

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

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## Abstract

Children live in cities and local communities, implying that they have proximity to the local government rather than the national government. The interaction of children with their governments happens at the local level. And, children experience the realisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the local sphere of government. Yet, children are relegated to the margins of local governance and implementation of SDGs and are not given the space and voice to shape how their cities should be or look like. In this project, we investigated through literature review and case studies in ICLD partnering municipalities (Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe and Livingstone, Zambia) to gain critical insights and a context-based understanding to local governments to enhance informed and child-focused decision-making around local governance and SDGs implementation.

## Preface



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

The mission of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty reduction by promoting local democracy in primarily low- and middle-income countries. In order to fulfil this, we promote and encourage decentralised cooperation through municipal partnerships programme; adding capacity-building through our international training programmes; and investing in relevant research and creating important research networks. ICLD documents and publishes key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiates and funds relevant research, engages in scholarly networks, connects relevant researchers with practitioners, and organises conferences and workshops. We also maintain a publications series. *Let's get together and make change: Towards a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework* is the 23rd report to be published in ICLD's Working Paper series.

Child and youth inclusion is a vital part of a high-quality democracy – their participation is both an end in itself and a means to a better future – and we must take careful action to make that inclusion meaningful. This driven group of scholars argue that *child-friendly* is not enough – and that *child-focused* means putting the young people's own views and agency at centre stage. Conceptualising Agenda2030 from a child- and youth perspective is an excellent start.

This report reflects the first stage of a multi-phase research project, born out of a *Local Democracy Lab* where municipalities reflect on current challenges together with invited scholars. It is part of a joint journey to better integrate children and youth into local politics, backed by sound research and informed decisions by local

governments. We extend our gratitude to the researchers, stakeholders, and the partnering municipalities for their unwavering dedication to this cause, which aligns closely with ICLD's mission and vision. I hope that this research will contribute to inspire and inform local policymakers to continue the challenging but critical work of advancing local democracy by addressing its important pillars of equity, participation, transparency and accountability, to make the world a better place for *all*.

Visby, Sweden



October 2023

Johan Lilja,  
Secretary General, ICLD



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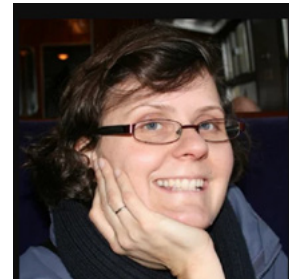
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## Executive Summary

In an attempt to enhance the work of local governments by enabling a more child-focused transformation of their respective territories in pursuit of sustainable development goals (SDGs), a group of international researchers collaborated with a range of stakeholders to conceptualise a new analytical tool. This working Paper presents the first stage of this endeavour. The research process included seven international scholars and researchers from various professional backgrounds and geographical locations, working with six municipalities to explore and exchange ideas pertaining to child and youthhood matters in search of material *evidence of how to include and empower children and youth in local (political) affairs*. Three researchers visited two of the six partnering municipalities – Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) and Livingstone (Zambia) – to gain critical insights and a context-based understanding for further refinement of the analytical framework while offering support to local governments to enhance informed and child-focused decision-making.

Guided by municipal representatives, the research team gained insights into both the existing and prospective structures of inclusion of children and youth in local governance. Visiting local authorities presented the team with first-hand information and evidence through interactions with the people who work with children and youth. Also, through observations into the local projects and initiatives, the team got a better understanding of the contextual and structural challenges enabling or hindering the inclusion and political sensitisation of children and youth. The team recognised the importance of the personal motivations and struggles of those enabling children and young people to participate in societal matters and have worked towards careful amplification of their voices across this partnership.

Following the field exchange, the team initiated a co-production process of mapping the existing initiatives to enable dialogue across and beyond the ICLD network of partnering municipalities. This mediated cross-sectoral collaboration builds a database of context-specific responses to challenges of child and youth inclusion that will offer further research material while laying a foundation for more context-specific policy development

and implementation. Building upon research findings, the research team revisited the initial concept of the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework. The research shows that there is commendable progress within cities and attempts to include children and youth. Yet, there remains a huge research gap and opportunity to further explore and expand on this agenda. This is the initial step towards facilitating the adequate integration of children and youth in local politics through evidence-based practices. To this end, a continuation of this research project is undertaken during 2023 and 2024, in a collaborative manner between the research group and local stakeholders on three continents.



## Introduction

The last decade of action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which is 2020-2030 – galvanise a renewed commitment and urgency to implement the development goals leaving no person behind. The commitment should manifest at all levels of government, including within sub-national spheres such as municipalities. In particular, SDG 11 relates to cities and urban communities, intending to make them more inclusive, resilient, safe and sustainable. This goal is critical for local governance. However, despite this global call to ensure that no one is left behind, children are a distinct group that is often overlooked and not given adequate opportunity to shape the governance of their respective cities (Arnott, 2008). Interrogating the concept of ‘child-friendly cities’, it is argued that ‘friendliness’ is not enough because it lacks enforcement and accountability. In other words, ‘friendliness’ implies taking children’s concerns and rights at the local level as charity, nestled in adult benevolence. Friendliness might perhaps not be a solution as friendliness does not adequately dictate a certain level of safety that is in the best interest of the child. Also, friendliness does not impose concrete duties upon local governments and maintains an idea of child inclusion as optional rather than a legal demand. The fundamental mechanism through which children and youth can be empowered to contribute includes *participation* and *inclusion*.

This time-limited and relatively small-scale impact research titled *Let's get together and make change: Towards Child Focused Cities Analytical Framework* brought together an interdisciplinary team of international scholars and local government representatives, in partnership with ICLD, with the aim of conceptualising a novel tool – relational object – as a contribution towards tackling the complex challenges around child and youth participation in the framework of the SDGs in both local and global contexts.

## Childhoods in the city: from ‘child friendly’ to ‘child focused’

### Child Friendly Cities

The concept of child-friendly environments has been inspired by the concept of child-friendly cities, referring to developing better conditions for children, to ensure public child-friendly urban conditions. We note that the concept of friendliness is vitally important, and yet often lacks the responsiveness required in planning and designing of the built environment and governance related issues in the city. Child-focused cities demand that when authorities plan the spatial and governance dimensions of city life, they focus specific attention to the rights, interests and wellbeing of children.

Literature confirms that outdoor play spaces are vital for children’s learning and developing stages throughout life and since children are spending more time indoors, it is becoming increasingly important to design good child-friendly spaces that will lure children outside and provide adequate support for physical and social development needs (Sukanya, 2019). Outdoor play spaces can inspire children’s imagination and exploration, as well as improve their confidence and social connection, thus having a positive effect on community cohesion. On the other hand, children who are not enabled to play freely may suffer limitations in their physical, social and cognitive development, which might be visible in future generations of adults lacking essential social and personal skills (Brown, 2014).

### Weaving together SDGs and UNCRC

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its comprehensive 17 Goals, is a universal call to action ‘for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future’. (UN SDG Progress Report, 2022: 02). The 2030 Agenda and its goals are mere aspirations for a sustainable world, and not human rights. Thus, they are not binding, and their implementation is based on the political commitment of governments. However, it must be noted that the 2030 Agenda is built on a human rights framework for its implementation. To this end,

governments of State Parties to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which remains the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the history of treaty law, are obliged to adopt a child rights-based approach to SDGs implementation.

The departure point for this transdisciplinary collaborative project is a concern around the invisibility of children in the SDGs implementation and barriers to rights-respecting participation and agency which serves to silence the contributions that children and youth can make to social and environmental action in local contexts. The current social, economic and environmental realities of young people, render them one of the biggest marginalised social groups, globally. Investment in and commitment to genuine participation and collaboration with young people is in everyone's best interests, particularly in contexts whose majorities are in youth populations creating an opportunity to "reap a substantial 'demographic bonus' for their nation's economic development, resilience, sustainability and productivity" (UNFPA, 2013; 04).

A UNICEF (2022) review of SDGs echoes the concern around rights for all children in the context of SDGs, including rights to participate and have their voices heard, particularly those most excluded and marginalised, and notes that awareness raising and participation should be the foundations of a 'continuum to regularly, meaningfully and consistently engage children [and youth] as agents of change to influence behaviours and social norms amongst themselves, their households and their communities' (03). At the heart of such endeavours lies a commitment to enhancing participation and children's agency - a fundamental child rights principle embedded in the UNCRC.

## Considerations of 'childhood(s)'

Paradigms of childhood are not universal across contexts and culture but often position children as either 'being' (actively engaged in shaping the construction of childhoods) or 'becoming' (adults in the making, thus with limited capacities). Such temporal dimensions get tangled up in idealised notions of children such as passivity, innocence and dependency on benevolent

adults which inhibits genuine and active participation. Children as 'becoming' is echoed in the development of SDGs which did not engage with children and youth and only a third of SDGs explicitly identify youth in their targets (Montrosse-Moorhead *et al*, 2019: 37). Uprichard (2008; 312) urges consideration of both 'being and becoming' children, increasing their potential agency which 'places children in the real situation of being present and future agents of their present and future lives and ultimately the world around them'. Yet, expressing agency is not a universal experience for all children and young people and is shaped by the social, cultural and environmental contexts of their everyday lives. Klocker (2007; 85) conceptualises 'thin' agency which refers to decisions in everyday actions that are 'carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few visible alternatives.' This deepens our understanding of the situated social and spatial dimensions of agency rather than assuming agency as inherent, normative and universal. Developing the dynamic and contextual tensions around children's agency, Bordonaro and Payne (2012) highlight 'ambiguous' agency which is 'in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions about childhood, moral and social ideals about the kind of behaviour young people should demonstrate, the activities they should engage in, and the spaces and places deemed appropriate for them to inhabit' (366). This is particularly relevant when we consider barriers and opportunities to engage in participatory endeavours with children and youth across contexts and varying social processes that stigmatise and marginalise them. Hill and Warrington (2022; 182-184) describe how participation is not only an "end in and of itself" but also a 'means' through which protection can be realised including 'means to achieving wellbeing and safety' and a 'means'...to thrive, experience wellbeing, access social justice...though their role in countering a sense of powerlessness and supporting self-efficacy'. Further, young people who have experienced harm and abuse often doubt their sense of being deserving of protection so participation can be important in 'recognising their entitlement to protection, care and respect as the foundation for accessing both safety and justice – individually and collectively' (Hamilton et al, 2019; 232). This generates a powerful argument that awareness raising and increasing participation cannot be achieved

by normative, paternalistic, and universal means but grounded in 'situated concepts of agency developed through understanding from the vantage point of local socio-cultural systems rather than externally derived socio-cultural assumptions about childhood and children's agency' (Edmonds, 2019, 202).

## Sowing the seeds for a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework

The seeds of this collaborative project were *sown* at ICLD's Local Democracy Academy held 06 - 10 June 2022 in Visby, Sweden and *cross-fertilized* within and beyond the thematic sessions reflecting on child-friendly cities and how children's rights can be centred within local government structures and agendas.

Responding to the global challenges, a visual analytic framework to foreground children's rights to participate in SDGs locally and globally was conceived and strengthened by participation in *Local Democracy Labs*, where municipal governments from ICLD partner countries posed specific policy-related questions to child and youth inclusion and participation to researchers.

A Child-Focused Cities working group of the ICLD was formed to sustain connections between researchers formed in Visby and a subsequent ICLD Impact Research Grant created the space for *germination* of ideas around the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework.

Our partnership stretches across and is informed by methodological registers at the crossroads of spatial and social sciences (architecture and urban planning with pedagogy, sociology, and political sciences) ownership across all partners. We believe this approach is necessary as traditional approaches to research and action have proved not to be appropriate or generate the necessary insights into how children engage with their environment. The choice of methods is designed to provide children with a platform to find their voice.

## 'Let's get together and make change': Impact Project

Following the ICLD Local Democracy Academy in Visby, the Child-Focused Cities working group responded to an ICLD Impact Grant call which offered the opportunity and space to develop ideas around the visual analytic framework and connect with different municipalities to learn more about the challenges and opportunities for creating child-focused environments. Our collaborative project '*Let's get together and make change: Towards the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework*' sits at the intersections between SDGs and UNCRC and hopes to centre lived experiences of the everyday lives of children and young people. **We reject adult-centric and one-size-fits-all models which neglect the power and potential of children's and youth contributions to shaping the present and the future, local and global.**

Respecting agency and rights to participation, which in themselves can be protective, this project would enable us to invite others to join us on this journey of discovery across contexts and disciplines and shape the future of our child-focused cities endeavours centring the perspectives of children and young as priorities. As adults, we cannot simply give or teach agency but should strive to open the space to experience and 'develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation' (Freire, 1970; 56).



Inauguration of the ICLD Child-Focused Cities Working Group, Visby Sweden, 2022.  
Photo: CFC Research Team

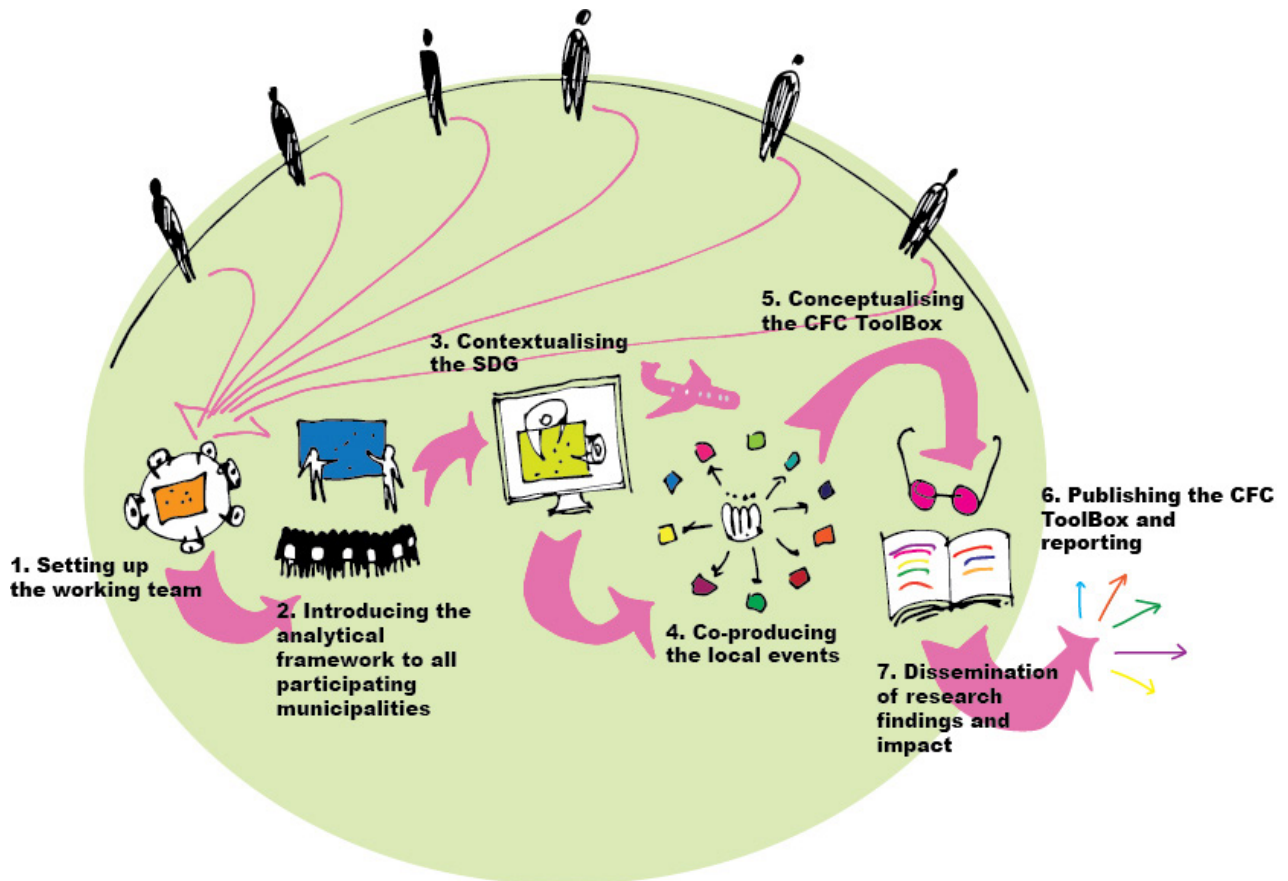


Figure 1. Conceptualised project horizon diagram, explaining project dynamic

## Methodology

The research team positioned this exploration as ‘stage zero’ in the development of the relational tool/object offering the opportunity to exchange ideas around the concept with municipalities and local stakeholders engaged in existing partnerships with ICLD. The underpinning ethos was *not to do “research”, but “praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”* (Freire 2005: 51), so engaging in online and in-person exchanges to **learn with partnering municipalities about context-specific challenges and opportunities was a critical first step** towards co-producing a contextually sensitive operational framework (CFCAF).

In recognition of the significant endeavours of the different ICLD partnering municipalities, *Let’s get*

*together and make change*’ created an ‘observatory’ to overcome some of the limitations of the small-scale nature of the impact project. Victoria Falls municipality (Zimbabwe) and Livingstone municipality (Zambia) were identified as *associated partners* in the project given their geographical proximity which enabled in-person visits within the time and budget boundaries of the project. Embedding the ethos of participation into the heart of the project, the research team invited other ICLD-partnered municipalities with a focus on youth inclusion to join as *observing partners*. These partners are Muranga (Kenya), Chobe (Botswana), Kinondoni (Tanzania) and Håbo (Sweden) - to follow along the more in-depth CFCAF contextualising exercises with Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) and Livingstone (Zambia) and be included in the broader international knowledge exchange.



## Methodology

The research is done after *Local Democracy Labs* with ICLD municipalities under the prioritised theme **Child and youth inclusion**, and with partnering municipalities:

1. Muranga, Kenya;
2. Chobe, Botswana;
3. Kinondoni, Tanzania;
4. Håbo, Sweden;
5. Livingston, Zambia (field research);
6. Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe (field research).

The first step was to host an online Inception Meeting (presentation available in the appendix section - A.1) to welcome associated and observing municipalities to the impact project. Space was given for introductions and the research team retraced the steps leading to the inception of '*Let's get together and make change: Towards the Child Focussed Cities Analytical Framework*'. Key messages included the transdisciplinary nature of our collaborative inquiry and the careful pacing of our hopes for a relational object-tool that is embedded in co-production and curiosity at *stage zero*. All municipalities were then invited to engage in an online survey designed to capture contextual specificities, their positions and views on the topic (survey available in the appendix section - A.2).

Next, three members of the research team travelled to meet with representatives in Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) and Livingstone (Zambia) to explore, exchange ideas and further contextualise the CFCAF in *field conversations* (field notes available in the appendix section - A.3). During the planning of visits, the research team offered ideas around the activities that could be undertaken but resisted imposing or prescribing an agenda in order to create space for collaboration and conversation. The host representatives invited the research team to join them in visiting initiatives, projects, and places, which were deemed critical allies in their respective commitments to child and youth inclusion and participation. Across the two municipalities, the research team spoke with around 30 representatives including schools, early childhood development programs (ECD), an

orphanage, local community initiatives, NGOs, social welfare projects, public space projects, community centres and sports facilities (fieldwork presentation available in the appendix section - A.4). The space within and between the visits allowed for exchanges of ideas and reflections which provided rich and meaningful contextual insights into the environments of children and young people.

From the inception of the research visit, the researchers were focused on the ethical considerations and requirements for engaging children as research subjects and participants. Thus, the research visit was framed to target people working with children in these municipalities, with first-hand local expertise on the issues affecting children in their localities. In the spirit of co-inquiry, conversations about children and youth experiences in everyday life through the eyes of those in different relationships enabled reflection around the challenges and opportunities. Where possible, researchers joined representatives to visit and walk through the spaces which added depth to the observations and discussions.



## Findings

In spite of its limited nature, this valuable attempt at bringing researchers and local politics closer together created a pathway for new applied scholarship and political action in the field of child and youth inclusion in local political affairs. Such an encounter offered a wide variety of critical findings were presented in three chronologically consecutive sections.

### Prior to encounters in the field

Starting from the interrogation of the initially conceptualised Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework, the research team outlined the main obstacles to its applicability and implication to the wider

political discourse. Namely, the inclusion of children and young people in the application of the CFCAF requires careful and responsible preparation unequivocally formulated and approved through ethical clearances by all partnering institutions. Furthermore, in addition to the existence of such protocols, which might be a well-institutionalised procedure, it is of great importance that facilitators of such processes should be ethically sensitised and familiar with the contextual specificities of the group of young people and children they work with. This project lamentably did not offer sufficient time for testing this important feature of the CFCAF, a procedure that will have to be stress-tested in further research attempts.



## Towards Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework (CFCAF)

This survey forms part of the Impact Project 'Let's get together and make change' with the aim to co-create a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework (CFCAF). With the support of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy, this collaborative project will reframe the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to include a children's/youth perspective, moving from 'child-friendly' planning, to 'child-focused' planning.

In order to develop the CFCAF, we need input from local stakeholders and communities. This survey is aimed at capturing the local perspectives and current development approaches, thinking and strategies related to child-friendly cities and sustainable development strategies. The data from this survey will help the research team to prepare for the site visit and in-person collaboration, and to identify the areas that should be explored as part of the case study investigation. After the site visit, a similar questionnaire will be conducted, that will help the research team to measure the impact of the project, and contribute to the refinement of the CFCAF.

The CFCAF will provide guidance for analysis and action to local governments, municipalities, and professionals within and beyond the ICLD network, to enable the planning of child-focused cities and spaces. As this is new and ambitious research, we would appreciate your support and inputs.

**We plan to listen and observe – learn from – and contextualize the CFCAF in conversation with you!**

Figure 2. landing page preview of the online survey

The project, however, did offer a chance for exchanges across multiple contexts, allowing further contextualisation of the CFCAF. To unravel these contextual characteristics, we facilitated an online inception survey targeting representatives of partnering municipalities. This offered us critical insights into the basic contextual specificities of child/youth-hood matters across municipalities while enabling us to understand their perceived relationship between local political affairs and the SDG.

The survey confirmed the founding premise of the CFCAF regarding the SDGs as not being focused on the needs of children and youth specifically, but rather vaguely including them as stakeholders in the broader urban debate. The respondents confirmed the difficulty and the importance of considering the 17 goals all at once to recognise and improve the position and well-being of children and young people in their respective societies. While the research team identified just a slight difference across municipalities in terms of the provision of child/youth inclusion facilities/programs relative to their size, a considerable variety of institutional settings were identified through which children and young people are included in the local political affairs of partnering municipalities. In other words, according to the survey results, fostering child/youth inclusion is happening in multiple mutually enriching ways, thus allowing various actors to take part in such endeavours: from local neighbourhood initiatives to democratising planning procedures, developing context-specific policy proposals and allocating specifically designed budget lines for child/youth inclusion.

The survey results show that explicit child-friendly space planning takes the least of the respondent's time in comparison to community engagement, sustainable development, local democracy matters and policy making. However, the survey identified agreement among the respondents about the importance of such planning and it confirmed that safety, accessibility, natural environments, the inclusion of communities in the planning process, cross-sectoral collaborations, and policy development, are crucial for fostering the position of children and young people in local political affairs through planning.

The survey illuminated the main challenges for maintaining child-friendly spaces: such as limited funds,

lack of knowledge, lack of awareness, lack of policies, lack of representation, and lack of collaboration, among others. Furthermore, the respondents recognised the sectoral nature of institutional settings that further limits the capacity of institutions to impactfully include children and young people in local (political) affairs. In spite of the very limited capacities of institutions to act towards fostering child and youth inclusion, the respondents named a few aspects that might be instrumental for making further steps such as the development of spaces for play, policy for youth inclusion, developing programs for children and nutritional support, and strengthening the safety of children and young people.

### Encounters in the field

While the inception survey offered us a chance to sketch out a wider image of child/youth-hood matters in respective societies of our partnering municipalities, visiting two of them enabled us to dive deep(er) into their contextual specificities. Separated by one of the seven World Wonders, by national borders and the big Zambezi River, nested in different cultural heritage, equipped with different currency systems, and operated in many different languages, Victoria Falls and Livingstone municipalities turned out to share many contextual specificities when it comes to societal prospects of children and young people. Having a World Wonder in common shapes the economy of these two unique places predominantly in service of international tourism. Furthermore, being at the geographical frontiers of their respective societies, the two share specific challenges that derive from local and regional commerce that *thunders*<sup>1</sup>, as it were, across societies. Children and young people are consequently exposed to these dynamics from an early age.

Our exchanges with local representatives helped us in our first analysis to understand the structural nestedness of infrastructures of inclusion of children and young people, as well as to recognise obstacles and barriers that hinder this age group to take part in local (political) affairs. Municipality representatives provided us with a detailed overview of their organisational structures and of all relevant institutions and local stakeholders (NGOs and private companies) dealing with children and young people.

<sup>1</sup> The local name of the Victoria Falls World Wonder is *Mosi-oo-Tunya* and in direct translation means *The smoke that Thunders*.



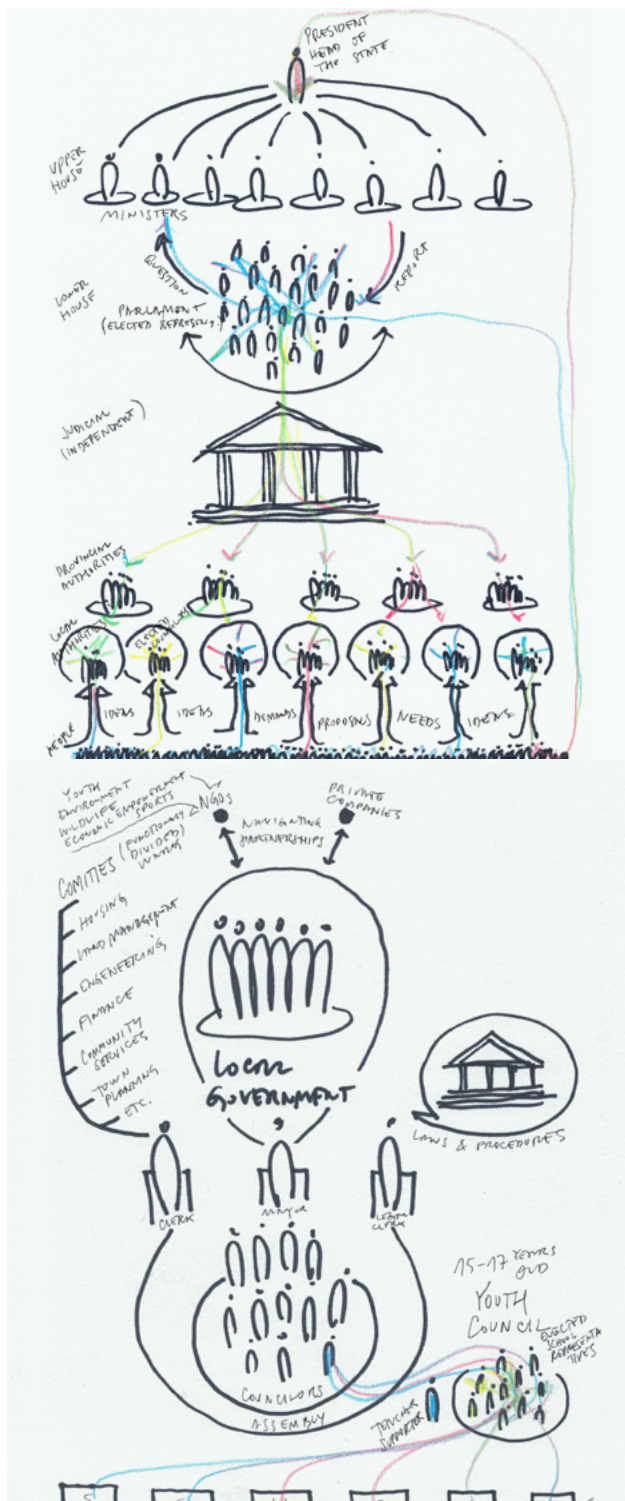


Figure 3. Graphical recordings of the meeting with Victoria Falls Municipality representatives showing organisational structure

The research team learned that the institution of territorially bound, school-based youth council (Victoria Falls) has a mimicking role of the city council, designed to democratically sensitise the local youth during their school time. With 17 elected members, students of secondary council schools, aged between 15 and 17, the youth council offers the opportunity to local youth to express their matters of concern. In the exchanges with young councillors the research team identified topics of concern which pertain to extending learning opportunities for furthering education, care for the environment and younger children (primary school education), sport, and meaningful skills for entering the job market.

Unfortunately, in spite of the recognition and the existence of this instrument, according to local representatives, the role and the impact of youth councils in local political affairs seem to be lamentably very weak. One of the reasons for this lack of impact lies in the fact that local framing of the societal group of *youths* stretches widely, all the way to 35 years of age.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the predominantly young population composure (more than 50% of people are under 35 years of age, according to our informants), there is a serious lack of representation of this age group. A possible reason for this is because the age group is difficult to control or to gather especially once they are out of educational institutions. Therefore, their minimal contribution hinders the impact of youth councils. The wide age span, that characterises both our visited societies, goes way beyond the age group for which the CFCAF was initially envisioned, and it is to be taken into account for its further development.

The research team further recognised particular vulnerabilities of certain age groups. In our exchanges with local stakeholders, we were repeatedly told that people aged between 17-21 (Victoria Falls) and 16-25 (Livingstone) were the most vulnerable. This coincides with the lack of institutional support that comes after finishing school and before entering the job market. It is in this *gap* that young people lacking in prospects are susceptible to wider societal issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, early marriages, and crime

<sup>2</sup> Whilst CFCAF acknowledges that the universal definition of a child refers to a person under the age of 18 (Convention on the Rights of the Child) and youth are persons between the age of 15 to 24 (UN guidelines), CFCAF is also cognizant to the fact that the operational definition and nuances of the term 'youth' often vary from country to country.

among others. Such a lack of support for this age group might be recognised as an opportunity to be filled with activities in further development of the CFCFAF.

In the exchanges with local stakeholders, the research team repeatedly came across a critical finding about the ambiguity of certain structures of inclusion. Namely, civic participation is often challenged by the religious beliefs of communities that prescribe different societal roles for children and young people. Children are particularly vulnerable in this regard, as they are subject to their parent's decisions while the law might be in conflict with either tradition or religion. For instance, everyone has a right to practice their religion, but some religious traditions dictate that young girls can be married off early and girls may be withdrawn from school earlier than the legal limit. Although issues of early marriages and child pregnancy were named as severe, these issues are also a common reality. While enforcing the law over such cases is not

easy, a clear commitment is set against such practices in both societies. The future role of the CFCFAF should, therefore, be sensitive to such ambivalent structures of inclusion, to promote the well-being of the child.

Almost all local stakeholders confirmed the lack of 'safe spaces' for children and youth and highlighted their importance in society. These spaces are recognised above all in their capacity to provide protection – shelter as it were – for children to think and act together with their peers on their own behalf. Whether it is a neighbourhood sports facility, innovation hub, social centre incubator, library hall, or out-of-school council, it has been acknowledged that the main obstacles in offering and maintaining such facilities are material and human resources, as well as a lack of structural and technical support. The CFCFAF might, by design, play a great role in navigating a more structural response to this need in the future.



Figure 4. Graphical recordings of the meetings with local stakeholders in Victoria Falls



The research team further identified the uneven spatial distribution of the existing structures of inclusion of children and young people as well as the diverse quality of programs that more often than not coincides with the socio-economic status of neighbourhoods. Children and young people from economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have to go long distances to reach their schools or points of interest, exposing themselves to potential harm. When existent, public schools in such neighbourhoods are often facing overcrowded situations that hinder the development of students while working across shifts (some children attend school from morning till noon and the others attend from noon till day end). Navigating the scarce resources puts a lot of pressure on the providers of inclusion of children and young people. On the other side of the spectrum, we

have encountered numerous private schools that offer educational services to families with stronger socio-economic status in society, offering substantially more space and programs to children, and better working positions for teachers.

With almost no options in between, such an educational landscape contributes to the creation of discrepant typologies of childhood. Inclusion therefore becomes a privilege or rather, it comes with privilege. In other words, such unevenly distributed provision at an early age is a cornerstone of social disparity and is to be taken into consideration with great attention for further conceptualisation and implementation of the CFCAF.

In out-of-school settings, local stakeholders often spoke about the time dimension of the inclusion of children and young people. They illuminated the challenge with the temporality of project-based formats of inclusion. While project fundings offer opportunity, their rationale often lies outside the community and is ignorant of the local needs. Therefore, projects are often interruptive for the everyday life and reality of children and young people. It has been acknowledged that such short-term instances of inclusion should be planned carefully and, if possible, linked to some more permanent programs/processes that could assure continuity as a condition sine qua non of formational years of children and young people. Further development of the CFCAF should, therefore,

recognise potential local plug-in opportunities in order to avoid these time-based pitfalls and remain respectful of the local dynamics.



Figure 5. Encounters with local representatives in Livingstone, Zambia: visit to Linda community centre

Societal participation in wide terms is, among other means, mediated economically. People exchange their values and goods and trade with them on their own behalf. Empowering young people to take part in such a process by generating their income is another serious challenge stressed by both visited municipality representatives. While the pressure to perform economically – that is to exist – in society is very high while there are scarce opportunities to actualise this among the youth. However, bright examples of Kwatu Trash for Cash and Olga's the Italian Corner from Livingstone, confirmed that such endeavours are possible and further investigation of different economic models for young people and its relevance for the CFCAF should be explored.

Last but not least, one of the strongest critical discoveries of the research team was in meeting the people – local stakeholders as initiators and facilitators of context-



specific responses to issues of child and youth inclusion in local (political) affairs – in their respective everyday life environments. We have had an absolute privilege to visit these guardians of child and youth inclusion and learn about the conditions that shape their work. What struck us the most is the commitment and the passion these people hold about this topic. And in spite of all the obstacles, the stamina they manifest in enduring all the challenges and keep doing their jobs. The fieldwork in Victoria Falls and Livingstone offered us a chance to meet true heroes of child and youth participation and we recognise a certain responsibility for ourselves to keep developing the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework in a way that celebrates and supports these people.

### Following encounters in the field

Inspired by these experiences, after we returned and collectively discussed our critical insights across the research team, we concluded that we would like to create an opportunity for a collective exchange and an amplifier of good examples of how to provide space for child/youth inclusion. We believe the best learning is learning together – through curiosity, trial and error, and the exchange of ideas. Therefore, we started conceptualising an online tool that transcends our initial research goals and sets the path for a collaborative project to reveal further, engaging with multiple actors, territories, and disciplines.

This collective knowledge building and sharing exercise will provide further material and guidance for analysis and action to local governments, municipalities, and professionals within and beyond the ICLD network, and contribute to the future planning of child-focused cities and spaces (online platform available in the appendix section - A.5). The open character of this platform will offer opportunities for further networking, thus allowing unmoderated mutual exchange flows among professionals, researchers, and local stakeholders. Facilitated by the ICLD CFC working group, the platform aims to in particular: 1) position the existing ICLD municipal partnerships in wider context of child/youth inclusion initiatives; 2) allow expansion of the network; 3) amplify the voices of context-specific initiatives; and

with time 4) become a relevant knowledge centre and a point of reference for all stakeholders interested in fostering Child-Focused agenda.

Choosing among different available options, we have selected the Padlet platform as it firmly meets our design criteria for this quest. We have provided the initial structure by making a stand-alone introduction (landing page) with a simple terms of use explanation to ease the navigation throughout the platform. Following, we provided a brief introduction to all partnering municipalities, listed in alphabetical order, and integrated local initiatives of the two municipalities we visited. We recognised that in such a way, both local stakeholders and municipalities can already engage and exchange experiences while slowly filling in the identified gap between their everyday activities and the SDGs. To facilitate this, we plan a feedback round on the level of our project, to actualise and confirm provided information before going public. Following the first revision, we plan to expand the platform with territories closely related to research team and project stakeholders (ICLD alumni) and finally to a wider professional network in our attempt to further develop the CFCAF. We expect this platform to become one of the main navigational tools for our further exchange.



Figure 6. A preview of the Padlet online platform for co-production of a database of good examples: Toward Child-Focused Cities

## Analysis and conclusions

Based on the literature reviews, previous research and engagement with the range of stakeholders as part of the empirical investigation, the research team were able to analyse findings and draw some conclusions that contribute to the ongoing evolution of the Child Focussed Cities Analytical Framework. We have charted the conception of the idea at the Local Democracy Academy in Visby, Sweden and the nurturing of connections forged which led to conducting *'Let's get together and make change'* Impact Project. Our analysis, conclusions and recommendations highlight critical reflections that will contribute to further development and refinement of the conceptual framework. In particular the conclusions highlight key reflections on the importance of contextual sensitivity, dynamics of child and youth agency and why participation is invaluable both now and in the future.

### Translating the Sustainable Development Goals: People, places and policy

In each and every space, place and conversation the research team encountered the SDGs. From the burden of the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating pre-existing pressures on local government infrastructures, access to basic life-sustaining resources, and gender inequalities shaping everyday challenges for girls and boys to dynamic spaces of safety and harm for children – the immediacy of the SDGs were ever-present. Yet notably very rarely, if indeed ever, did the terminology of the SDGs explicitly feature in the exchanges throughout the visits. **Most exchanges reflected an understanding and practical exercise of SDGs but lacked the verbal acknowledgement of the SDGs in question. The SDGs were observed to be simultaneously everywhere and yet nowhere.** Interlinked to this was the theme of spoken languages, which featured in many conversations. In particular, the Director of Youth Invest (Victoria Falls) highlighted how spoken language was a key ingredient of participation and inclusion both in terms of working within a context with over 16 official languages and also infusing the communication styles and cultures of children and young people. Upon reflection, we must consider the 'language' of the SDGs and how accessible it is within and between different stakeholders, audiences and actors. Critically, to develop the CFCFAF we must interrogate the meaning around SDGs from children

and explore options for child/youth-centred translation of SDGs in multiple directions as a fundamental part of children and young people's participation and inclusion in matters which impact them.

### Participation is precarious

Fragility around participation and inclusion emerged strongly. Many of the representatives were engaged with a wider context of donors and NGOs for funding and these challenging dynamics created uncertainty around the life spans of services and projects. Some spoke of the sense of futility such as projects for out-of-school youth who then disengaged when projects ended. Other representatives shared creative methods through which they have built the sustainability of service. This included involvement in the planning process and income-generating endeavours that contributed to the sustainability of services such as GreenLine Africa youth centre (Victoria Falls) which positions young people as 'owners, beneficiaries and participants' and Kwatu Cash 4 Trash (Livingstone) as a youth-led recycling initiative generating investment in project development. Creatively embedding children and young people in development and oversight processes emerged as a striking and powerful dynamic which foregrounded participation and inclusion whilst also contributing to greater sustainability, independence and ownership of projects.

### Dynamic spaces of safety and harm

A key lesson learnt through the rich and varied exchanges relates to the meaning and fluidity of spaces where children and young people spend their time. During the visit, the team heard about and saw many different spaces where children and young people participate. We cannot know the meaning of these spaces for children and young people, but a dominant dimension was the significance of schools as spaces of safety, inclusion and participation from the adults' perspectives. Many people highlighted their concerns for children and young people who were disengaged from schools and youth aged between 17-21 who had transitioned out of the school system. This group emerged as a distinctly vulnerable group in

relation to participation and inclusion. This view was connected to the gaps in provisions after secondary schooling exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. We also heard great concerns about children and young people who cannot attend school, dropping out for social, economic, and health-related issues. Issues like 'child-headed families' where orphaned children end up parenting their younger siblings and acting as breadwinners. We learnt how young people find/create spaces to belong such as hanging out under trees which often led to social issues such as alcohol and drugs abuse. In Livingstone, marketplaces and their immediate peripheries appeared to be significant spaces for young people, and these were seen to be spaces of harm where they could be exploited. However, in the context of exclusion and marginalisation, these spaces may be experienced as simultaneously safe and harmful, and the challenge may be to increase safety in these contexts whilst addressing the structural and systemic factors which lead to their social exclusion.

## Participation as protective

Protection and participation are inseparable pillars in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Through our exchanges with the municipalities, we learned that the everyday lives of children can be experienced very differently. Individual, family and social differences can be compounded by contextual and systemic inequalities that create barriers for many children to be included and participate in matters which affect them. Examples include gender-based social issues, urban/rural contexts, leaving school early, unemployment and social marginalisation which many people we spoke with saw as inhibiting children and young people's sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing. From this perspective, participation is not only important for local governments to act as duty bearers of children's rights to participate, such as UNCRC Article 12, but also a means through which they can realise some aspects of rights around protection. In both municipality visits, we heard about children and young people who were viewed as being particularly socially excluded which led to anti-social and risky behaviours. In Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe this included young people who had left school early

or those aged 17-21 who were out of employment and in Livingstone, Zambia young people who spent time in and around open market spaces were identified to be of concern for local government and particularly challenging to engage. In both municipalities, people shared their welfare concerns for children and youth who used substances such as alcohol and drugs, at times leading to offending, as responses to feeling socially excluded.

There are many views on connections between social exclusion and anti-social behaviours, but one particularly powerful perspective foregrounds the multidimensional notion of 'mattering' (socially, economically, politically, digitally..) as an essential aspect of human experience. Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2020) explore the microsociology of violence as entangled with young people's sense of not mattering. This may be useful when considering the power and potential participation and inclusion, even at a micro level, particularly for those who are finding unhelpful and harmful ways of developing a sense of mattering such as engaging in drugs, risky behaviours and being drawn to contexts such as market spaces where they may be exploited as a means through which they can feel as if they 'matter'. For Greenline Africa, a waste management hub for youth based in Victoria Falls, youth participation should not just be considered during the implementation stage but from the planning and proposal stage. They maintain that "involvement means that youth become owners and not just beneficiaries of project: 'nothing for us without us.'" We also heard of different projects in Victoria Falls (such as Rose of Charity - a caring children's home, Young and Gifted Africans- a creative hub for youth, Youth Invest – a youth led NGO) and Livingstone (such as Kwatu Trash 4 Cash- a youth led recycling project) that illustrated different ways that those participating can develop a sense of mattering through social and environmental endeavours including contributing the economic sustainability of projects and being included in the development of provisions from the outset. For others, children and youth participated at local government levels such as the Junior and Youth Council (Victoria Falls) which may promote a sense of belonging. This illustrates that there is not a

prescriptive means through which participation and inclusion should occur but rather is positioned within the social ecology of different children and youth's everyday life. For those most excluded, they may feel a sense that they do not matter.

Hill and Warrington (2022, pp. 182-184) describe how participation is not only an “end” in and of itself but also a ‘means’ through which protection can be realised including ‘means to achieving wellbeing and safety’ and a ‘means’... to thrive, experience wellbeing, access social justice...though their role in countering a sense of powerlessness and supporting self-efficacy’. Further, young people who have experienced harm and abuse often doubt their sense of being deserving of protection so participation can be important in ‘recognising their entitlement to protection, care and respect as the foundation for accessing both safety and justice – individually and collectively’.

## Participation as a (life-long) process

Participation occurs in different contexts and levels of everyday life. It is perhaps easy to forget that time passes and children and youth participation is not only in the ‘here and now’ but also about experiences of mattering and being heard, which will optimise their participation over the course of their life. This is particularly relevant in populations that are marginalised and socially excluded. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1979), we also saw participation and inclusion as ecological and contextual. For example, young people in the Junior Council (Victoria Falls) were participating at a broader level (exosystemic) whereas we heard about children and young people who were at times struggling to participate in microsystems (e.g. school due to rural locations, socioeconomic barriers such as school fees etc and other social issues). The Primary School Headteacher spoke about participation acknowledging internal factors (personality, particular strengths &/ or skills) and external factors (opportunities, spaces) that interact to shape a child’s opportunities to be included. He also spoke about everyday exchanges that can be created for children to participate such as working in pairs and small groups. This highlights a

degree of ‘micro-participation’ which may be very important when we consider children and young people participating in SDGs. For some young people, they have the experiences and skills (internal and external) to participate at broader levels but for others, their experience of being heard, seen, and participating may be less, so we need to consider different ‘levels of participation’. We could consider these together as ‘building blocks to participation’. Otherwise we may risk empty participation, ‘only looking for them when we want them to participate’ (Greenline Africa), which may inhibit future participation.

## Recommendations

Our analysis and conclusions have generated rich reflections for the ongoing development of our vision to develop a Child Focused Cities Analytical Framework. They have also developed some key reflective recommendations we would like to highlight that are important for anyone working to enhance youth participation at any socio-ecological level including school, community, local government and research fields

### Create 'conducive conditions' for participation

Participation of children and young people is not a one-off event, neither is there a one-size-fits-all. Instead, it is ongoing and should constantly meet the ever-changing needs of children and young people in order to fulfil the goal of "leaving no child behind". Participation can easily become empty and static, and endeavours must strive to provide conducive conditions through which children and young people are effectively listened to. There is no 'one size fits all' and participation can occur across micro to macro levels. Lundy (2007, pp. 937) offers a useful chronology which can be developed to guide participation as a process - **Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence**. Lundy cites a child's 'right to audience' as a 'guaranteed opportunity to communicate views to an identifiable individual or body with the responsibility to listen'. Feedback is a strategy through which 'duty-bearers and decision makers get an opportunity to demonstrate to the rights holders how they have put the 'due' into 'due weight' (Lundy, 2018, . 349). In this sense, any participation should be understood as a dynamic and reciprocal exchange and not simply a one-way exchange. Our global futures lie in the hands of today's children and young people and experiences of mattering and meaningful inclusion, and we must nurture the seeds of hope we plant.

### Enhance tactical urbanism to advance child-focused spaces

Adult oriented processes are often inherently complex, lengthy and can sit at odd with the experience of time felt by children and youth. We highlight the utility of Tactical urbanism as a powerful tool to involve children

in the process of generating Child-Focused Cities. Lydon and Garcia (2015: 2) defined tactical urbanism as 'an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies'. Existing tools can be adapted to measure the impacts of the small-scale interventions carried out with children and learn about how to promote their meaningful engagement<sup>3</sup>. Tactical urbanism, by allowing learning by doing, can offer a range of measurable social and physical benefits. For example, through the co-design of small-scale interventions in public open spaces to improve children's quality of life, children develop their critical thinking, creativity and imagination, cognitive and communication skills, sense of belonging (Christidou et al., 2013), environmental and social consciousness (Hart, 1997), as well as the ability to become active citizens (Chawla & Heft, 2002). The possibilities are endless, but all actions need to take the local specifications and context into account. Tactical urbanism should be further explored in different contexts and cultural settings to support the planning and development of child-focused cities.

### Towards a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework

This research has introduced and refined the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework in an attempt to support local municipalities and authorities across the globe to enhance the planning and development of child-focused spaces and cities. The framework and Padlet interface created as part of this project could support decision-making to enhance child-focused spaces in various locations and cultural contexts, but needs to be refined to incorporate context-based considerations.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, <https://ciudademergente.org/measure-tools>



## Further Steps

### Publication of research results

This research and findings will be presented as a journal paper in a Special Issue of the journal 'Land' entitled: "Public Spaces: Socioeconomic Challenges". This objective is to translate the research findings to an academic paper to enhance the reach and impact of the project and socialise the findings and way forward across disciplines and sectors.

Cities Analytical Framework as a navigational tool for igniting and fostering the change that our world desperately needs.

### Contribute to the ICLD knowledge base and network

The research team aims to enhance international collaboration with various roles and institutions to enhance impact and broaden the scope of this research. The aim is to extend the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework to include more geographical contexts and cultural diversity. The International Society of City Planners (ISOCARP) confirmed interest to collaborate with the research team and explore future possibilities for research and projects pertaining to child-focused cities. The research team will investigate such and aim to formalise an international working agreement to further the work on child-focused cities and spaces.

### Further develop the Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework towards future inclusion to the ICLD knowledge base

The research team will make the research report available to the ICLD network, along with the information pertaining to the Padlet platform, in an attempt to support local municipalities and decision-making linked to child-focused cities and spaces. The research team will continue to seek further investment and funding opportunities to progress the initial research, and expand the case study investigation and context-based findings to more geographical locations and settings.

We conclude this research project with a commitment to share and expand our exchange and further contribute to the emergence of the Child-Focused

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# **THE GLOBAL GOALS**

For Sustainable Development