome of our journey—challenging top-down, linear knowledge structures and instead advocating for collaboration shaped like a ‘circle.’ Collaboration isn’t just about overcoming logistical barriers like language, time zones, and resource gaps; it also requires bridging the disconnect between academia and practice. Too often, knowledge moves fast in theory but slowly in real-world application. This mirrors findings from our ‘*Let’s Get Together and Make Change*’ project (Cilliers et al, 2023), which highlighted that even those deeply engaged in sustainability work don’t always use the formal language of global agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The notion of more horizontal and/or circular collaboration was also reflected in the Test Sites as a shape of intergenerational collaboration. As facilitators in Belo Horizonte reflected ‘throughout the process there was a concern of promoting a playful and horizontal atmosphere’ (Appendix [B.1.1.2]).

### Context and culture

This was clear across our test sites, where children and communities held vital knowledge about the issues affecting them—both now and for the future—but expressed it in their own ways. Recognizing and valuing this local expertise is essential to making collaboration truly inclusive and impactful. Contextual collaboration was a defining strength across all Test Sites, seamlessly embedding exploratory exchanges within existing partnerships. This approach not only deepened cultural sensitivity but also amplified local relevance and impact. The diverse settings—ranging from the rural landscape of Emboreet, Tanzania, to the suburban Ledine neighborhood in Belgrade, and the densely populated favela of Morro Do Papa-gaio—demonstrate the remarkable flexibility of the Toolbox in addressing distinct community needs. While contextual challenges overlapped, they were uniquely shaped by local realities where for instance, children in Naleppo function and exist as an indigenous Maasai group under political, societal and

environmental threats and challenges. In Naleppo, intergenerational and gendered dynamics influence beliefs about children's contributions. In Morro do Papagaio, children faced restricted access to open urban spaces, navigating fears of violence and harm. In Belgrade, the initiative built upon existing efforts to address systemic marginalization of children, exacerbated by rigid state education policies. Crucially, working within local contexts and fostering strong partnerships ensures that children's contributions are not only recognized but also aligned with local values, needs, and knowledge—making the Toolbox a powerful, adaptable framework for meaningful change.

## Social ecologies of childhood

“Our Childhood Toolbox” also stresses the importance of positioning children in the socioecological dimensions of their lives and seeks to illuminate these dimensions with children, communities and stakeholders. In particular, these important dimensions include home, family, streets, school, communities and cities. As captured by facilitators in Emboreet, these dimensions are deeply interconnected - ‘not forgetting that all of these and the neighbourhood have an influence on the self, that is the child and youth’ (Appendix [B.1.1.1]). More macro dimensions such as culture and change over time were sparked through participation such as discoveries of lost or ignored platforms between children and elders in the Maasai pastoralists indigenous community including as sitting around the bonfire in the evening with boys tell them stories and girls were closely taught by women how to grow as future women. This prompted reflections of parents who suggested reviving that practice as it helped children and youth to be closer to adults and interact.

## Changing spaces and spaces for change

The importance of using different ways to support children's participation. Across all tests, creative mediums were used to foster participation disrupting an overreliance of words and language. This was signif-

icant as children use different languages to talk and write such in Emboreet - Swahili and Maasai language to talk and mostly Swahili to write with English sometimes taught in certain schools. Facilitators recognised that children were very good at communicating their ideas, feelings, opinions, preferences and fears through creative, arts based methods. This included drawing, photos, mosaics, mapping, clay sculpting and singing.

Reflecting the core premise of the “Our Childhood Toolbox” as an intermediary for participation, each Test Site used diverse activities to create meaningful ‘focal points’—not just as valuable experiences in themselves, but as powerful tools for engagement. These intermediary objects brought the Audience and Influence elements of the Lundy Model to life, enabling local communities and stakeholders to connect with children's perspectives in tangible ways.

In Emboreet, children designed posters to communicate issues affecting them, sparking discussions with a range of adult stakeholders. Children used songs to convey their messages after putting posters on the wall for adults to see and discuss. Beyond providing a medium for children to express their views, this challenged hierarchical, intergenerational assumptions that children's voices lack legitimacy. The process also revealed deeper social dynamics—children associated the ‘office’ where their posters were displayed with punishment, fostering distrust in the police. By participating in this exchange, both children and police officers experienced a shift in perception, fostering trust and intergenerational dialogue.

In Belgrade, the recurring Creative Studio provided a dedicated space where children engaged in participatory activities, promoting inclusion and collaboration. These interactions culminated in open classroom events where families and the community could witness and engage with the children's collective work—using physical model as a relational tool for discussion—reinforcing their voices as meaningful contributors. In Morro do Papagaio, participatory exchanges took the form of a ‘polyphony’ of simul-

taneous activities, culminating in the transformation of the Beco São Jorge stairs. This collective effort became both a symbol of children's contributions—captured in one child's renaming of the space as 'The Stairs of the Artists'—and a catalyst for wider reflection within the community, as evidenced by congratulatory remarks from passersby. Like the posters in Emboreet and the open classroom in Belgrade, the transformed stairs did more than change a physical space—they created spaces for change. These interventions not only amplified children's contributions but also reinforced their unique knowledge as essential to shaping their communities.

## Children as role players in the pursuit of sustainable cities

Children have the right to participate in all decision-making that will impact the quality of their lives, including the planning, designing, and managing their local environments, as ordained in the Convention. But are children invaluable role players in pursuing efforts towards achieving the SDGs? Are their values aligned with sustainable principles? Children across our test sites did not mention the need to achieve sustainable cities and were unaware of the SDGs. However, they mentioned valuing opportunities for playing, being with friends, practicing sports, enjoying natural elements, relaxing, exploring, and contemplating while feeling protected from dangers such as traffic, assault and molestation, and pollution. Despite this rather language difference, we found that children's values are aligned with SDGs. Thus, children should be valued as citizens who can effectively contribute to decision-making processes towards achieving the SDGs rather than as future citizens. To enable this shift in perception and action, we—the adults—have to perform a translational action to assure these contributions are both heard and integrated in our decision-making.

## Tactical urbanism with children as a tool to achieve sustainable cities

By attracting and retaining children and making spaces more interesting, liveable, and communal, tactical urbanism at Morro do Papagaio proved to be a tool for promoting social sustainability. Tactical urbanism can potentially impel a sustainable social spiral: more people from the community use urban open spaces, more conducive to children's independent mobility such space might become. The informal conversations and other tools used to guarantee children's right to be heard showed that their active involvement in tactical urbanism practices can make cities environmentally sustainable because children value cleaner, greener, playful, and colourful spaces.

## Sustainable cities connect to children's rights

At Morro do Papagaio, children valued the traditional role of urban open spaces as aesthetically pleasing places for walking, cycling, conversing, and playing. Such child-friendly spaces offer opportunities for children to experience their rights to play, culture, health, development, adequate standard of living and learn. Promoting children's rights means promoting a sustainable city. The tactical practices with children at Morro do Papagaio to make Escadaria São Jorge, and design and build activities over the course of several years in the Ledine neighbourhood in Belgrade, aligned children with their rights and helps them appreciate collective responsibility, moving away from individualism. Tactical urbanism, and activities of co-producing with children in public space, offer opportunities for children to experience their right to participate, be heard, learn, relate to and enjoy culture they co-create.

## Key conclusions

We continue our collective call to action: to break down cultural and systemic barriers that limit children's participation. Achieving true inclusion requires a fundamental shift in how society perceives children—not as passive recipients, but as active contributors. "Our Childhood Toolbox" is designed to drive this shift, recognizing and valuing children's



knowledge as essential in shaping their communities and the world around them.

At its core, “Our Childhood Toolbox” is more than just another framework—it’s a growing, long-term tool that creates space for intergenerational knowledge-sharing and amplifies children’s often-overlooked voices. It connects existing resources, encourages new ways of thinking, and helps local governments include children in decision-making, especially in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Above all, it ensures children’s rights are protected, their voices matter, and their well-being comes first. Yet, we cannot and should not from the unequal power dynamics of global context, impose

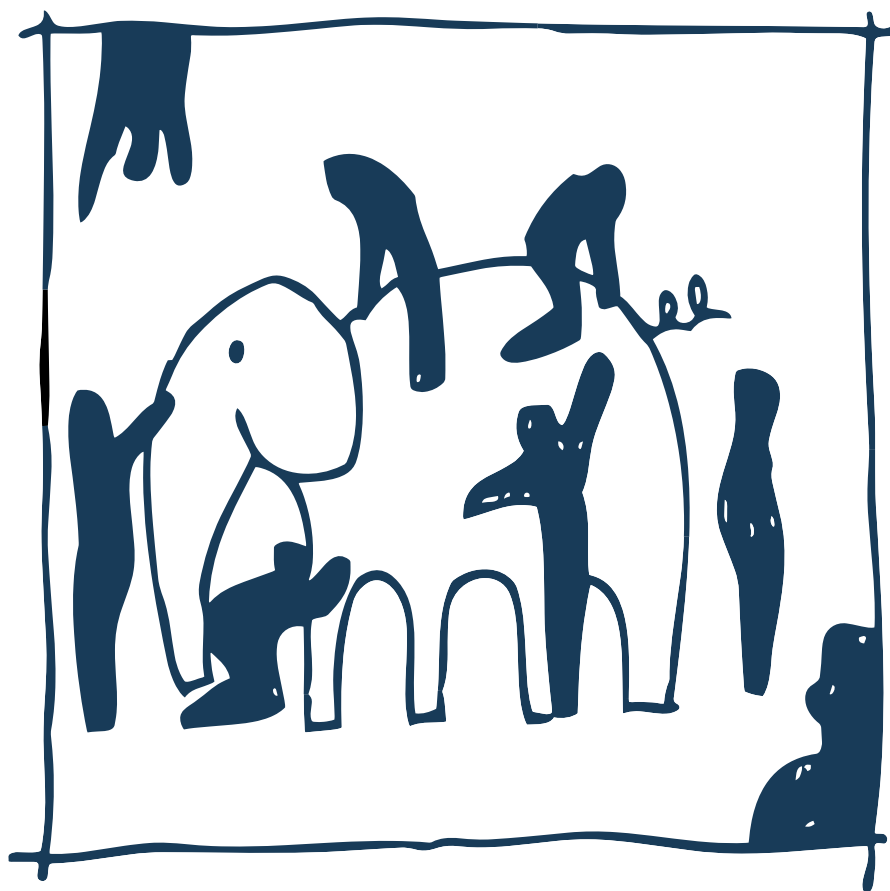
perspectives of children upon local contexts. Changing perspectives takes time as clear, consistent and enforced legalistic constructions of childhood do not by themselves change or reinforce protective social norms (Pasura et al, 2013; 206). However, through allyship of a range of actors, as guardians of the Child-Focused city, changes of perspectives over time can strengthen the position of children as key stakeholders which has potential to nudge intergenerational perspectives across the life course. The application of “Our Childhood Toolbox” showed that involving children meaningfully in creative and tactical practices to transform their spaces offer opportunities for them to experience their rights: it is a powerful tool to promote sustainable cities.

<b>Integrate children’s voices</b>	By creating safe space and facilitating workshops using various interfaces, children and youth contribute valuable insights that enhance the quality and effectiveness of solutions within urban and environmental decision-making. Their perspectives are crucial for creating child-friendly and sustainable spaces.
<b>Address structural inequalities</b>	There is a need to uproot colonial and imperial practices that shape power dynamics and resource distribution. By enhancing reflexivity and positionality, the approach seeks to engage with these issues and promote knowledge democracy and power sensitivity. This is also vital for optimising South-South, North-South, and South-North exchanges in international projects.
<b>Incorporate local contexts</b>	Contextual specificity matters. When working with multiple contexts, or translating insights between them, gathering preliminary information and perspectives through tools like Google forms, ensures that unique challenges and opportunities are understood and incorporated in designing projects.
<b>Encourage long-term perspectives</b>	Implementers must keep a long-term perspective on children’s participation. By recognizing the precarity and fragility of children’s involvement, it is possible to develop sustainable solutions that evolve and grow over time.
<b>Introduce supportive tools</b>	The use of tools such as Padlet and recorded sessions supports participants who face connectivity challenges, ensuring that all voices are heard, included and recorded. This fosters a sense of connection and continuity.
<b>Promote children’s participation in policy and practice</b>	The Research Circle and discussing the Our Childhood Toolbox with practitioners both advocate for the inclusion of children in policy and practice. By providing a structured, step-by-step approach, the toolbox guides local governments and stakeholders in effectively engaging children in decision-making processes, ensuring their rights and contributions are acknowledged and valued.

## Recommendations and next steps

The development of “Our Childhood Toolbox” marks an important milestone in our journey towards realising our vision for *Child-Focused cities*. Through the iterative process of developing our conceptualization of a ‘Child-Focused cities analytical framework’, blossoming into “Our Childhood Toolbox”, we have learned that no-one can do this alone, but it is about creating spaces between generations, people, professional roles, disciplinary foundations and contexts. We strongly believe that Research Circles, as an example of a space of curiosity and exchange, can generate momentum and innovation and advocate for similar modes of egalitarian and exploratory spaces through which change can happen.

We have high hopes for “Our Childhood Toolbox” to be widely used as a translational, intermediary object that sparks transformational and inspirational approaches to repositioning children’s contributions towards local and global challenges. Just as our ideas germinated, planting seeds that grew through collaborative endeavours we hope that “Our Childhood Toolbox” cultivates growth of a global network of connections, ideas and examples of Child-Focused cities from the ground up. We hope that we can continue to grow our concept of realising Child-Focused cities through investment in implementation of the toolbox, further nurturing connections and iteratively developing the use of the toolbox in practice. The need for capacity building, developing staged implementation towards a culture of peer learning is evident to sustain momentum and move toward Child-Focused Cities in practice.



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## Appendices

Documents are to be found as separate files. Appendix 1 and 2 are published on ICLD's website whereas appendices 3-5 are accessed through a public online space.

- **Appendix 1:** Our Childhood Toolbox (add link to toolbox once published)
- **Appendix 2:** Poster Presentation: [Link](#)
- **Appendix 3:** Test site narrative reports
  - [Emboreet](#)
  - [Belo Horizonte](#)
  - [Belgrade](#)
- **Appendix 4:** Research Circle presentations [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#)
- **Appendix 5:** Scientific conference presentation: [Link](#)



# **THE GLOBAL GOALS**

For Sustainable Development