



a **Fondation Botnar** initiative



Healthy Cities for Adolescents Phase II

Mid-term Internal Learning Exercise – Executive Summary

October 2024

Executive summary

About the HCA-II programme

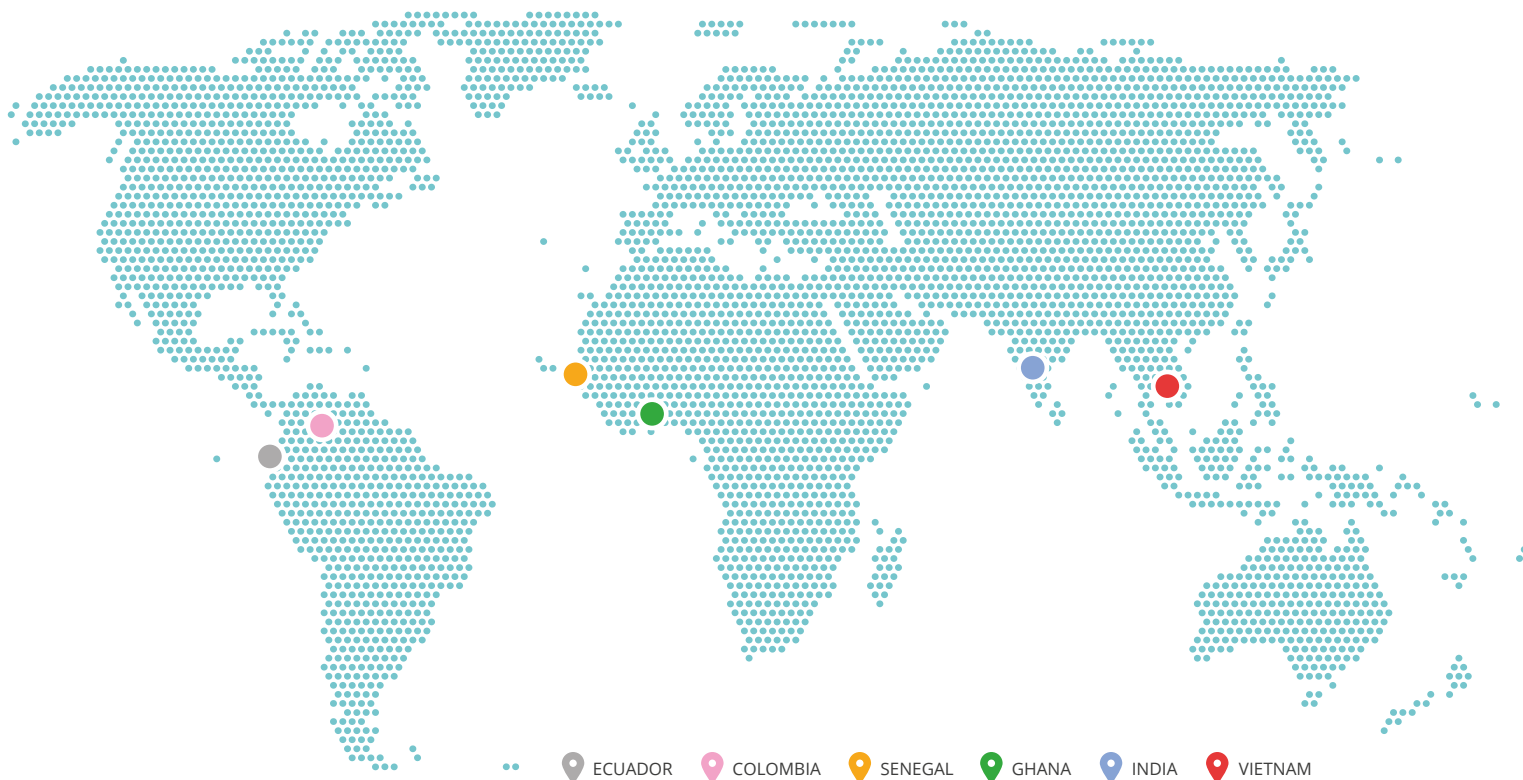
Healthy Cities for Adolescents (HCA)-II is the second phase of Fondation Botnar's flagship initiative to promote the health and wellbeing of adolescents in cities. HCA-II funds and supports projects across six countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Ghana, Senegal, India and Vietnam. HCA focuses on intermediary cities which represent some of the fastest growing urban and adolescent populations, and the greatest needs and opportunities for sustainable urban development. The programme seeks to foster cross-sector collaborations with multiple stakeholders at the city level to catalyse long-term systemic solutions.

About the MILE report

The MILE report captures lessons that are relevant across the programme, and explores the processes and systems implemented by the Global Team to support projects in delivering the wider programme strategy. It summarises how the programme intends to translate lessons into action to support future improvements and progress towards programme ambitions. [The report](#) is primarily intended for internal use to inform learning and adaption of the programme. Lessons generated may also be useful for similar programmes and wider stakeholders in the adolescent health and wellbeing (AHW) and sustainable development space.

About the MILE

The Mid-term Internal Learning Exercise (MILE) is a formative exercise intended to support learning around what is working well and what adaptations can be made to the HCA-II programme with an aim to enhance overall delivery and ultimately, impact. It captures learning around seven active HCA-II projects across six countries.



Seven active HCA-II projects participating in the MILE

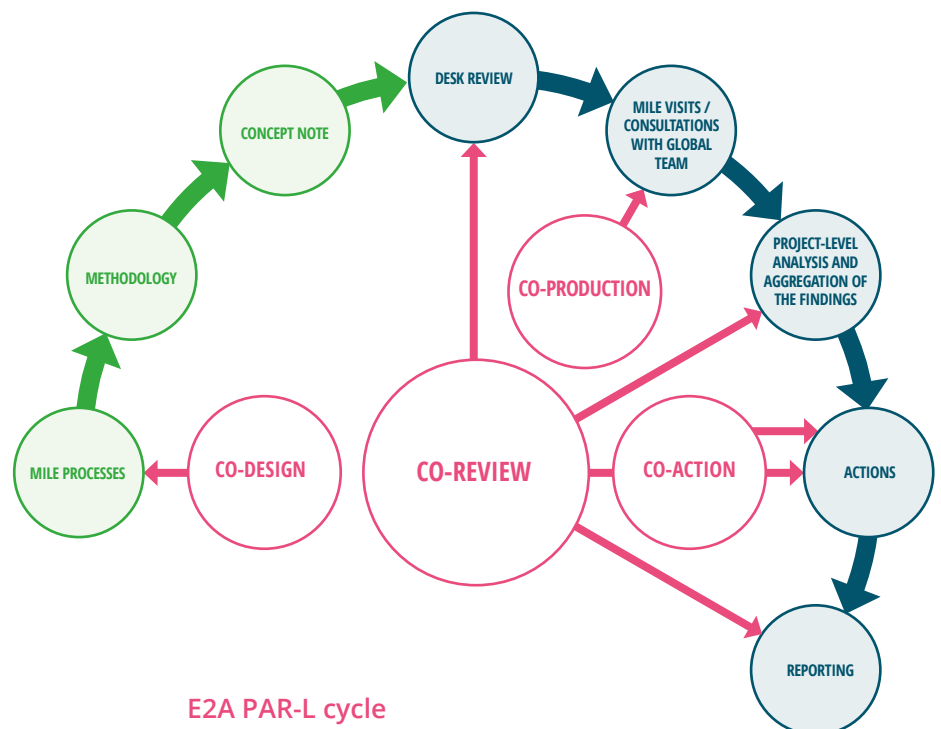
Project name	Country
Alza tu Voz (ATV)	Ecuador
Vivo Mi Calle! (VMC)	Colombia
Fort pour le Futur (FPF)	Senegal
Young and Safe (Y&S)	Ghana
Resilient City for Adolescents (RCA)	Ghana
Safe, Vibrant and Healthy Public Spaces (SVHPS)	India
Healthy Cities in Da Nang (HCDN)	Vietnam

The MILE explores research questions across five broad research domains:



Methodology

The MILE was co-designed and co-delivered by the Global Team, HCA-II in-country advisors (ICAs) and project partners, guided by the participatory action research and learning (PAR-L) cycle. The methodology included a comprehensive desk review and primary research consisting of in-country and online visits, discussions with project consortia, city authorities, adolescents and wider stakeholders. It concluded with a series of collaborative sense-making and action-planning workshops as part of the 'co-action' phase.





Research domain 1: How can we make our work fit for context?

For 'Fit for context' we looked at the alignment between project and programme-level design with the context, values, needs and resources in each specific operating context and the global operating context.

Fit for context – overview of current practice:

All Projects have ensured that adolescent health and wellbeing needs and priorities have fed into shaping project activities and have engaged wider stakeholders at various levels to ensure project design is fit for context and aligns with local needs. Approaches have included participatory needs assessment and co-design with adolescents, context assessments, situation analysis, stakeholder consultation and building on learning from HCA-Phase I. All projects have processes in place to monitor contextual changes and adapt accordingly.

At a programme level, HCA-II design has been informed by in-depth learning from Phase I and consultation with key stakeholders and heavily inspired by the Evidence to Action (E2A) Framework. The programme has produced several outputs to ensure it is fit for context including a Strategic Positioning Paper, four research papers on cross cutting themes of the programme (Systems change, Youth Participation, Equity & Inclusion, Harnessing Digital Approaches) and country-level scoping studies.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- **The selection of strong local partners** has supported engagement with communities and local authorities during project design.
- **Creative methods have supported meaningful youth engagement** in needs assessment and co-design.
- **Collaboration with adolescents in project co-design as part of the needs assessment and co-design (NACD) phase** has ensured that activities are tailored to address young people's real-life experiences and priorities within their cities.

Programme-level:

- **Scoping studies in each HCA-II country** helped to identify potential intermediary cities and assess the viability and entry points for HCA-II.
- **The introduction and ongoing piloting of dedicated funding and time for the participatory NACD phase** has helped to ensure that projects are designed based on emerging needs identified by adolescents, and that consortia are built in response to those needs.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Project-level:

- **Late engagement with partners, adolescents and community stakeholders** in context analysis and project design can contribute to delays and missed opportunities.
- **A lack of engagement with consortium partners in project design** can contribute to misunderstandings.
- **Balancing time and resources to conduct NACD** can be challenging. An open question remains regarding how to balance this time, especially when there is a need to progress into implementation.

Programme-level:

- Due to the need to focus on scale-up of the HCA-II programme, there has been **limited opportunity to identify and connect with other potential global partners in the AHW space** that could inform how the overall programme may need to adapt due to potential changes at the global level - see research domain 2.



Research domain 2: How can we ensure coherence with global initiatives in the adolescent health and wellbeing space?

For 'Coherence' we looked at processes around how HCA-II projects and the programme ensure alignment between local and global initiatives in the AHW space.

Coherence – overview of current practice:

All HCA-II projects have conducted mapping exercises, tailored to their thematic focus including stakeholder mapping, mapping of local policies, public spaces and existing services. Projects have also collaborated with city authorities to enhance local coherence including through design workshops, capacity building, scaling up existing activities delivered by authorities, and supporting city-level decision-making through data generation.

At a programme level, global initiatives have been extensively mapped to ensure coherence at the global programme level including through a study that was commissioned to identify other initiatives that aligned with HCA-II values and ethos.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- **The mapping exercises conducted by HCA-II projects have been crucial** for designing activities aligned with city-level priorities. When done collaboratively, mapping has provided first-hand information for projects to develop approaches that are building on the work of existing players in the AHW space.
- **Project consortium meetings and networks have contributed to enhancing relationships** between the different project stakeholders and helped improve governance at the city level.
- **Building new, or leveraging existing, city platforms** outside of project consortia has been an effective way to bring wider stakeholders together and support coherence.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Project-level:

- **Cutting across the wide scope of AHW** has made it difficult to align with all relevant government departments such as youth, health, urban development and education.

Programme-level:

- **There is a need for increased interaction and coordination with other Fondation Botnar initiatives**, especially in the Cities portfolio to foster and leverage greater internal coherence.
- Up to this point, the focus of the programme has been on identifying/establishing strong projects in the target countries. There has been **limited connection with wider complementary initiatives** at regional and global levels.



Research domain 3: Effectiveness

We considered 'Effectiveness' at two levels. *First*, we looked at the systems and processes that the overall programme has in place to support the delivery of both projects and the programme. *Second*, we examined how the projects and the programme are delivering on cross-cutting thematic priorities (summarised below in Effectiveness Part II).

Part I: How can programme-level systems and processes support effective and impactful delivery?

Programme-level systems and processes – overview of current practice:

At the programme level, the HCA-II programme management is organised into core workstreams relating to programme and financial management and administration, grants management, MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning) and communications. HCA-II has developed multiple systems and processes to provide support to projects across grants management, MEL, evidence generation, and advocacy. This includes a suite of project and financial management systems and tools, as well as regular feedback loops between the Global Team and the projects to discuss progress, challenges, and project adaptation. In addition, HCA-II has developed mechanisms to track and deliver against the programme strategy and overall goals and ambitions – including the programme Theory of Change (ToC), log frame, and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Through these mechanisms, HCA-II reflects upon its progress to ensure learning, adaptation, and continuous improvement.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

- **Most projects have found HCA-II project management and financial systems/processes comprehensive and supportive of project delivery.** For many projects, the structure of bi-annual strategic meetings and monthly operational calls with the Global Team has been relevant and useful.
- **Project and financial management support from the Global Team has been useful.** This has included workshops to build capacity and address any knowledge gaps at the project level.
- **Projects have appreciated flexibility from the Global Team** to amend project and financial management processes to suit different project contexts. This has included extensions to inception/NACD phases and reductions in reporting requirements, in line with project needs.
- **The HCA-II MEL systems/processes have been useful** for recording feedback, collating evidence, and identifying lessons at the project level. In particular, the learning and reflection journal has been an important tool for identifying and addressing issues in a timely manner.
- **Projects have valued the MEL support provided by the Global Team.** This has included reviews of MEL deliverables, feedback on MEL products, technical inputs to MEL plans, and capacity building workshops.
- **The in-country advisor (ICA) role is enabling support to projects that is more contextually relevant** and hands-on. It has been an invaluable addition to the delivery and management of the HCA-II programme and is now in the process of being scaled-up so that ICAs are even more empowered to manage day-to-day operations and provide on-going support to projects.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

- Some projects have experienced challenges with quarterly reporting that led to delays in receiving quarterly disbursements. It was noted that the structure of the quarterly report has required a granularity of detail that should be reserved for the annual report and takes time to complete which is perceived to take time away from implementation activities.
- For some projects, the introduction of new templates and deliverables post inception has been associated with additional unplanned cost and effort.
- Some projects have found the MEL requirements to be time-consuming and have required capacity development. In some cases, there have been challenges in understanding the E2A Framework and how it has been embedded into the programme. In other cases, local partners have not had sufficient capacity to implement the MEL recommendations and needed additional capacity building.
- Thematic research papers have been developed but practical operational guidelines have not yet been shared with projects due to competing delivery priorities.
- Although the ICA role adds value to project management and provides contextually relevant support for projects, there does not appear to be a shared and consistent understanding of the remit of the role and lines of accountability.

Part II: How can the programme promote thematic priority areas across its projects and wider work?

This section relates to the second part of the 'Effectiveness' domain in the research framework and explores learning around how the projects and the programme are delivering on cross-cutting thematic priorities: (1) equitable partnerships, (2) youth participation, (3) digital transformation and (4) equity and inclusion (E&I).



1: Equitable partnerships – overview of current practice:

Various mechanisms/processes have been developed to foster equitable partnerships within project consortia. In some cases, project roles and budgets have been distributed equally between the various project consortium partners. In others, mechanisms such as promoting consortia-level dialogue, and encouraging collective solution development have been put in place. At the programme level, the principle of equitable partnerships is emphasised by funding multi-stakeholder, community-led consortia rather than individual organisations.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- All projects have affirmed that the consortium model of working is valuable. Projects have expressed being able to leverage different organisational strengths, capacities, local knowledge and networks and achieve greater scale.

Programme-level:

- The project design phase places a strong emphasis on establishing and embedding consortium governance models.
- Consortium partners are encouraged to participate in strategic discussions. This underlines important signals around their value and status.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Project-level:

- For projects that did not have a NACD phase, a three-month inception period has been too short for planning, contracting and meaningful engagement across multiple consortium partners. This has been particularly challenging for organisations working with local governments without pre-existing relationships prior to the HCA-II project.
- Some projects initially struggled with levels of collaboration between the lead partner and consortium members. Collaborative working has since improved leading to better participation and improved relationships across the consortium.

Programme-level:

- Channelling project funding through the lead partner can work against the philosophy of equitable partnerships. It is complex and inefficient to fund multiple consortium partners individually, hence the decision to channel the funds through one partner. However, this can send mixed signals when it comes to promoting equitable partnerships. Use of terminology like 'lead partners' may also be problematic.
- Some local partners have shared that they have had few interactions with the Global Team, with the bulk of communication happening through lead partners, due to contractual arrangements.



2: Youth participation – overview of current practice:

All HCA-II projects have promoted **youth participation**, by involving adolescents within design and implementation in different levels and capacities. Most projects have at least one adolescent at the Project Steering Committee level, representing the voices of other adolescents and feeding into the strategic direction of the project. At the programme level, the Global Team commissioned a research paper on youth participation, and also has a dedicated technical advisor (TA) for strategic advice around this thematic priority.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- Convening a core group of adolescents to support co-design, delivery and strategic decision-making has increased ownership. For some projects, a core group of adolescents has provided active inputs to the overall design and implementation of project activities.
- Creative approaches have involved adolescents meaningfully, beyond co-design. These have included the use of creative activities (such as music, theatre, and painting), the creation of platforms (such as youth festivals and radio shows) and the development of innovative pathways to amplify adolescent voices.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Project-level:

- Challenges have included **scheduling conflicts with school activities, differing capacity levels among adolescents, and varying levels of interest** across activities.
- **Working with adolescents who live in difficult contexts has highlighted numerous barriers to participation.** Projects have found it challenging to engage adolescents while remaining sensitive to other aspects of their lives and competing needs, as well as ensuring they are not being extractive.

Programme-level:

- **There has been no adolescent input at the programme level to-date** – despite adolescent interest in inputting into strategic decision-making.
- **There is no platform to connect adolescents across the programme.** This has not been prioritised to date, and there are challenges associated with it, including language barriers. A country or regional approach could be a useful starting point.
- **Support by technical advisors around youth participation has been relatively under-utilised to date – certainly by projects.** Increasing the visibility of this resource and how projects can request this support will help to change that.



3: Harnessing digital transformation – overview of current practice:

Harnessing digital transformation takes different forms in different project contexts. Of the projects that are adopting digital approaches, some have leveraged existing digital platforms and tools, while a few have focussed on creating new ones. Further, some projects are emphasising digital skills and access as well as digital solutions recognising these aspects as key to harnessing digital transformation. At the programme level, the Global Team commissioned a research paper on harnessing digital transformation, and also has a dedicated technical advisor (TA) for strategic advice around this thematic priority.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- **Pairing digital skills trainings with work placements/internships is equipping adolescents with relevant, future-focussed skills** and enhancing their future employability. This includes building on the growing online presence of young people through training on coding, digital communication and social media, alongside online safety and security.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Project-level:

- It is important to acknowledge that **there is still a digital divide in certain project contexts**, with some adolescents – especially in marginalised communities – struggling with digital literacy and access.

Programme-level:

- **Support by technical advisors around digital transformation has been relatively under-utilised to date – certainly by projects.** Increasing the visibility of this resource and how projects can request this support will help to change that.



4: Equity and inclusion (E&I) – overview of current practice:

Projects have taken different approaches to addressing E&I. While some projects have specific activities for certain marginalised groups, others attempt to integrate E&I by trying to ensure fair representation of marginalised groups in general project activities and developing interventions to include vulnerable groups across various contexts. At the programme level, E&I principles have been embedded across strategic HCA-II documentation. Further, the Global Team commissioned a research paper on E&I and has a dedicated technical advisor (TA) for strategic advice around this thematic priority.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- **Mapping marginalised groups** has helped projects identify relevant groups. Most projects have performed a mapping, which has helped identify the pathways through which the specific needs of marginalised groups could be addressed.
- **Working with schools, communities, and local leaders** has helped projects reach marginalised communities and lent them increased legitimacy in the community.
- **Accommodating different needs as part of project activities** has ensured the participation of marginalised groups.
- **Specific E&I interventions have provided services for hard-to-reach communities.** Some projects have developed specific activities to target vulnerable groups.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Project-level:

- **Training is needed to boost awareness of and confidence with E&I principles.** Some projects have requested training in E&I concepts and agreement on approaches to increase awareness and support teams in integrating these principles in their work.
- **Meaningful inclusion of diverse and vulnerable groups of adolescents in robust design and delivery** has been a consistent challenge. While projects have different approaches to E&I, project teams, adolescents and city authorities have highlighted the need for more consideration around E&I and involving vulnerable populations within project activities.
- **Of the projects that target adolescents with disabilities, most have encountered challenges in meaningful inclusion.** This is due to a range of factors including accessibility issues, safety concerns, social stigma, lack of parental/family buy-in, and project-level resource constraints.
- Some projects have recognised that **it may not be possible to institute specific interventions for marginalised communities in every context** considering limitations in time, resources and budgetary constraints.



Research domain 4: How can we promote sustainability and enabling environments to support long-lasting shifts in system conditions?

In the context of HCA-II, we defined **Sustainability** as maintaining and supporting lasting project and programme outcomes beyond the grant making cycles. For indicators of **enabling environments**, we explored: (1) improved physical and digital spaces; (2) political will; and (3) resources and finances committed. The focus on creating 'enabling environments' is an important part of sustainability for HCA-II to lay the foundations for longer-term **shifts in system conditions** that will promote adolescent health and wellbeing in cities.

Sustainability and enabling environments – overview of current practice:

While projects included high-level sustainability considerations in their applications, detailed sustainability strategies and exit plans have generally not been fully integrated into their designs. Nevertheless, projects are enhancing sustainability through the creation of platforms for ongoing engagement between adolescents and decision-makers, the integration of activities into school curricula, and the development and implementation of policy and advocacy plans.

To enhance sustainability across the programme, HCA-II commissioned a research paper on systems change, which established key concepts and principles, mapped the current landscape in sustainable urban development, and informed the HCA-II Strategic Framework. A thematic toolkit is currently being developed from this research to help projects integrate systems thinking into their design and implementation. An advocacy strategy has been developed to identify global allies and key messages to promote lasting change beyond the programme's lifecycle.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- Projects have cultivated a **high level of buy-in among adolescents** who have demonstrated strong commitment to sustaining project activities.
- Early indications suggest that projects have contributed towards **new understanding, skills and opportunities** for adolescents to engage in and influence decision-making in their cities.
- **Adolescents have demonstrated new knowledge and increased understanding of the mechanisms to engage in and influence decision-making in their cities.** This represents a foundational shift for sustainable change.
- Projects have facilitated **meaningful engagement between city authorities and adolescents, supporting early shifts towards changes in mindsets.** Stakeholders in cities are beginning to understand the benefits of youth participation and the importance of investing resources to address AHW.
- There are **early signs of increased political will from local authorities**, some of which have shown interest in replicating project activities in the future, taking on management of adolescent-friendly spaces, or in changing specific regulations to promote AHW.
- **Early shifts have taken place towards improvements in city spaces, infrastructure and services to address AHW needs over the longer term.** Public spaces, such as parks, neighbourhoods, adolescent clinics and community centres have been revitalised.
- **Projects are in the process of exploring innovative funding streams** to enable the continuation of their activities. Projects are also beginning to look to the private sector to ensure sustainability of funding.

Programme-level:

- Research on approaches to support shifts in system conditions has helped to frame thinking on sustainability at a programme-level.
- The advocacy strategy, and strategic partnerships, represents an important route to programme sustainability to promote and influence longer lasting change.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Project-level:

- In general, projects are currently approaching sustainability as a somewhat siloed activity, rather than as a cross-cutting strategic priority. Although projects are contributing towards early shifts in system conditions (outlined above), they are not explicitly and deliberately tackling sustainability through a comprehensive systems-thinking lens.
- In some contexts, it has been challenging to solely rely on political will as a means of ensuring sustainability due to changes in political leadership.
- Projects have cautioned against allowing local authorities to co-opt project design/implementation for their own political gain.
- Some projects have been designed on the assumption that certain activities will be organically sustained via volunteers and communities beyond the project lifespan. An open question remains around whether this will be possible without sufficient resources to support ongoing activities.
- Adolescents have caveated that they cannot sustain projects alone. They are clear that they need support from local leaders to pave the way for them to raise their voices given the relatively unwelcoming environments they inhabit.

Programme-level:

- The Global Team has not yet developed a detailed programme strategy to translate sustainability considerations (reflected in the HCA-II Strategic Positioning Paper) into actionable plans with projects.



Research domain 5: How can we facilitate shared learning, adaptation and dissemination?

For 'Shared Learning' we looked at the promotion of learning at the project level, across projects, and at the programme level.

Shared learning – overview of current practice:

All projects have developed strategies for continuous learning, employing mechanisms such as quarterly and annual reflection sessions, along with collecting regular feedback from adolescents and stakeholders. They have also implemented approaches, such as workshops, to share learnings and progress with local adolescents, officials, communities, and organisations. However, the dissemination of learning at project, national, and global levels has been limited, as many projects are still in the early stages of implementation. Projects are now formulating strategies to share their findings as evidence emerges and are collaborating with ICAs to explore their potential role in this dissemination effort.

HCA-II has various mechanisms to reflect and document learning at the programme level including internal quarterly risk discussions, bi-annual reflection sessions with the Global Team and ICAs, regular project-level feedback (both formal and ad-hoc) and an annual review with Fondation Botnar. The programme fosters continuous learning through adaptive processes and has plans to further disseminate knowledge via the HCA-II website, learning networks, and webinars. The Global Learning Forum (May 2024) was an opportunity to facilitate in-person learning between projects. Additionally, the Global Team is collaborating with a Global Learning Partner (GLP)¹ to shape the learning agenda and provide technical support including conducting in-depth research into priority learning areas identified by projects and the programme not already captured.



What have we learned about what's been working well?

Project-level:

- **Adolescents have valued the feedback mechanisms implemented by the projects** reporting that they have allowed for meaningful feedback that project teams consider.
- There are **numerous examples of project activity improvements and adaptations made** based on the lessons learnt so far.
- **Projects have successfully developed context relevant dissemination mechanisms** to share AHW learning and engage on AHW with adolescents, officials and external organisations at the city level.

Programme-level:

- **The first HCA-II Global Learning Forum (GLF) was a significant learning event for the HCA-II community.** It created a unique opportunity for projects from across countries to meet in person and interact over three days of reflection and workshops.



What have we learned about what's been challenging?

Programme-level:

- Projects have valued the opportunities to exchange and share learning when organised by the Global Team, but **there has been minimal follow-up between them afterwards.**
- Although projects have acknowledged the benefits of an HCA-II CoP, **the Facebook group is not viewed as a suitable interaction platform.**
- **Approaches to meaningfully engage adolescents in programme-level strategy and decision making have been limited,** despite plans to bring adolescent representatives across all projects to participate in-person at the GLF.

¹ Institute of Development Studies (IDS) holds the GLP contract and operates within the MEL workstream.

Translating learning into action



Projects and ICAs co-developed and prioritised project-level actions based on lessons identified via sensemaking and action-planning workshops.



ICAs will work with individual projects to determine granular action plans at project-level.



This process was mirrored by the Global Team, where a programme-level action-plan was co-developed and prioritised, incorporating feedback from projects.



Follow-up and further reflection is planned to review progress on actions and learning at GT level and with ICAs over the next 6 and 12 months.

**Healthy
Cities**
for Adolescents



a Fondation Botnar initiative



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