

# OUR CHILDHOOD

## A toolbox for local governments fostering child/youth inclusion

by ICLD Child-Focused Cities Work Group



## ICLD Child-Focused Cities

### Work Group [listed alphabetically]

**Jua Cilliers** <sup>[1,2]</sup>

**Lynne O Cairns** <sup>[3]</sup>

**Paula Barros** <sup>[4]</sup>

**Predrag Milić** <sup>[5,6]</sup>

**Rejoice Shamiso Katsidzira** <sup>[7]</sup>

**Rongedzayi Fambasayi** <sup>[8]</sup>

**1** Unit for Environmental Sciences and  
Management, North-West University;  
South Africa

**2** School of Built Environment; University of  
Technology Sydney; Australia

**3** Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse,  
Durham University; United Kingdom

**4** Departamento de Projetos, Escola de  
Arquitetura, Universidade Federal de Minas  
Gerais, Belo Horizonte; Brazil

**5** URBAN - Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban  
Culture and Public Space, Vienna University of  
Technology; Austria

**6** Social Design – Arts as Urban Innovation,  
University of Applied Arts Vienna; Austria

**7** Centre for Human Rights, University of  
Pretoria; South Africa

**8** South African Research Chair in Cities, Law and  
Environmental Sustainability, Faculty of Law,  
North-West University; South Africa

**The group is behind both the content  
and the design of this toolbox, within the  
framework of the project “Child-Focused  
Cities for the Sustainable Futures Network”.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The document in your hands  
provides a creative interpretation  
of the Child-Focused Cities’  
initial concept, offering a feasible  
engagement model 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.

It has been conceived in a  
series of creative dialogues -  
Research Circles - with relevant  
professionals and representatives  
of Municipal Partnerships of the  
ICLD Sustainable Futures Network  
and further tested in practice  
through local partnerships with  
reputable organizations that work  
with (and for) children.

We extend profound appreciation  
to all of them for their  
indispensable contributions!

# OUR CHILDHOOD TOOLBOX

aims to support local governments in their attempts to sensitise and include children and youth in local (political) affairs while pursuing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The toolbox achieves this by a) linking itself with the frameworks deriving most notably from the Agenda 2030, b) expanding it with the positionality publications on child inclusion offering valuable insights for how to work with children, and c) relating it to the empirical evidence co-produced in partnership with three well-established organisations working with children on the spectrum from urban to rural settings.

This toolbox is a valuable resource for local governments in their attempts to include children and young people in localising SDGs. Building up on relevant external resources, the toolbox proposes an engagement model by combining top-down strategies with qualitative bottom-up approaches to child and youth inclusion.

By applying the engagement model, local governments will be able to gather valuable insights from children and youth while establishing local partnerships around localising SDGs and empowering children and adults to take action and contribute to the process of delivering a sustainable future.

*The Toolbox enables long-term, cross-sectoral collaborations for inclusion of children and youth in localising SDGs. It offers support to local governments and engaged practitioners in recognising available resources and establishing localised working plans for this endeavour.*

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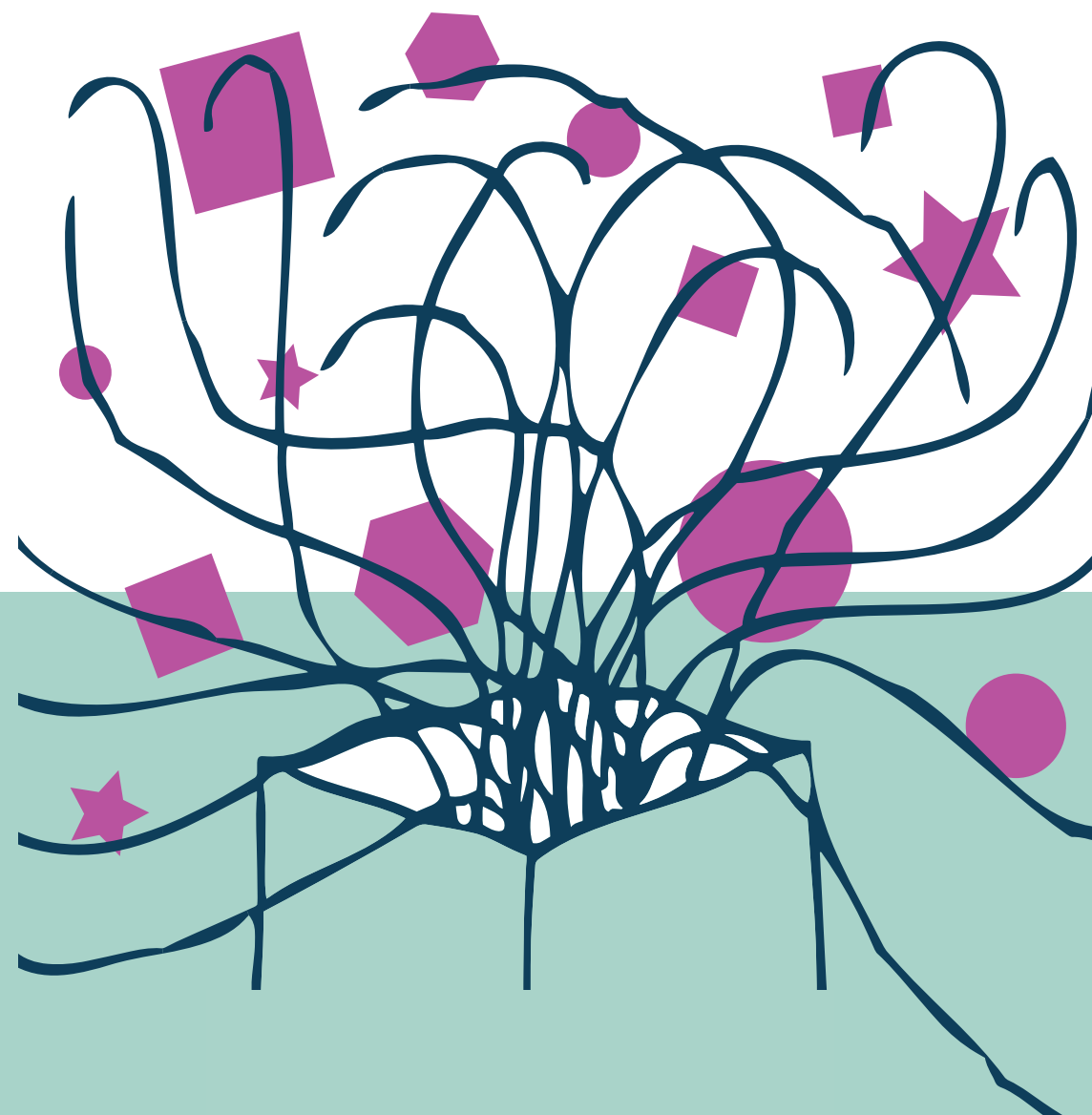
[1.1] Sustainable Futures Network

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## [1] Introduction

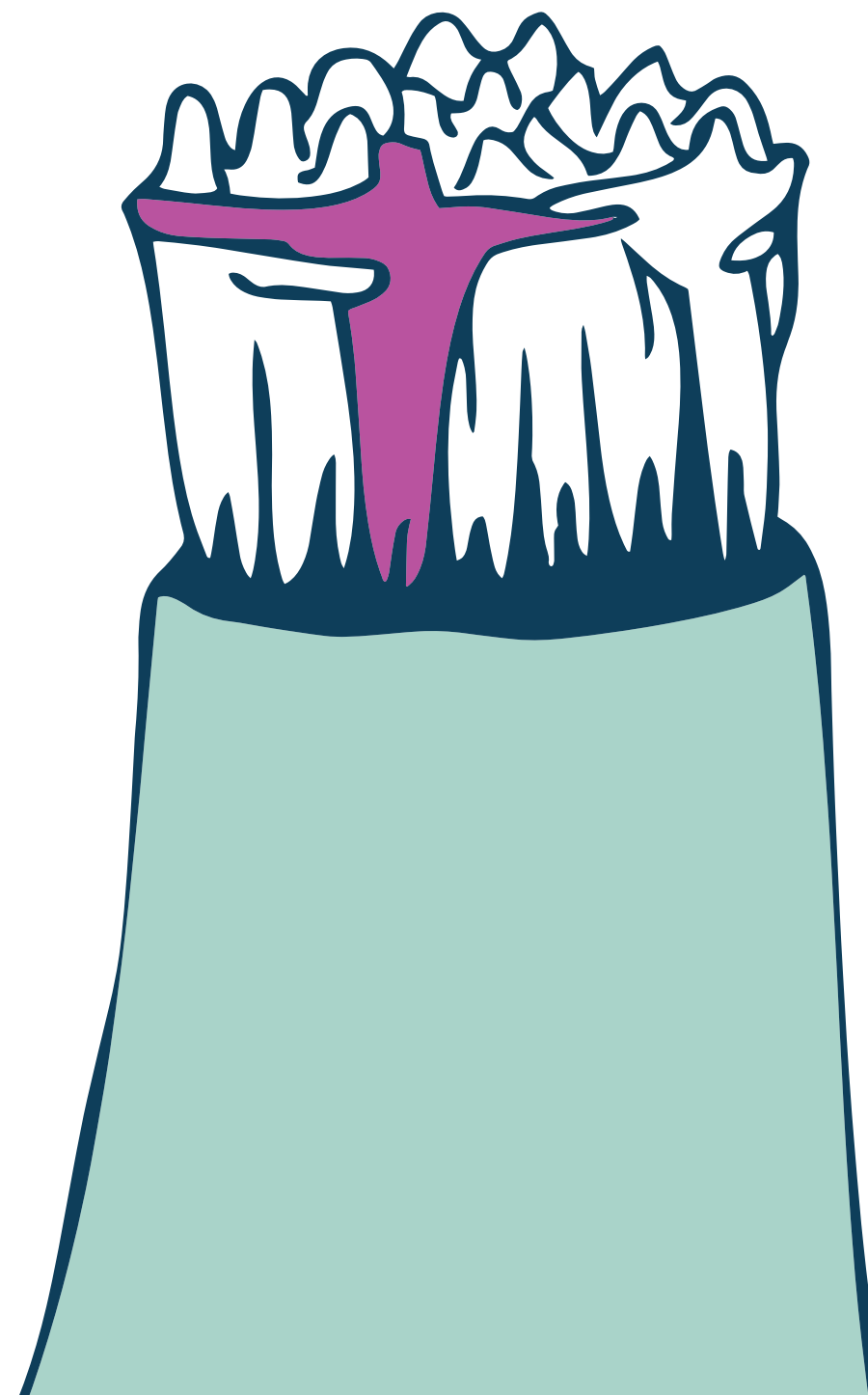
# Child-Focused Cities [CFC] for Local Governments

The child-Focused Cities [CFC] agenda emphasises our commitment to the inclusion of children and youth in local democracy. The concept revolved around questions of why, how, where, and under what circumstances children and young people are recognised as political subjects and important role-players in shaping sustainable futures.

The guiding premise of this toolbox is that childhoods around the world — as everyday social, economic, and cultural realities — are shaped by the complex interplay of consequences of the decisions of politically mature

subjects of a given society, that is of the adults. Despite being considered one of the most vulnerable social groups at the sharpest end of the consequences, children and youth have unique insights and perspectives that position them as valuable allies in this endeavour.

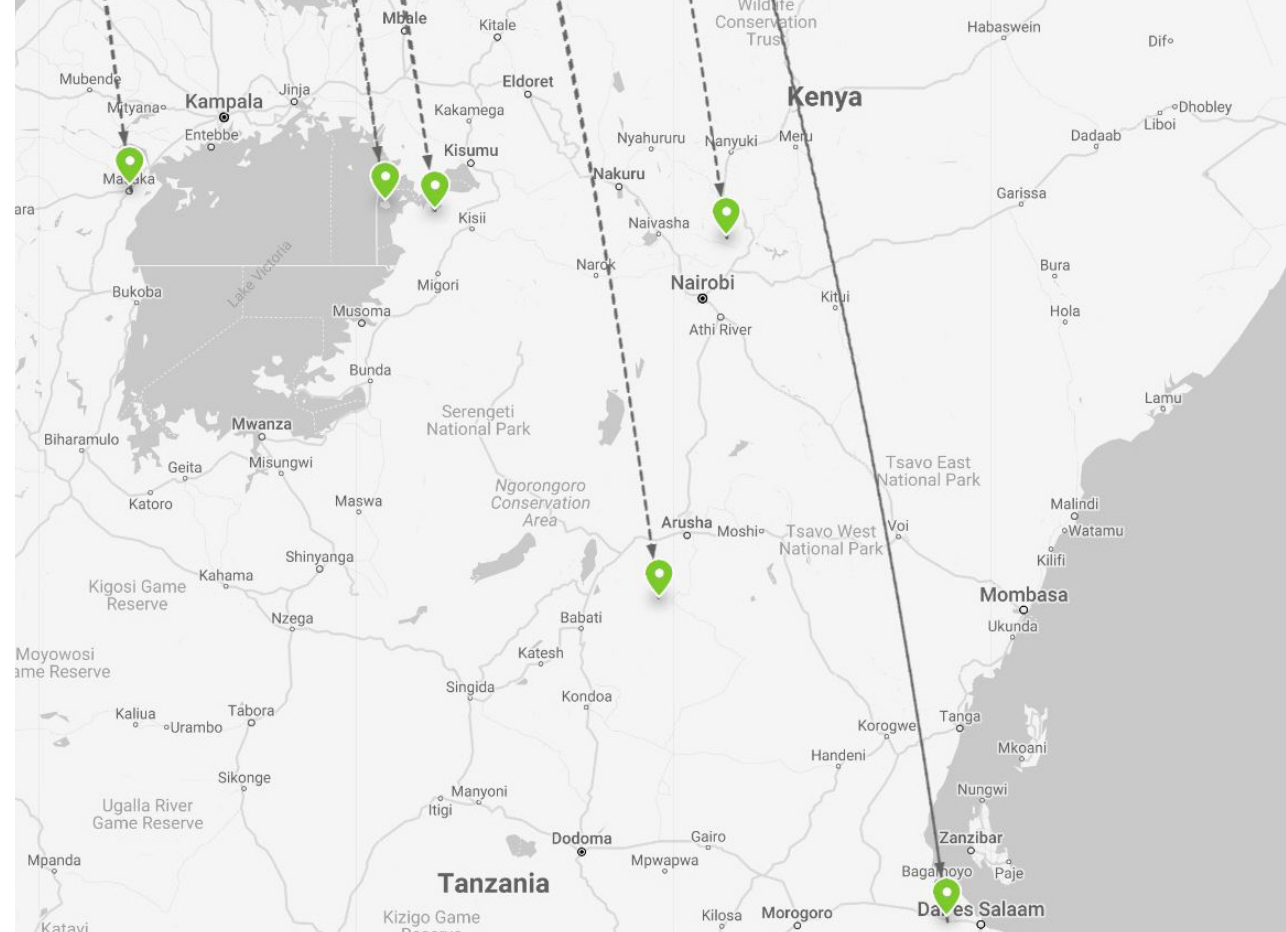
The toolbox is therefore envisioned as a practical instrument offering guiding protocols for advancing the CFC agenda on the local government level, empowering a whole array of engaged stakeholders, including children and youth themselves, to take action.



## [1.1] Sustainable Futures Network

The ICLD Network for Sustainable Futures was formed from existing municipal partnerships, to horizontal knowledge exchange and use of ICLD tools and mentorship. The participating municipalities work on issues of youth inclusion, child rights, youth in environment advocacy and education as preparation for an active civic life. They share the commitment to enable youth to take an active part in forming their future, for social, environmental and economic sustainability.

scan for further info



### Härryda municipality and Homa Bay County

Kenya

**Project:** Young people's influence and choice of working life and education

[Find out more](#)

### Kalix municipality and Masaka

Uganda

**Project:** Education for Mind Set Change

[Find out more](#)

### Öckerö municipality and Mfangano Island, Homa Bay County

Kenya

**Project:** Children's right to participation

[Find out more](#)

### Region Gotland and Kibaha

Tanzania

**Project:** Together Towards Sustainable Development Goals

[Find out more](#)

### Upplands-Bro and Muranga County

Kenya

**Project:** Youth Participation

[Find out more](#)

### Strängnäs municipality and Emboreet, Simanjiro

Tanzania

**Project:** Social Sustainability

[Find out more](#)

### Thematic domains

- environment and climate
- gender based violence
- working life and entrepreneurship
- child protection from SGBV
- child perspective - adults
- experiences of children
- education for mindset change
- environmental impact of plastics
- student-oriented learning
- inclusive education
- grow the future
- sustainable development
- youth inclusion,
- child rights,
- youths in environmental advocacy and education
- labour market

### Objectives

- wider stakeholder involvement \*
- prevention, particularly among minority groups to identify victims and abusers
- establish a closer connection between the young and the decision-makers
- action plan development
- increased engagement in political issues
- create stakeholder's awareness on the need to have CFCs and values attached to CFCs
- empower young people, aged 13 – 20, for working life and entrepreneurship in a democratic society

\* Contextual insights about the SFN municipal partnerships obtained during meetings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam



## [2] Relevant Resources

- [2.1] **positionalities**  
worth embracing
- [2.2] **frameworks**  
worth considering
- [2.3] **networks**  
worth exploring
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worth seeing
- [2.5] **specific activities**  
worth trying
- [2.6] **lessons**  
worth learning

In following pages, presented publications / sources are explained in a nutshell and where possible provided with a QR download link.

Before you proceed, we invite you to pay special attention to the presented Matters Circle of various aspects Our Childhood is built on. We find them very important and trust that this digest representation will help you navigate your way through offered material.



## [2.1] positionalities worth embracing

Fostering child inclusion requires specific perspective shifts and considerations to ensure respectful, child-sensitive and appropriate environments and processes. We summarize the main aspects of the needed positionality in a paper *Let's Get Together and Make Change* (ICLD, 2023), complemented by a selection of relevant further readings that in our opinion could enhance these positions.

### Let's get together and make change: Towards a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework

Jua Cilliers, Paula Barros, Predrag Milić, Rejoice Shamiso Katsidzira,  
Caroline Brown, Lynne Cairns, Rongedzayi Fambasayi



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**STEPS TO ENGAGING YOUNG CHILDREN IN RESEARCH** support participatory research with young children; particularly children aged 5-8 years of age.

**CHILDREN AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN URBAN AREAS** summarizes evidence on children and local governance, and proposes ideas for action in urban settings.

**CITIES FOR AND WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH** provides low-cost ideas that answer the question 'What can we, ourselves, do to make cities better for children and young people?'

**WE ARE HERE** supports the roles children and adults can play in decision-making processes and in which type of spaces it may take place.



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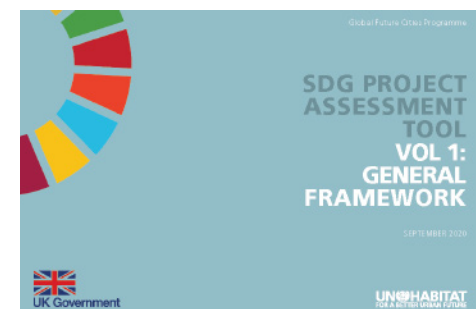
## [2.2] frameworks worth considering

Cutting through various dimensions of child inclusion, we identified frameworks that could help institutional embedding of the OUR Childhood Framework, allowing us to link the work here proposed with the ongoing work of delivering results in the framework of SDGs. Most notably, we recognised the recently published *My Neighbourhood* Publication (UN-Habitat, 2024) as a good vehicle for guiding urban professionals in the direction of securing SDGs while informing decision-makers about how to create conducive conditions for such work. We build upon this publication by offering a complementary bottom-up approach to child inclusion.



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 **THE SDG PROJECT ASSESSMENT TOOL** offers a guide to local authorities keen to develop more inclusive, sustainable and effective urban projects.




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 **NEW URBAN AGENDA** offers shared vision for achieving better sustainable urban developments.




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 **NUA** offer guidelines to facilitate the preparation of National Reports on the progress in the implementation of the NEW URBAN AGENDA.



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 **SHAPING URBANIZATION FOR CHILDREN** is a handbook that offers concepts, evidence and technical strategies to facilitate child-responsive urban planning.

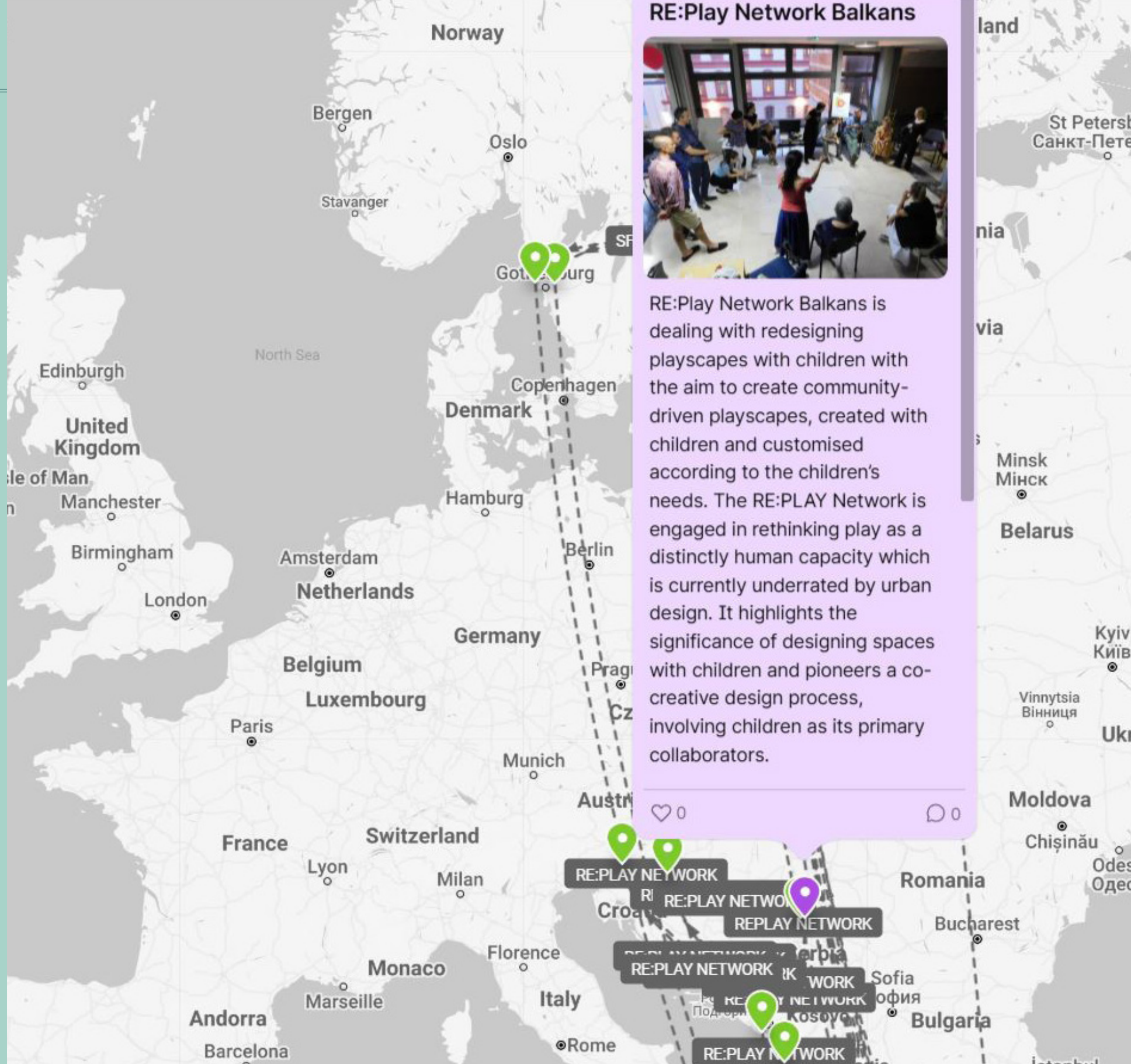
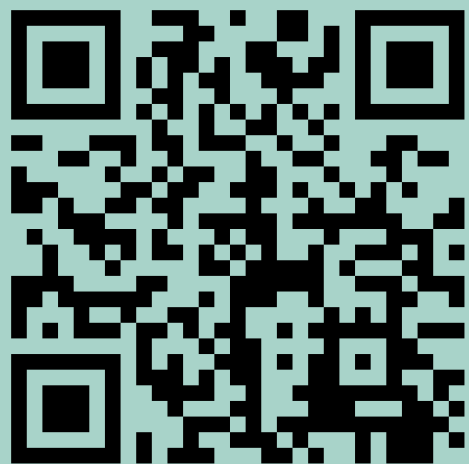


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## [2.3] networks worth exploring

With an idea to capture the growing network of networks around the globe and support the global dialogue on this topic, we initiated an open online platform and started mapping various stakeholders and initiatives fostering child inclusion. We invite you to explore this open map and contribute to it – join the network – by mapping yourself, your organisation and your network, and where possible, establish a connection with other entities out there. With the guiding premise that we are all parts and parcels of the proposition here presented, this map can help us strengthen our distinct positions and direct us more impactfully towards our desired end – that is child inclusive sustainable future.



### RE:PLAY Network Balkans



RE:PLAY Network Balkans is dealing with redesigning playscapes with children with the aim to create community-driven playscapes, created with children and customised according to the children's needs. The RE:PLAY Network is engaged in rethinking play as a distinctly human capacity which is currently underrated by urban design. It highlights the significance of designing spaces with children and pioneers a co-creative design process, involving children as its primary collaborators.



RE:PLAY NETWORK

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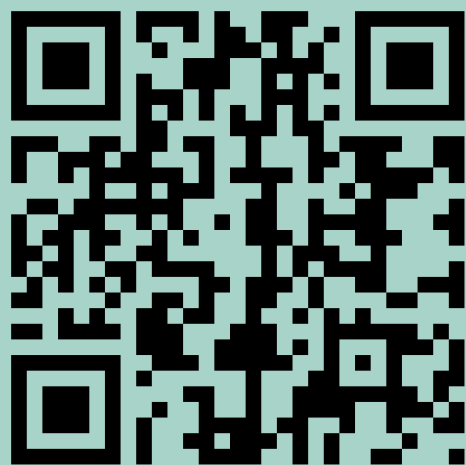
RE:PLAY NETWORK

RE:PLAY NETWORK



## [2.4] experiences worth seeing

Discovering the voices of others, and recognising that we are not alone in this endeavour is empowering. Therefore, we prepared an open online platform deriving from our inception study back in 2022 where we showcased some of the initiatives we visited on the ground or discussed during fieldwork visits in Livingstone Municipality in Zambia and Victoria Falls Municipality in Zimbabwe. We invite you to explore those and to think about how your municipality / organisation can add to this global exchange of good examples. What turned out to be a successful case or a prospective project in one place is an experience worth seeing and we look forward to seeing them grow.



## Towards Child-Focused Cities

Co-production of a database of good examples

### Landing page

Predrag Milic 2yr

#### Welcome to our Child-Focused Cities platform - building bridges between good ideas!



#### What?

Our intention is to provide an opportunity for a collective exchange - mapping exercise - of good examples of how to provide space for child/youth inclusion. We believe the best learning is learning together - through curiosity, trial & error and the exchange of ideas.

#### Who?

This board is assembled by a group of researchers and municipality representatives, authors of context-specific responses to issues of child and youth inclusion in their respective environments.

#### Why?

This board was conceptualised

### Initiatives by Sustainable Development Goal(s) (SDG)

lynneocairns 2yr

#### Summaries of initiatives organised by SDG

Below are summaries of initiatives organised systematically by SDG 1-17. For more details of initiative, please look under the municipality they in based.

Please post as a 'comment' a brief summary of your initiative(s) under each Sustainable Development Goal. Many initiatives may aim to address more than one goal.

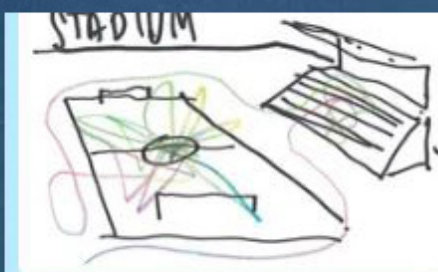
Find more details of each Sustainable Development here: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

lynneocairns 2yr

#### Initiatives addressing SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere



### Livingstone, Zambia



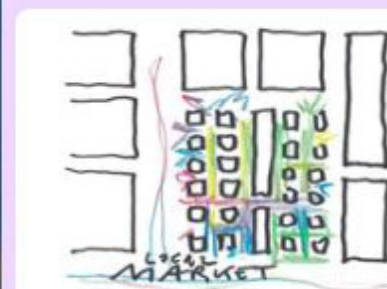
Brief description to be added by local partners

0

+ Add comment

Predrag Milic 2yr

#### Local market



Brief description to be added by local partners

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+ Add comment

Predrag Milic 2yr

#### District community centre

### Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

+ Add comment

Predrag Milic 2yr

#### Mission - Vision - Values



Expressing clearly what do w stand for

0

+ Add comment

Predrag Milic 2yr

#### Uniforms





## [2.5] specific activities worth trying

Different children prefer expressing their ideas in different ways. To facilitate the inclusion of various personalities in the decision making process, beyond traditionally recognised forms of expression such as public speaking, assemblies and meetings, we tested various dialogic artistic interfaces with children from urban to rural settings. These interfaces proved valuable to make children feel comfortable and knowledgeable, while experiencing fun. In addition, the exchanges prompted by these interfaces are guided by what children chose to express. Therefore, through these artistic dialogic interfaces children can more easily assume the role of protagonists in decision-making processes.

We share here an illustrative list of potential interfaces that is however not exhaustive. Through experimentations with children in local settings, other interfaces may emerge as more meaningful and highly powerful. This was the case with the *photoji* in Belo Horizonte through which children expressed themselves by taking photos and associating an emoji to each photo - eliciting questions and exchanges.



**drawing**



**collaging**



**photoji**



**clay modeling**



**public screening**



**mosaicking**



**singing**



**painting**



**appropriating**

Source: Naleppo - Emboreet, Tanzania

Source: Skograd - Belgrade, Serbia

Source: UFMG - Belo Horizonte, Brazil



## [2.6] lessons worth learning

Throughout the process of conceptualising this toolbox, we learned several lessons worthy noting. First, we confirmed that children's rights are violated in different contexts, hindering the achievement of the SDGs. 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 publication proved to be a helpful framework for spatializing what matters to children. All these key lessons and experiences gained are summarised as 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.

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., policy-makers, 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.

### [3] Engagement Model

The Our Childhood engagement model starts from the premise that children and youth already occupy specific spaces and have opinions about their environment. While simultaneously being affected by the interplay of all societal matters they lack opportunities to voice their views, leaving the local governments short of this valuable resource. The engagement model is therefore thought of as a missing link between existing practices, documents, and stakeholders, allowing local governments to include children and youth in local affairs – or metaphorically, to hear their political subjects of the future.

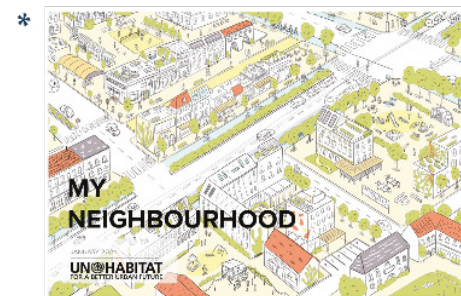
The provided sequence of steps invites the readers – toolbox users – to position themselves according to their specific situation and navigate their way around, skipping those steps already realised while prioritising others. In that sense, the provided list should be seen as a list of potential steps subject to further contextual elaborations.





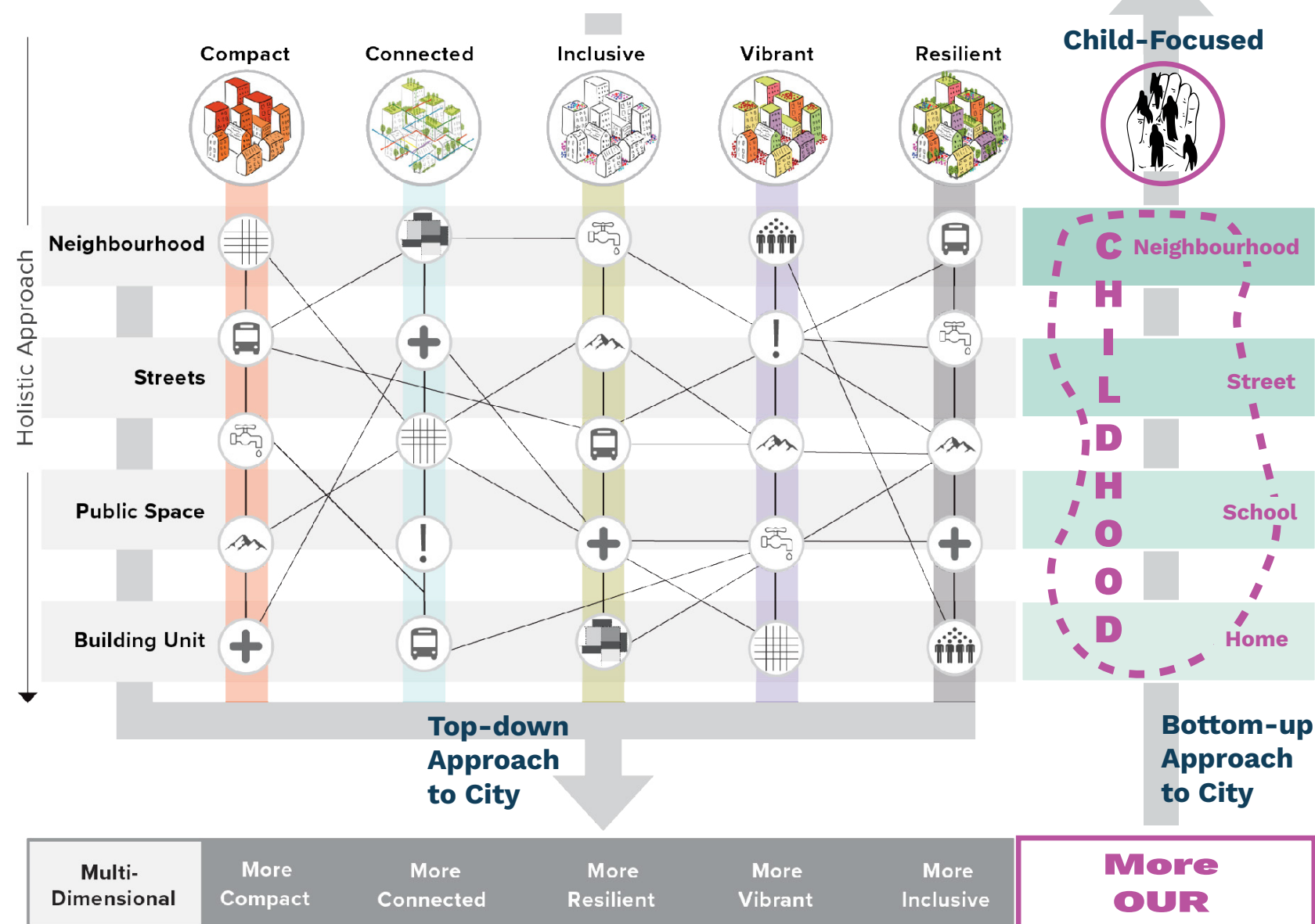
This toolbox embraces the structure provided by the *My Neighbourhood* publication as presented here, distinguishing between general narratives (five key city concepts from an urban planning perspective), specific instruments (SDG indicators) and spatial dimensions through which the city embodies itself (Building Unit, Public Space, Streets, and Neighbourhood). Complementary to this top-down strategic scheme we propose a soft bottom-up approach to urban development by establishing an analogue concept – Child-Focused City – to be achieved through context-specific, inclusive, and creative childhood interventions. While our political and governing apparatuses tend to compartmentalize everyday life, we argue that in the case of children, their everyday experience of childhood cuts through all four spatial dimensions at once.

Therefore, we propose looking at all of them together while expanding the analysis and the potential intervention with cultural, economic, and social aspects of activities dealing with their societal distribution through birth. What we propose as the core of these analysis and interventions is **children's relationship with their societies mediated by their everyday environment**.



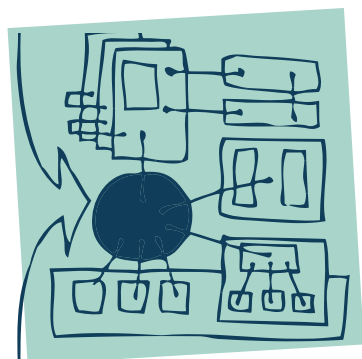
\* here presented diagram is an extract from the *My Neighbourhood* publication depicting the holistic approach to cities: distinguishing between five different city conceptions across four different spatial dimensions. Our proposal amends it with the bottom-up Child-Focused City conception – one informed by children's relationship with the world around

By carefully intervening in places children know the best and relate to as theirs, we can eventually expand their realities and change the way they relate with the world around them – as an indispensable quality for their societal inclusion.



Source: MY Neighbourhood (UN-Habitat, 2024)

## [3.1] top-down strategies



### [I]

Before you start, get familiar with the SDGs and the associated frameworks, particularly those proposed in section 2.2. Consider various positionalities and matters of concern for working with children and youth (section 2.1).



### [II]

Organise internal sessions trying to collect available resources, and map all stakeholders, relevant institutions, civic groups, and spatial and social infrastructures already being in service and exchange with child and youth affairs.



### [III]

Set up a meeting with all recognized stakeholders (including youth organisations, NGOs, professional organisations, and commercial stakeholders) and engage in an in-depth mapping exercise allowing mutual recognition and establishment of alliances among stakeholders.



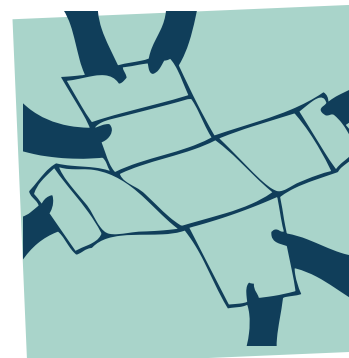
### [IV]

Set up a working space specifically dedicated to child-youth affairs, a simple office with easy access will do the job. Make sure the space is seen by the community. Keep it open and appoint a running position of the child and youth coordinator selected regularly among the stakeholders.



### [V]

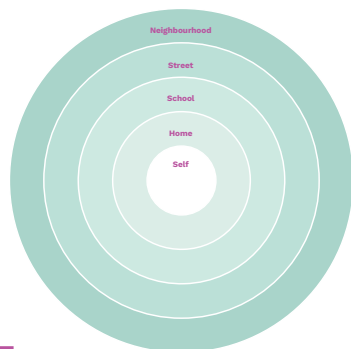
Based on existing statistics and local knowledge make a priority map, selecting neighbourhoods with greatest needs where to start with your activities. Keep in mind the existing social infrastructures: schools, markets, public space, local neighbourhood initiatives, community leaders, etc.



### [VI]

Prior to engaging with children and youth, partner with local community leaders, neighbourhood associations, and CSOs, invite artists, students, and universities, and set up local teams to implement the OUR CHILDHOOD Engagement Model as further proposed. Follow along and adjust your goals accordingly.

## [3.2] bottom-up approaches

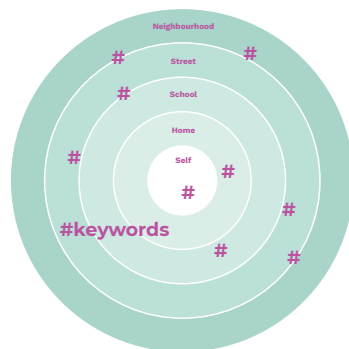


[2]

Keep in mind that children perceive the world from their own, centred perspective - their everyday reality is their world. And their relationship with the world is mediated by their immediate surrounding - home, street, school, and neighbourhood. Be aware that the interests and concerns of us adults might be peripheral to this social group. Think of specific activities across the provided dimensions of their childhood.

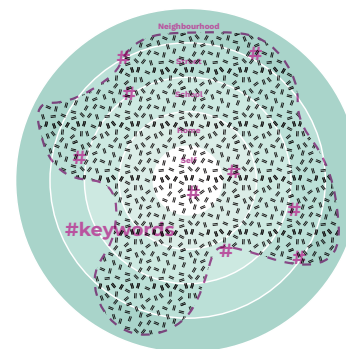
[1]

Everywhere in the world, children already occupy certain spaces, during certain hours, using specific languages, to talk about their relevant topics, with some adults. Start from there. Learn where they are and conceptualise your activities around these building blocks of your context-specific engagement strategy for their inclusion.



[3]

Start with activities where they would come up with specific interpretations of their surrounding. Use the diagram to map these key notions and views across dimensions and allow children to explain their views, offering various expression methods. Capture these exchanges.



[4]

Gather material and work towards making a comprehensive map/collage of 'OUR CHILDHOOD' with children. Facilitate joint discussion around results and work towards recognition of key issues raised while remaining sensitive to less vocal positions.



[5]

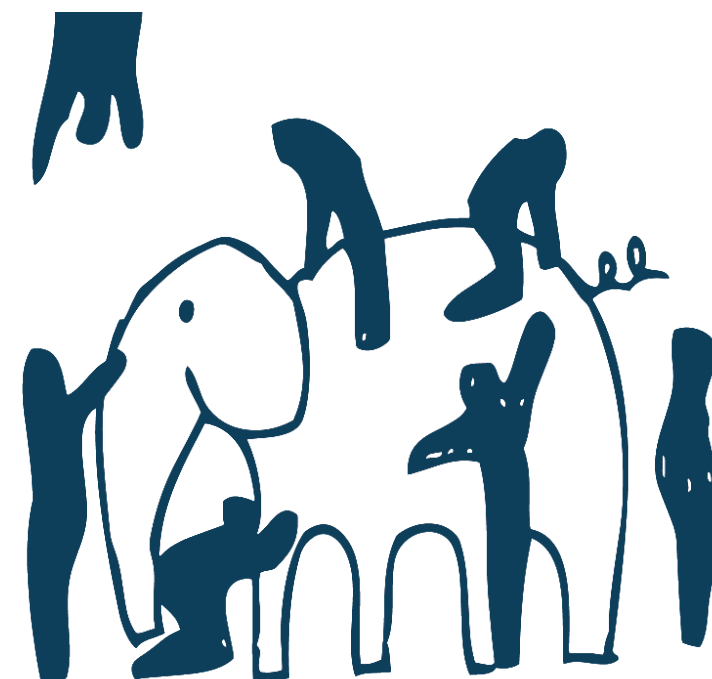
And finally, introduce the SDGs to children and compare them with the results of your previous activities. Recognise opportunities for acting and set up teams to develop proposals for action. Keep the map as an open tool subject to revisions and further planning, available to children. Be open about limitations and take the proposals seriously. Start implementing proposals through joint action with children.



**It is through being persistently interested and invested, speaking with deeds rather than promising words, that you will reciprocally gain trust from this age group - a relation that will pave the way to active political life - that is to a sustainable future.**

**OUR CHILDHOOD > OUR WORLD!**

***It is our children  
we are talking about!***



Child-Focused Cities



