Healthy Cities for Adolescents

a **Fondation Botnar** initiative

Equity and Inclusion in projects supporting young people's health and wellbeing in intermediary cities: lessons from HCA-II.

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Executive Summary

Purpose: this report seeks to identify good practices supporting Equity & Inclusion (E&I) in the Healthy Cities for Adolescents II Programme (HCA-II, 2022-2026), managed by Ecorys Consulting. This is one of multiple programmes supported by Fondation Botnar that aim to improve the lives and wellbeing of adolescents and youth in cities around the world.

Intermediary cities, having populations less than 1 million people, are the predominant focus of the HCA-II programme. Such cities contain most of the global urban population yet typically receive less attention in studies and development programming than large, mega, and capital cities.

This paper maps out E&I challenges in the HCA-II programme and brings out tacit knowledge and practical solutions tried by project staff that help to navigate these. The paper further enquires if, and how trade-offs may arise in efforts to achieve both equity and inclusion goals, as well as other programme goals such as working in consortia, seeking partnership with, and having impact on government and other stakeholders. Finally, the paper offers project staff's reflections on the operational context of intermediary cities.

Methodology: the paper looks at nine active projects in the HCA-II portfolio at the time the research was conducted in local city contexts in Ghana, Senegal, Vietnam, India, Colombia and Ecuador. It is prepared by the Institute of Development Studies and supported by a group of affiliated in-country research experts, which together act as the Global Learning Partner to the HCA-II programme. The study adopted an iterative participatory analytical process, rooted in jointly designed research questions. It entailed a series of consultations and interviews with programme implementers, Ecorys in-country managers and grantees, and joint sensemaking of findings. It also benefits from a set of Focus Group Discussions with young people.

The paper captures existing knowledge, challenges and good practices, identifies opportunities for enhancing E&I, and offers concrete recommendations that can be taken forward in the next stage of HCA-II.

Findings: The key results from this research highlight that while Equity and Inclusion were not a central part of HCA-II strategy and projects' remit, multiple E&I challenges were encountered by all HCA-II projects. Many of these reference socio-cultural norms, including regarding age-based social hierarchies; gender; class; race, ethnicity, caste and religious minorities; and disability. Socio-cultural norms also

intersect with territorial insecurity to influence the ability of adolescents to engage with HCA-II projects. Project staff are often aware of these, and some projects had included measures to address E&I challenges into their design and activity plans. Where E&I challenges were not part of the design and not centrally addressed, project staff are gaining expertise on how to address these on an everyday basis but are constrained by time and resources.

Projects constantly need to consider trade-offs in terms of addressing E&I challenges. The paper identifies four types of trade-offs. These concern a) Depth vs breadth of youth participation in consortia; b) Involving local authorities: buy-in vs risk to meaningful participation; c) Engaging the most disadvantaged adolescents and neighbourhoods vs scope and impact; and d) Youth ownership vis-a-vis project sustainability.

Across HCA-II countries, project staff noted that intermediary cities enabled them greater ease of access to local government authorities; facilitated covering all areas/neighbourhoods in an inclusive manner and entailed less institutional density and complexity.

Finally, the report lists a set of specific recommendations for the remainder of the HCA-II programme, including in the case of project extensions, and suggestions for the longer term.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical period marked by rapid physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development and a period of the life course when many of the factors that contribute to lifelong health and wellbeing are, or are not, acquired or solidified (Ross et al. 2020). Experiences during this time profoundly influence wellbeing both in the short and long term. Yet, adolescents, and especially those aged 10-19 years, have long not been a political priority, have been neglected in policymaking processes regarding policies and programmes that affect them, and have fallen between cracks in service provision. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its pledge to "leave no one behind" will thus not be achieved if urgent attention is not paid to adolescents and their health and wellbeing (Mohan et al. 2022).

Cities, of varying scopes and sizes are the homes of a majority of young people, globally. In 2020, around 56 per cent of the world's population – some 4.4 billion people – lived in urban areas, of which 1.18 billion were children. Rural to urban migration, natural growth, as well as city boundary recalibrations spur global urbanisation rates, which are projected to expand from 56 per cent in 2021 to 68 per cent in 2050 (UN-Habitat & Global Utmaning, 2022). Over 90 per cent of the urban population increases is taking place in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF, 2022). Low-income countries' cities and towns thus are increasingly home to the world's youngest populations.

Importantly, a majority of the urban population resides in secondary or intermediary cities (UN Population Division, 2018). Despite their demographic importance, intermediary cities often remain neglected as scholarly, policy and programmatic attention tends to privilege large, mega- and capital cities.

Health and wellbeing for young urban residents is intrinsically related to the ways in which urban systems work or do not work for them. There is growing realisation that their incorporation in urban life is rarely on equitable or equal terms, with young people subject to varying degrees of inclusion, exclusion and constrained participation in important social, economic and political domains. Here, attention is due to both the structural features of exclusion, including socio-cultural norms that may inhibit or support, but also to the ways in which power inflects divergently on individuals' and groupings' specific intersectional profiles and vulnerabilities. Undoubtedly, some urban geographies are of greater significance. In the absence of planned provisioning of adequate and affordable housing, urban informal settlements proliferate, which are often characterised by insecure tenure,

substandard housing, weak public services (including health) and unsafe living environments. The estimated number of children living in slums is 350 to 500 million, which is set to triple by 2050 (UNICEF, 2022).

Some international development actors have increasingly focused on improving the health and wellbeing of adolescents and youth in cities. UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative, for instance, seeks to address young people's desires, visions and aspirations and developed guiding principles based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, n.d). However, there is still limited evidence on the best practices for addressing Equity & Inclusion (E&I) in urban programming for young people (Loveday, 2023).

Accordingly, this paper seeks to address this research gap, looking across project activities undertaken in six countries as part of the Healthy Cities for Adolescents II Programme (HCA-II, 2022-2026). This is one of multiple programmes supported by Fondation Botnar that aim to improve the lives and wellbeing of adolescents and youth in cities around the world. Building on a prior Healthy Cities for Adolescents I Programme, HCA-II focuses on intermediary cities. A central goal of the programme is to realise improved outcomes and increased equity in priority health and wellbeing domains for adolescents in such settings. HCA-II comprises funded projects that tackle the health and wellbeing concerns of adolescents in local city contexts in Ghana, Senegal, Vietnam, India, Colombia and Ecuador. This paper looked at nine active projects in the HCA-II portfolio at the time the research was conducted. Annex 1 presents a brief overview of those projects in terms of their aims, approaches and activities.

This paper maps existing E&I challenges encountered by HCA-II projects and brings out tacit knowledge and practical solutions tried by project staff that help to navigate and, to some extent, overcome these challenges. The paper presents findings from a series of consultations and interviews with programme implementers, Ecorys in-country managers and grantees. It is prepared by the Institute of Development Studies and supported by a group of affiliated in-country research experts, which together act as the Global Learning Partner to the HCA-II programme. They adopted a participatory analytical process to reflect on learnings emerging from the nine HCA-II projects involved in the research.

The paper captures existing knowledge, challenges and good practices, identifies opportunities for enhancing E&I, and offers concrete recommendations that can be taken forward in the next stage of HCA-II. The key findings from this research were:

i. Projects encounter multiple E&I challenges and staff are aware of these, and some projects had included measures to address E&I challenges into their design and activity plans.

ii. Where E&I challenges were not part of the design and not centrally addressed, project staff are gaining expertise on how to address these on an everyday basis, but are constrained by time and resources.

iii. Projects constantly need to consider trade-offs in terms of addressing E&I challenges vs. scope and reach of the project.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces key aspects of the debate around E&I in relation to programming for adolescents and youth in cities, and where E&I is currently integrated in the HCA-II programme. Section 3 outlines the objectives of the current study and elaborates the methodology used for collecting insights from projects. Next, Section 4 discusses the key E&I challenges encountered by projects and documents some of the measures projects have taken in response. Thereafter, Section 5 reflects on trade-offs: when opting for addressing certain E&I issues, what dilemmas occur, what is lost or how may measures create new challenges? Section 6 proceeds with project staff's reflections on the operational context of intermediary cities. The final section concludes and presents recommendations at the project and programme levels.

2. Equity and Inclusion in programming for adolescents

2.1 E&I challenges for adolescents in cities

The World Bank (2020) distinguished several Urban E&I Principles that need to be realised for those living in cities: accessibility, connectivity (in terms of traversing the city), safety, health, climate resilience and security. UN-Habitat notes these and additional needs for living a good life in cities in its 'Her City' initiative: access to technology, decision-making and leisure (UN-Habitat & Global Utmaning 2022, p.18-19). The broader debate on E&I in relation to cities has outlined the inequalities experienced by various population groups to enjoy good urban lives, with research paying particular attention to low-income groups, especially slum residents; gender; and migrant populations, refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (Bailey & Otsuki 2025; Khan et al. 2023; Van Ham et al. 2021). In parallel, urban systems analyses point to the complex interconnected sets of institutions, policy and

regulatory norms and environments, infrastructures and networks that shape the day to day functioning of cities and its inhabitants' wellbeing.

Social exclusion is a key determinant of health and well-being, with power dynamics undermining the ability of certain groups to equally participate in social and economic arenas such as educational achievement, achieve social mobility and find decent work, and participate in decision-making and have their voices heard (Mir et al. 2024). There is broad agreement that intersecting inequalities shape experiences, life and wellbeing in the city and compound disadvantage, with low-income groups, minorities and women being more susceptible to vulnerability and shocks and experiencing disadvantage. The position of children, adolescents and youth has received relative less attention in this field (but see e.g. Gupte et al, 2014).

Moreover, children and youth are considered to experience relatively more deprivation and are routinely excluded from formal decision-making processes, like local state authorities (Chatterjee et al. 2021; Mir et al. 2024; Shtebuneav et al. 2023). The HCA-II Strategy Paper on E&I produced in 2023 concludes that there is limited evidence on how to address E&I as well as on best practices from youth-inclusive urban programming (Loveday, 2023). With respect to programming, adolescents often 'fall between the cracks' as interventions tend to target children (aged 0 to 10) or young adults in age group 18 to 24 (Chatterjee et al. 2021, p.13).[1]

For consistency, this report uses the same definitions of equity and inclusion as included in the HCA-II Strategic paper of E&I (Loveday, 2023). Following definitions of the World Health Organisation (WHO), adolescents are those between 10 and 19 years of age, whereby some distinguish early adolescence (aged 10-14) from older adolescence (15-19). Adolescence is considered a period of rapid biological, psychological and social change. This report uses 'youth' and 'young people' interchangeably. Equity is understood as the process of 'levelling the playing field' through the provision of benefits, resources, and opportunities that respond to the needs of urban residents and the specific challenges faced by marginalised groups (World Bank 2020). Social inclusion is about enjoying equal rights and opportunities. Promoting the inclusion of adolescents is about understanding and addressing the power dynamics and intersecting inequalities that inhibit social inclusion: not only are adolescents a disadvantaged group, certain social identities within the broader category of adolescents experience deeper levels of marginalization. Certainly,

[1] The United Nations defines youth as those between the ages of 14 and 24, but different policy actors use different age-based definitions and in some contexts the category 'youth' stretches up to the age of 35.

realizing an 'inclusive city' requires multiple dimensions of need to be addressed: social, economic, spatial, environmental, and political inclusion (Liang et al. 2022). Without addressing dynamics that produce inequities and may thus create E&I challenges, projects risk reproducing and potentially even deepening inequities.

2.2 Global frameworks

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is foundational to enhancing E&I for children and young people. Key articles of this convention uphold children's right to have a voice and be considered in decisions that affect them, be protected from violence and have the right to adequate housing, and play. The CRC thus recognizes the importance of voice and participation, as well as children's wellbeing. In addition to the CRC, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the related "Agenda 2030" that set the deadline for attaining the SDGs by 2030, as well as the UN Youth Strategy "Youth 2030" are major policy frameworks for promoting the E&I of young people and offer entry points for specifically addressing their health needs and wellbeing in cities through SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. SDG 11 specifically mentions youth (and women) in its objectives to improve safe, accessible and affordable transport and access to green and public spaces. SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls resonates with the CRC as it emphasizes voice and participation, as well as elimination of all forms of violence.

The 2030 Agenda brought a renewed focus on social inclusion and various UN entities such as UNICEF (2022) have announced expanding its work in urban areas due to increasing urbanization, which is not necessarily met with the advantages of living in urban areas that are often assumed, like proximity to services and jobs. UN Habitat initiated 'Her City' to promote girls' and women's participation in urban planning and design processes to realise inclusive cities (UN-Habitat & Global Utmaning, 2022).

2.3 E&I in the context of the HCA-II programme

Within the context of the HCA-II programme, E&I is a designated area of learning. This learning process started off with a strategic paper published in the early stage of the programme, which presented an overview of key concepts and lessons learnt from programmes implemented by UN bodies and INGOs (Loveday, 2023). E&I principles have been embedded across strategic HCA-II documentation at the programme level, including the programme's Theory of Change and Logframe, and there is some expertise on E&I among the programme staff.

The Midterm Internal Learning Exercise (MILE) report published in October 2024 indicates that projects are addressing E&I in various ways. Most projects have mapped marginalised groups and their needs, have engaged community stakeholders to reach them, and have tried to accommodate their needs. Some have provided services for hard-to-reach communities, like transport for participants to attend project activities. Gender, age, class and disability are key dimensions of inclusion considered by projects, but there are limits to what projects can do to reduce barriers due to project scope, budget and time constraints (Ecorys, 2024). Knowledge about gender-sensitive approaches appears to be more strongly integrated into projects, whereas addressing E&I challenges related to class and disability requires further attention. The inclusion of different vulnerable groups with divergent needs, has been a consistent challenge across projects, because each group would require dedicated support in the form of staff time and resources. Various projects have requested expert advice (ibid.).

3. Research objectives, design and methodology

3.1 Objectives

This paper aims to capture and share lessons about the ways in which HCA-II projects encounter and deal with sociocultural norms as factors that may foster or inhibit young people's participation in health and wellbeing programming in intermediary cities, shaping its equity and inclusion outcomes. We consider that: "Sociocultural norms are the shared expectations and rules that guide behavior within a society or cultural group, shaping individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and social interactions." (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018, p. 45). By supporting meaningful youth engagement, the overall HCA-II programme addresses social norms that grant power and voice to those considered 'adult' and senior in society.

Social norms that require respect for senior citizens and demand deference from children and adolescents are universal, whereas the extent to which children, adolescents and youth are excluded from decision-making can strongly vary across contexts. Age-based social hierarchies are thus strongly informed by social norms around seniority and who gets a right to voice (Durham, 2004). Moreover, specifically for the African context, the debate on 'social adulthood' has shown how young people find it increasingly hard to meet the social indicators of adulthood in

their respective societies such as formal marriage and independent housing, which means that many will not have become respectable adults long after they became adults according to age-based definitions (Cole, 2011).

Who is considered a 'youth' -and is thus denied voice and opportunity- may thus depend on contextually defined notions of what the transition to social adulthood ought to look like (Durham, 2004)[2]. Despite experiencing norms around seniority and adulthood as a constraint, young people around the world have agency and seek to negotiate these norms to have their voices heard (Bleck et al. 2023). These dynamics pertain to interactions between young people and adults in positions of authority within and beyond the family, including in municipalities and other institutions that are part of urban systems.

Shifting social norms around adolescents being perceived as 'not yet citizens' and not worth listening to, requires a change in mindset by adult stakeholders. The MILE report indicates there are early signs of this occurring (Ecorys, 2024). In recent years, the World Health Organisation devised an Adolescent Well-being Framework which frames wellbeing as "Adolescents have the support, confidence, and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realizing their full potential and rights" (Ross et al. 2020, p.472). Responding to this call to action, all HCA-II projects give adolescents ample opportunities to grow their confidence. This formative learning paper addresses norms about age and generation, but also gender, ethnicity and religion, class, and disability, acknowledging intersections.

Additionally, the paper enquires if, and how trade-offs may arise in efforts to achieve both equity and inclusion goals, as well as other programme goals such as working in consortia, seeking partnership with, and having impact on government and other stakeholders. Recognising that project implementing partners often have significant knowledge about contextual socio-cultural norms and professional expertise in how to handle these to achieve greater equity and inclusion of adolescents and young people, this learning paper articulates the tacit knowledge embedded within HCA-II projects. Lessons learnt can inform the remainder of the HCA-II programme, as well as other current and future Botnar Foundation-supported programmes involving adolescents and young people in urban settings.

The research questions (Box 1) addressed in this learning paper were co-constructed by project partners and Ecorys' in-country managers involved in HCA-II during an in-person meeting and group discussions in Bath in May 2024. Project

[2] Since the HCA-II programme uses age brackets in selecting participants, this is less of an issue within the programme.

partners provided further inputs during a subsequent online consultation (August/September 2024). Field based activities were conducted from September-December 2024.

As the findings will show, projects are already taking multiple measures to address certain norms that create E&I challenges: some by design and some in a 'learning by doing' kind of way, adapting implementation strategies where relevant and possible within the overall project design and budgets. According to the MILE report, projects that implemented a mapping of vulnerable groups at the start helped identify the pathways through which their specific needs could be addressed (Ecorys, 2024, p.46). Other projects engaged community stakeholders and knowledgeable partners to identify groups and learn about dynamics of vulnerability and needs.

Box 1: Research questions

The learning paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways and to what effect do HCA-II projects seek to navigate prevailing socio-cultural norms to affect equity and inclusion within projects?

2. What kinds of trade-offs arise when HCA-II projects attempt to meet project equity and inclusion goals as well as programme goals (e.g. regarding consortia building, working with authorities, sustainability)?

3. How, why and to what effect do projects respond to such trade-offs?

4. What lessons may be learnt from these efforts to navigate socio-cultural norms and programming trade-offs, and in what ways do these relate to the characteristics of intermediary cities?

3.2 Research approach, methodology, strengths and limitations

Based on qualitative Key Informant Interview (KII) data, this learning paper collates perspectives of implementing partners of the programme, including project grantees, including lead and implementing partner organisations in the six HCA-II countries, as well as Ecorys in-country managers. It also presents findings from a light touch engagement with adolescents and youth who participated in HCA-II

project activities in four out of the six countries, and shared perspectives on E&I in focus group discussions (FGDs).

Table 2 shows which research activities were implemented in each country and how many participants were involved.

Table 2: research instruments and respondents per country

	Number of KII occasions	Number of KII respondents	Number of FGD groups	Number of FGD participants
Colombia	3	3	0	0
Ecuador	5	6	2	21 (10 males, 11 females)
Ghana	4	4	4	28 (16 males, 12 females)
India	4	10	0	0
Senegal	4	4	2	19 (7 males, 12 females)
Vietnam	2	2	1	9 (5 males, 4 females)
Totals	*22*	*29*	*11*	*77 (38 boys, 39 girls)*

IDS designed the research approach and instruments to be used for interviews and FGDs, which were refined using feedback from in-country research experts involved in the Global Learning Partnership. Researchers (in-country experts affiliated with IDS) ensured that the FGD activities with adolescent participant were playful and conducted in a safe and open environment, to ensure quality. The FGDs involved participatory methods such as theatre and drawing, which offer young participants an easy and accessible avenue for expressing themselves. They generate visual and written materials that bring out young people's perspectives on equity and inclusion. FGD participants were between 12 and 24 years of age, with selection dependent on availability and interest to participate.

Between October and December 2024, these in-country research experts and in some instances IDS researchers conducted the research activities in each of the

countries. The study adhered to requirements for doing ethical research with children and young people and obtained ethical approval from the IDS Research Ethics Committee. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on prior informed consent, including from parents and guardians of participants who were under the age of 18. Participation was anonymous and no names are used when discussing findings.

Data for each KII (some comprising multiple respondents) were collected, summarised and translated into English. Furthermore, a summary report was generated across the interviews for each country by the in-country research experts. Where required, clarifications were sought and made by in-country researchers.

This approach entailed strengths and limitations. The iterative, participatory learning process adopted after data collection helped to ensure the quality of the results, as this paper benefited from multiple rounds inputs from HCA-II project participants and leadership. As a first step, IDS researchers used the findings from FGDs and KIIs to devise a draft version of the report. This report was circulated ahead of two online sensemaking sessions[3] involving project participants from across the six countries, seeking to present, discuss and validate findings and recommendations. Subsequently, in-country researchers, Ecorys in-country managers, and two members of the Ecorys HCA-II team commented on the first draft of the report, prompting some revisions.

Recognising that the nine HCA-II projects in six countries (Colombia, Ecuador, India, Ghana, Senegal and Vietnam) are at different stages of implementation (some in the design phase, others having progressed to implementing phase), and having different capacities to engage with the research, project grantees were asked to opt in to the various activities conducted for this study. Consequently, the empirical materials that were generated were not similar across project contexts, and this is reflected in the reporting below, where insights from some projects sometimes offer more details. Rather than going for a balanced approach showing similar levels of insight for each country, this report opts for showcasing testimonies commenting on shared and locally specific themes, where available, to deepen insights.

[3] In total, 17 participants attended the online sensemaking sessions and four participants sent written feedback after reviewing the draft report, which was incorporated into the final draft.

4. Findings: Navigating sociocultural norms and E&I challenges

This section of the learning paper covers the most pertinent sociocultural norms that affect E&I of young people across the HCA-II programme. The analysis showed that especially social norms about age, gender, ethnicity and religion, class, and disability generate expectations and social rules that guide young people's behaviour. In addition, security emerged as a challenge to E&I. While security is not social norm, insecurity intersects with for instance gender and therefore influences the ability of adolescents to engage with HCA-II projects. The sub-sections cover each of these issues, foregrounding the perspectives of study participants. The perspectives of adolescents and staff are clearly distinguished and, where relevant, intersectionality is addressed. Each section also contains reflections on existing measures and actions used to address the respective challenges.

4.1 Social norms around age-based social hierarchies

The findings of the study for this learning paper show that socio-cultural norms that create age-based hierarchies continue to be a major challenge to E&I. For Ecuador, adolescent participants noted that they lack confidence about how they should feel when present in public spaces. They explained this as feeling unsure about "what the rules are" when they use public spaces in the city and are often afraid of "being told off". They asked to learn more about "the rules". However, this narrative reflects how they conflate formal rules ('public spaces are freely accessible to all') and de facto rules that restrict young people's access and use of these spaces, which they have internalised as not having a right to "be" in public space.

Respondents in Ghana noted that young people cannot question their elders or participate meaningfully in decision-making and governance structures. Resulting from this norm is a deeply entrenched belief that young people lack the capacity and experience to contribute meaningfully, which silences their voices. Similarly, in India, parents did not think that their children ought to be consulted (regarding public space interventions supported by HCA-II), as the idea that adolescents should express their voices and opinions was in tension with community norms. Likewise, in Senegal, young people were not supposed to exercise voice, particularly in the presence of adults: *"it is considered that adolescents don't have rights, but only*

duties. Even if during family meetings, they are not included." (Senegal, KII, 10 December 2024).

Building confidence and voice

Despite persisting challenges, the findings show that projects offer adolescents to 'practice participation' and enhance their capacity to speak in public, often starting in small safe spaces and groups and then in public fora. Young people in Senegal noted that they valued how, because of HCA-II, they are acknowledged as a resource in their communities, to the point that they are sought by other NGOs. Some are currently helping the project in a 'quasi-staff' position. They brought this up in contrast with challenges to participation such as a lack of self-confidence, shyness, and lack of communication and public speaking skills (notably, in French, which is the official language of state bureaucracies).

A grantee in India considered that: *"For them (adolescents, ed.), the elevated social status of being involved was very important, because they have very limited opportunities. The project allowed them to share their ideas, to even travel to a different city. This is a rare opportunity. They even joined the Global Learning Forum virtually…They told us: "Our parents raise us to become good natured, but not to become confident. This is what we gained from the project engagement". It really changed their lives. Certain adolescents came back to us, asking for more engagement…clear demand. This is a big parameter of success for [organisation].*" (India, KII, 1 October 2024).

The "Resilient City for Adolescents" in Ghana also offers a strong example of an effort promoting voice through a youth parliament at city-level. Yet, each project that encourages public engagement by adolescents can push against and transgress restrictive norms by creating positive examples of youth participation. In India, implementing partners noted: "*Parents thought that adolescents can't really be good decision makers. But when they saw that these adolescents did a public space audit, and we worked on inclusivity… etc… and talked with their parents, then parents also felt confident about their children.*" (India, KII, 13 December 2024).

Working with champions

One good practice emphasised in Senegal was to use 'adolescent role models': they had hired young people for certain project positions: *"Contrary to adults, young people speak the language of the youth and are more likely to be understood.* (…) *When one wants to work with the mass, one has to create leaders because the mass cannot develop itself"* (Senegal, KII, 10 December 2024). Thus, youth peer educators played an important role in engaging communities, and here "*it is important to involve local*

leaders and not just the adolescents." (Senegal, KII, 9 December 2024). Moreover, by working with existing local organisations that work with young people, it is easier to operate: *"It is much easier to enrol young people collectively than individually. Therefore, we identify existing organizations."* (Senegal, KII, 29 November 2024). As the next section demonstrates, involving female role models can overcome gender norms that constrain the participation of girls.

Obtaining support for adolescent participation in HCA-II activities frequently required engaging and convincing parents, sometimes with the explicit or tacit support from intermediaries, such as other influential local leaders and respected adults. An implementing partner from India described the general approach as being two-pronged: "*On one hand working with adolescents and on the other hand we had to work with the community. With that combination we overcame any issues."* (India, KII, 11 November 2024).

In Senegal, one grantee reported: "*In one case, I asked one youth leader's mother to accompany to meet a dad in order to pledge for a parental authorization. On our way, she suggested that we ask the neighbourhood chief to come with us. Once I explained the objectives of the trip and what was at stake, the village chief himself made the pledge that convinced the parent to authorize her daughter to travel with me to WUF."* (Senegal, KII, 10 December 2024).

The advantage of working with local leaders is that *"They know the nooks and crannies of their communities and can help us detect young people with an interesting profile."* However, there is sometimes a risk associated with using these intermediaries because *"they can have financial expectations; and they can try to control the participation of the young people whom they have facilitated their involvement in the project activities."* (Senegal, KII, 29 November 2024). This challenge is further addressed in Section 5 on the trade-offs encountered when involving local authority.

Promoting positive youth-stakeholder relationships

In Colombia, project interactions raised the point of how to navigate and effectively work with existing neighbourhood level institutions, while ensuring that young people are meaningfully included. Reports noted that neighbourhood institutions like the Community Action Board (Junta de Accion Communal) were dominated by adults who don't take youth voices seriously: *"We realized that in the project we found a tension between adult and young people. Many times, we have seen how adults, especially men, silence the voice of others."* (Colombia, KII, 12 December 2024). Consequently, young people felt disconnected or apathetic interacting with this

board. Moreover, when the project organised informal committees involving youth leaders, authorities were found to be dismissive, as the committees did not have a formal role.

Such attitudes were also observed in another project in Thrissur, India, which sought to co-create the project with adult professionals. *"We organized activities that took a subset of youth participants (8-10), but also engaged parents, government folks, healthcare professionals, teachers, and others. We found that these other stakeholders were very dismissive of young people. This suggests to us that the need is to address the clear gap that young people are not being heard, the low levels of acceptance. In Kerala, many youth schemes are in place but they are based on stakeholders' own perceptions, not those of young people."* (India, KII, 7 October 2024). Moreover, interviewees noted that because Kerala scores relatively well on many social development indicators, state level government actors appeared less open to advocacy messages on young people's health and wellbeing.

Colombian interviewees insisted that productive relations with official institutions needed to be maintained, otherwise damaging tensions could be created. A key approach here too entailed both an element of direct conversations with municipality employees and with leaders within the community to resolve local intergenerational conflict, inviting adults to listen and opening dialogue with young people. *"We brought together young people and adults because we realised there is no point in working with youth in isolation. That the challenge is for young people and adults to learn how to listen to each other. We realised that elevating youth does not mean making opaque the voice of others. Neither is it useful to treat them with condescension – seeing them as 'pobresitos' – poor people."* (Colombia, KII, 21 November, 2024).

The project finds it helpful to have spaces that promote the cooperation between youth and other stakeholders, through 'learning by doing'. By adopting such activities, project staff "*became much more aware of conflicts within the community, such as conflict between adults and youth*" (Colombia, KII, 21 November 2024). Further, effective convening of youth and adults entailed having to deal with the sometimes irreverent and conflictual attitudes towards adults that some young people were showcasing. "*We have also seen young people with the attitude 'what matters is my opinion' and not listening to others, while showing apathy in the co-design"* (Colombia, KII 21 November 2024).

Moreover, these approaches raised questions about under which conditions and through which means can effective transgenerational cooperation be organised. *"I*

have been reflecting that we are asking a lot of young people – asking them to be responsible for a public space at such a young age when they are defining what responsibility is. In this sense, the alliance with adults is very important. For example, the work involves going to speak with secretariats, which is something that is more for adults. So, we need transgenerational work." (Colombia, KII 12 December 2024). In a similar manner, grantees in Senegal emphasised the importance of promoting intergenerational dialogue (Senegal, KII, 10 December 2024).

Staff of different HCA-II projects noted there is strong variation between younger and older adolescents in terms of their ability to engage with projects and the extent to which they experience norms around age as a constraint. Younger adolescents are more likely to be in school but may have fixed time availability after school and on weekends, whereas older adolescents are more likely to spend time on income-generating activities. Also, the MILE report indicates that projects find it challenging to plan around the competing needs and priorities of participants (Ecorys 2024, p.8). Older adolescents are more independent when traversing the city and can thus come to project activities and are likely to have had relatively more exposure to activities outside of the home.

The programme's MILE report of October 2024 notes that the participatory approach to involving adolescents in the design of the programme works well and is appreciated by programme participants. Certain projects have a very active core group of adolescents that regularly feed into project strategies and implementation (Ecorys 2024). In our FGDs, participants themselves recognised that the presence of adult staff is helpful as they, as young people, are still learning how to handle peer pressure and respond to disrespectful behaviour by others when this occurs. In Ecuador, they emphasised the ability of staff to create a positive and safe environment which enabled them to grow.

Good practices

The overall aims and objectives of the HCA-II programme centrally address health and wellbeing of adolescents in cities, and projects ultimately aim to enhance (different dimensions of) their inclusion within urban systems. Projects use several approaches to tackle social norms that create age-based hierarchies. Good practices include:

- Adopting participatory approaches to project design.
- Brokering relationships between adolescents and parents/carers and other adult stakeholders.

- Mapping good practices that enable productive and respectful relationships between adolescents and parents/carers and other adult stakeholders.
- Convening and co-designing activities with youth and adults in the same space enables dialogue and makes conflicts visible yet also creates the space to address these.

Recommendations

- Consider the importance of role models for boosting the confidence of young girls and marginalised groups and integrate role models in project activities.
- Recruit professional staff who have the skillset to create a safe and enabling environment where participants feel respected and are encouraged to respect one another, boosts confidence, in addition to the implementation of skill building activities.
- Include deliberate programme strategies aimed at preparing and persuading parents/carers and other gatekeepers/stakeholders such as religious and community leaders, seeking their support, 'priming' them to see adolescents more positively and educate them about the value of youth participation.
- Facilitate and model positive interactions between adolescents and stakeholders in community fora or in project workshops, where different actors are tasked to cooperate.
- Design project activities that are transgenerational in nature, which can bridge the life worlds of adults and adolescents.

4.2 Gender

Gender inequalities constituted one of the most pronounced challenges to E&I across all projects. Both professional staff and adolescent participants articulated how prevailing gender norms constrain the voice and participation of adolescent girls and young women in their projects. Age-based social hierarchies result in marginalisation of young women and girls in particular as they significantly intersect with gender norms. For some contexts the intersection of gender, class and religious norms was highlighted.

In Colombia and in India, projects working on public spaces found these not to be gender neutral. Here young girls are less likely to feel secure and, therefore, less

likely to inhabit these compared to boys. The project sought to raise awareness among both boys and girls about gender equity. As boys became more aware of how girls feel in public spaces and what they need to feel safer, some boys were found to become allies of the girls (Colombia, KII, 12 December 2024).

Gender norms influence perceptions about what is respectable and appropriate behaviour for adolescent girls and young women. In the context of Ghana, India and Senegal, this influenced parental attitudes towards project engagement. Concerns about societal judgement and the fear of 'promiscuous behaviour' by girls when they mingle, which potentially result in teenage pregnancy, compelled Ghanaian parents and adults to restrict the mobility of their girls. Consequently, the participation of girls in project activities was undermined. In Ghana, collaboration between boys and girls in organising public events appears to have a positive impact on parents and community actors, who seem to accept that social interactions between boys and girls are possible.

Likewise, in Senegal, girls, more than boys require parental permission to participate in activities outside the household. Especially where projects address sensitive topics, they face distrust: "*There is a social belief that sexual and reproductive health projects have a hidden agenda with the aim to incite adolescents to be sexually active."* (Senegal, KII, 9 December, 2024). This is closely related to these topics being taboo, with young people who seek to address these at risk of being stigmatised (Senegal, KII, 29 November 2025). Hence, careful communication with parents and local authorities is needed, dispelling miscomprehension and mistrust, to support young people's participation. Once parental permission is obtained, it was found that *"girls are much more engaged and motivated, which explains that there are more girls than boys participating to project activities"* (Senegal, KII, 5 December 2024). However, this was also explained by pointing to girls having fewer alternative opportunities and boys having stronger obligations to contribute to the household's income. For them, *"Participation in association and project's activities are considered as unproductive. As a result, boys prefer to explore and engaged in other activities, considering that they have much more options than girls."* (Senegal, KII, 5 December 2024). Therefore, involving parents was important, with implementing partners explaining the importance of public space for the physical and psychological development of adolescents in general and girls in particular.

In India, aware that public spaces are largely occupied by men and older male youth, parents were not easily convinced that girls should be involved in public space interventions. Indian parents typically needed reassurance on: e.g. *"Where they [girls] go, what are the timings, with whom will they be, is it safe? This would not be*

asked for boys." (India, KII, 1 October 2024). Parents did not think children needed to be in public spaces to begin with and hence, thought that participation in HCA II projects workshops would be a waste of their time. In Bhubaneswar, parents worried about the safety of public spaces for young women, whereas in Jaipur, patriarchal ideas related to marriage and the honour of a girl symbolising family honour underwrite the notion that girls' proper space is primarily within the home, not in public space. *"Girls get married early around the age of 16-17 years and to come out to talk about the development of their community is very different and difficult. Girls are not allowed to go out much."* (India, KII, 11 November 2024).

Despite such reservations among parents, Indian implementing partners were able to increase the participation of girls in the workshops. Having staff members who lived in the communities (low-income settlements), and involving youth peer leaders facilitated building linkages and the development of trust with parents and other community leaders. One of the implementing partners noted that their organisation "*has been working in (the, ed.) space of child and adolescent inclusion for a long time. Peer leaders and ladders of trust have been built over the years…Since so much work is already ongoing it is easy for the same members to step in to now to discuss HCA 2 project. Many youth of the community in fact function as trustees of [name of the organisation]. And many staff also come from the same background.*" (India, KII, 13 December 2024).

"The other concern parents had about their children participating in the HCA-II workshops was that they might have negative peer influence, and learn undesirable values." (India, KII, 13 December 2024). Parents fear that unsupervised interaction with peers puts adolescents at risk of substance abuse, falling in love leading to and marriage by choice – this is seen as counterproductive for their futures as it affects their focus on studies, and may distract them from earning a living. "*We addressed this by having discussions with parents and making them understand that the programme is monitored and no such influences should happen. And that children's voices are important as they will be major public space users in the future."* (India, KII, 13 December 2024).

Moreover, implementing partners used a model that involved selecting champions from these communities. This was irrespective of their age, made them understand the project first. *"For instance, Tulsi. She is a cluster coordinator with our partner team. She had associated with this organization since being a young child. Been working with adolescents in the community for a long time. She had been taken care of by the [name] organisation. For HCA-II, champions helped them disseminate in the community. They were from the same community, from the same language, understood each other very*

well culturally." (India, KII, 1 October 2024). Starting with a small group of adolescents, who then became instrumental in convincing caregivers to let their girls participate in projects, was another effective tactic in India. Implementing partners reported: *"First, when we started the programme, we had 50 boys and only a few girls. Then gradually in 7-8 months we had to get more boys as girls had dominated the group."* (India, KII, 11 November 2024).

In Senegal, grantees pointed out the importance of local allies in enabling the project to function: *"Health workers are our allies because they are good at dispelling rumours concerning sexual and reproductive health that is the main reason why people can be suspicious of the project."* (Senegal, KII, 10 December, 2024). However, intermediaries must be carefully overseen, to ensure safeguarding and prevent sexual harassment or other forms of abuse. *"We need to be cautious of pitfalls using these intermediaries because they can think that they are the mentors of the young people, facilitated their participation in the project. As such, they tend to think that the young people should be accountable to them, while the youth just exercise their right to participate."* (Senegal, KII, 5 December 2024). In this respect the HCA programme helped the grantee to strengthen its child protection policy (ibid).

In some cases, however, gender norms were not a major barrier. For instance, adolescents in the city of Riobamba in Ecuador stated that gender inequality was something 'of the older generations' and that younger generations were more progressive. Adolescents in Vietnam emphasised adolescent girls were better at taking part in social activities and school activities but noted that gender barriers do emerge later: "*We [girls] are more active and stronger than the boys. We are involved in every activity and we are also good at studying. Most student leaders at the class and at the school are girls. However, after graduation, more boys are successful in their career than girls*".

Good practices

- Encouraging adolescent boys to aid their sisters at home to tackle norms causing time poverty.
- Having boys and girls collaborate to organise events to generate a positive example of girls safely participating in the public domain, which may gradually shift restrictive gender norms.
- Working with community champions.

- Involving female adolescent role models to build the confidence of girls, and involve adolescents as role models in conversation with care givers to allow girls to participate in projects.

Recommendations

- Jointly reflect on gender inequities in public space to foster alliances between boys and girls.
- Target parents to communicate the benefits of project participation and explain safeguarding measures as well as measures that prevent e.g. discrimination and bullying, contributes to securing their approval. This practice applies to enabling young girls to engage with projects, but also different minority groups.
- Look for implementing partners that are deeply embedded within communities where interventions take place, to support the sustainability of project outcomes: they may more easily broker access to parents, community leaders (e.g. traditional chiefs, mothers' leaders) and other respected members (teachers, nurses, health workers etc), whose support is essential for the feasibility and success of youth programming.
- Work with intermediaries to secure parental permissions is critical, but time-consuming and requires careful overviewing (as they may seek to 'control' youth).

4.3 Race, ethnicity, caste and religion

Depending on the context, adolescents and youth that belong to ethnic and religious minorities may face E&I challenges in terms of their health and wellbeing outcomes, due to stigmatisation and discriminatory attitudes and practices. These exclusionary dynamics may also hamper their participation in projects. In some cases, social and religious norms particular to their communities may lead to *self-exclusion*, or reluctance on the part of care givers that will not allow them to participate in projects. In Ghana, India and Ecuador, for instance, project staff referred to communities where prevailing social norms lead to self-exclusion from project activities, although sometimes based on feelings of distrust towards society that have developed because of longstanding experiences of discrimination.

Certain religious norms made parents and carers reluctant to have their children engage in projects, afraid they would get exposed to 'Western' gender norms that conflict with their beliefs, which emerged in the context of Islamic communities in Senegal. Ethnic groups, like indigenous communities in Ecuador, uphold gender norms that are considered relatively more restrictive, discouraging interaction with

peers and public activities, which limited opportunities for girls to engage with projects and perpetuated gender disparities. For activities focused on mental health, project staff in Ecuador avoided particular terminology to overcome cultural taboos and materials were adapted to align with local cultural symbols and practices.

In Jaipur, India, the project engaged the issue of discrimination of low-caste migrants' children from accessing and using public parks, in (lower) middle class neighbourhoods, despite many residing here. *"Slum children are not allowed to enter into these neighbourhood parks by guards of the residential societies."* (India, KII, 11 November 2024).

Despite this awareness of caste discrimination, there was an acute sense that caste and religion are politically highly charged issues, to be avoided: "*we want to be very neutral*" (India, KII, 1 October 2024). This entailed emphasizing some terminology, e.g. promoting gender inclusion, disability inclusion, age inclusion but "*we will never go to religion and caste!*" (ibid.). Parents sometimes were reluctant to allow their children to participate in the programme; "*Some castes do not want to be seen with other castes…When speaking to caregivers, this came up.*" (ibid.). Grantees sought to circumvent such issues by denying this was happening and by emphasising the opportunities for young people to learn.

The project in Ecuador was meant to be inclusive but did not take measures to facilitate the deliberate inclusion of Montubio adolescents or Afro-Ecuadorians. Project staff noticed that participants from these communities felt uncomfortable mixing with participants from *mestizos* communities. Staff contemplated whether the project should organise separate activities, which would support confidence building of children from minority groups but felt this would be against the spirit of the programme. Since other projects targeting only minority groups do exist but do not focus on building relationships between groups, this HCA-II project continued activities that bring diverse groups together.

In Colombia, interviewees stressed that, in different moments, they felt a sense of inadequacy to respond, or even fully grasp, the multilayer levels of discrimination that youth experience in the neighbourhoods in which they worked. A grantee thus mentioned the need to more deeply understand more about the racial dimension of the programme – both neighbourhoods are formed by migrants from the coast, with the greatest majority from Afro-descendent communities (Colombia, KII, 21 November 2024).

Good practices

- Adapting language and communication to engage with adolescents belonging to ethnic/religious/minority groups helped staff persuade parents/carers to allow their children to participate in activities.
- Adapting the facilitation of project activities in ways that nurture mutual respect between groups, in case participants belong to different social groups.

Recommendations

- Carefully consider whether there are power differentials between young participants belonging to different (ethnic, religious) groups and how to address these in activities.
- Where adolescents from minority groups lack confidence in the presence of majority youth, consider preparing them in a safe space in advance of bringing them together with others to build their self-confidence and presentation skills. Similarly, those belonging to majority groups may need to be prepared before joint activities are organised.
- Develop communication tools and strategies that are not only sensitive to sociocultural norms of particular minority communities but also recognize that these communities may lack trust in external actors due to prevailing forms of discrimination.
- Involve project staff and/or youth volunteers that belong to minority communities to build trust.

4.4 Class and economic factors

Adolescents belonging to relatively disadvantaged socio-economic face a range of constraints, of which some have to do with social norms (for instance, due to prejudice against marginalised groups) while other constraints are related to resources (including e.g. education, financial means). Age-based hierarchies intersect with socio-economic class. Adolescent participants stressed it would be hard for any young person to 'walk into any office', but that those from disadvantaged backgrounds would probably not be taken seriously, and might even

not be admitted, to prevent any attempt at exercising voice. This may be exacerbated by other intersecting inequalities, like ethnicity.

Within the context of the HCA-II programme, there are clear spatial dimensions to E&I related to economic factors. While projects operate in relatively smaller cities, large numbers of marginalised communities live in under-serviced peripheries and may lack public infrastructure. Project participants noted that costs for meals and transport were a major barrier to adolescents to access projects, which was aggravated if participants lived in peripheral or even rural communities. Poverty intersected with other forms of identity, for instance migrant communities in Ecuador, Colombia, and Ghana were poorer and likely to live further away. Adolescents living in marginalised communities are also more likely to be 'time poor' and were reported to work in the informal economy to help sustain their families. All these factors influence access and the ability to engage in projects.

Furthermore, the MILE report (2024, p.45) indicates the challenge of 'digital divides' between better-off and underprivileged communities, which influences both access to technology and the extent of (digital) literacy and skill levels. Some projects therefore opted to implemented activities in areas where disadvantaged groups reside and thus cut their transport costs. This made activities accessible to not only *more* but also a *greater diversity* of participants. In Ghana, disadvantaged neighbourhoods were targeted, and the project in Senegal used 'mobile clinics'.

Reaching economically marginalised groups comes with multiple challenges, which the project in the city of Da Nang (Vietnam) illustrates. The technology focus of the project requires digital literacy, which those who have limited education may not have. Activities are held in the city centre and therefore relatively difficult to access for youth from distant, poorer neighbourhoods. When targeting relatively poorer neighbourhoods, the inclusion of participants from this area did not translate into meaningful participation as they lacked confidence and skills, whereas the project did not have the resources to organise activities to support them. In addition, schools felt compelled to nominate high-performing students for the project as they wanted to ensure they implement all activities well. While involving schools was an effective strategy for the recruitment of relatively disadvantaged participants in some contexts, for other contexts respondents flagged that bias and exclusive practices could be reproduced in this process. But so could the reverse. E.g., in Bhubaneshwar, exchanges organised between well-off school children and school children in low-income settlements confounded the latter's parents low expectations. They noted: "*We thought our children will not be able interact with these*

private school kids… but they have exchanged each others' phone numbers. Adults said: "We learnt – this is our own conditioning"." (India, KII, 13 December 2024).

Moreover, Indian project partners pointed out that marriage and family responsibility norms are different in middle class families than in low socio-economic status families. *"Girls in our project are from low socio economic strata and they have to go back before sunset. So it was a challenge for us to think about how to navigate this restriction on time. Sometimes our later hours workshops could not take place because of this. And earlier they had household chores and schoolwork to do."* (India, KII, 11 November 2024).

Measures to address class and economic factors could be distinguished into two categories: specific targeting measures to reach disadvantaged areas and relatively marginalised youth; and mobilizing resources to reduce the costs of participation for marginalised groups. For instance, ATV in Ecuador has reached out to adolescents through both private and public schools. The Young and Safe project in Ho collaborated with the Ghana Education Service to reach out of school youth. While all projects need to consider budget constraints, various projects enabled the inclusion of youth from marginalised backgrounds by paying for transport, meals and t-shirts, which helped to reduce feelings of shame about 'what to wear' when attending project activities among those who could not afford appropriate clothes.

In Colombia, working in low-income areas of the city made staff reflect on the value of the project, and how it can respond to very material challenges to participation for young people. *"The challenge of the project is that, in both Cali and Palmira, the young people come from such low income that they even worry about having enough food. We cannot deal with all the dimensions of challenges they are facing because we don't have enough budget, and it is sometimes controversial to be talking about public space when you don't know if the young people ate at home."* (Colombia, KII 12 December 2024). Consequently, staff fretted about what to do when young people requested stipends for participation in its programme, to match the opportunity costs of working. They were torn by a recognition that participants' families were facing significant poverty and in need of support, but that project budgets did not allow for such support to be given, while also considering that such support should not become the reason for participation either.

It is widely accepted that especially women and girls from low-income families are relatively more 'time poor' than men, because the amount of time they need to do chores (Marter-Kenyon et al. 2023). This challenge was underscored in Ghana and Senegal, where lack of time posed a challenge for adolescent girls to participate in

project activities. Likewise in Colombia, many young girls aged 6-12 years old have to take care of chores to support single parent households. For young boys, many must support working and helping provide some livelihoods for their families. In India, too, parents worried about the transaction costs of their girls being included in the programme. They saw this as compromising their ability to dedicate time to schoolwork or to support with chores in the household. One implementing partner observed: "*Also, parents are concerned about children's tuition classes. Since they pay for these classes, they would not allow their children to miss them for participating in our workshops for HCA II. Parents would restrict participation because they were concerned they would eventually drop out of school because of their performance. Hence, we had to shift our programme workshops and sessions to Saturday or Sunday. This way they would not miss out on tuition.*" (KII, 13 December 2024).

Such concerns were shared by adolescents: *"Yes, tuition classes are a major concern. Students don't want to miss out on the classes because of this project. That was a concern which affected their participation in the project."* (KII, 13 December 2024).

In Senegal, and in Palmira, Colombia, other approaches were attempted, by working more closely with and through schools, to for instance, develop activities during school hours. Facilitated by a passionate teacher, the school allowed the project to carry out activities within the school day and take the students to the public space during class hours. More so, the school now acknowledges the hours spent in project activities as part of a certificate on community work. However, it was not quite clear though how young people viewed and valued such accreditation of their activities in Palmira. Staff in Senegal noted that by operating through schools, out of school youth are not involved in projects.

Good practices

- Organising activities in disadvantaged areas.
- Using flexible funding to enable addressing financial barriers that hinder project participation by adolescents from poorer backgrounds, e.g. to support costs of transport, meals and t-shirts.
- Acknowledging that time poverty influences project participation, certain projects adjusted timing of activities to align with chores implemented by young girls and boys, or with schooling requirements to enable participation.
- Involving stakeholders actors that have direct engagement with disadvantaged communities in the recruitment of participants.

Recommendations

- Implement activities to build adolescents' skills, confidence and leadership to enhance their meaningful participation.
- Sensitize stakeholders to prevent that they reproduce bias, prejudice and discriminatory practices towards disadvantaged groups.
- Be aware of social norms that may differ between target communities and staff at implementing partners, where these affect adolescents' ability to participate.

4.5 Disability

Disability can be understood as the condition of people having a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities. Promoting disability inclusion was recognised as a major challenge across all projects. Most projects realised that provisions for disability had not been included in the design, since the overall HCA-II programme did not have an E&I strategy and projects were not required to prioritize E&I or dedicate time and resources to this. Consequently, adjustments are hard to make during project implementation. Everyone acknowledged that each form of disability comes with its own set of needs that require resourcing to make projects more inclusive. Disability and class strongly intersect as persons with a disability (PWD) often need additional resources to facilitate transport (for themselves and carers), and specific logistics. Certain projects have been able to make provisions for PWDs. For instance, during the Young and Loud Hackathon, Young and Safe Ghana organised a sign language facilitator to make the activity accessible for adolescents with a hearing impairment. In Bhubaneshwar, one of the local implementing partners is a disability focused organisation. Consequently, out of 250 adolescents that participated in the programme, more than 40 had a disability. By involving them in the public space audit, the programme was able to challenge common misconceptions that young disabled adolescents have no sense and opinion about public spaces. "*Mostly disabled children are thought of as unproductive. How can deaf children make a model of a public space? Most parents and principals didn't think such children can do such good work."* (India, KII, 13 December 2024). However, when people in the community observed what is going on, they changed their perception gradually about the value of inclusion of adolescents with disability in public spaces. Others gave positive examples of how project participants were keen on helping peers with a disability

on their own accord, for instance helping them access buildings and activities. Some projects collaborate with disability rights organisations to increase their expertise on disability inclusion and mutually reinforce each other's work on strengthening the voice and participation of adolescents. Examples included Young and Safe in Ghana.

However, project organisations did not always feel capable of working with PWDs. Thus, visual or hearing-impaired adolescents were deemed easier working with than those having a cognitive disability. Project implementers felt that they lacked the capabilities and knowledge to work with the latter: "*our project does not know how to handle issues faced by children with cognitive disabilities. If children have difficulties in processing information with us, we don't have the expertise to engage them on such projects*." (India, KII, 13 December 2024).

In addition, social norms can restrict the participation of PWDs in projects in all contexts, although with varying degrees. Feelings of shame and stigmatisation undermine the confidence of adolescents with a disability and cause their parents and other community actors to withhold their participation. For Vietnam, respondents noted that parents of participants who do *not* have disability are reluctant to have their children take part in activities that involve young PWDs due to prejudice: a challenge that requires additional time and strategies to tackle. In India, in Bhubaneswar, community and school leaders considered that disabled children need not be present in public spaces, for sake of their own safety. A principal of a school for visually and hearing-impaired children hence was initially reluctant to allow the children outdoors for the public space audit organised by the HCA-II project or to participate in other project activities, however this was overcome after project partners persuaded a teacher to accompany pupils in activities.

Here, the intersection with gender is critical. As one of the implementing partners noted: "*The issue is usually of gender. Particularly, concern for sending them outside home space. So, when we have activities or workshops in the evening we have to make arrangements for their pick and drop.*" (India, KII, 13 December 2024). Another way of elevating participation involved persuasion, and making arrangements that involved teachers. "*So, we had to have 4-5 meetings with the principal and teachers to ensure we will keep the children safe in our workshops. There would also always be one teacher [that was present in activities] with hearing impaired students.*" (ibid., ed.)

Good practices

- Finding budgetary space to make provisions for PWD inclusion.

- Identifying no-cost solutions made certain activities accessible for PWDs.
- Organizing transport for PWDs.
- Collaborating with disability rights organisations enhances the capacity of implementing partners to work with PWDs.
- Conducting activities with adolescents with physical disabilities in public challenged common misconceptions about them.
- Communicating safeguarding strategies to parents and caregivers to overcome fears about their children being stigmatized.

Recommendations

- Plan realistically for PWDs at the design stage of the programme, to develop optimal strategies, organise the right facilities, recruit staff with expertise, and have budgetary space. Recognise that the needs and capacities of PWDs are highly diverse.
- Advocate, sensitise, and publicly promote positive examples of PWD participation and impact can address social norms that limit the participation of adolescents with a disability.

4.6 Security issues

Safety and security issues were particularly pronounced in Ecuador, Colombia and India. In Ecuador and Colombia, security risks were connected to gang activity, whereas in other countries safety issues were mostly related to sexual harassment in public spaces, and crime. Safety and security issues are highly gendered. Adolescent girls are often considered more vulnerable to security risks, but it important to also understand how security risks vary for adolescent boys and girls. For instance, in cities affected by gang violence in Ecuador, adolescent boys were afraid of being targets of gang recruitment, while girls were more likely to be afraid of violent attacks, armed robbery and sexual harassment. In crime-affected areas, adolescent boys were afraid of being attacked or drawn into fights, and girls of (sexual) assault. This potentially spills over onto project activities and underlines the significance of projects' understanding of local context and abilities to manage risk. For instance, "*In Cali, we initially worked with a group of youth chosen by another NGO, from insecure spaces and marginalised areas. We didn't know their background: if they were gang members, if they even wanted to be there in the training. But then, during the training conflict arose, physical fights occurred, and the technical team had to stop the training. We didn't have the tools to manage.*" (Colombia, KII, 1 October 2024).

Across different project contexts, the risk of sexual harassment and violence hampered the participation of adolescent girls. Parents and carers may not allow them to attend activities out of safety concerns. In India, sexual harassment is widespread and also pervades educational institutions which are meant to be safe spaces for pupils and students. This situation has not only prompted parents to restrict the mobility of adolescent girls, but also undermined their trust in other institutions and, by implication, any kind of project (see Raj et al. 2022). Thus, in Bhubaneswar, parents worried about the safety of public spaces for young women. Also in Vietnam, parents were reluctant to have their girls attend activities late at night or overnight. Security challenges only exacerbate the impact of socio-cultural norms that favour the participation of boys over girls.

Within the context of HCA-II projects, security issues have several implications. The first relates to E&I: a lack of public safety limits mobility and therefore access to project activities, this applies especially to girls, as noted, but also disadvantaged youth as they may be living in areas with higher crime rates.

The other two implications may not be directly linked to E&I but pose risks to project success. Firstly, as projects are embedded in communities, they are not immune to certain forms of violence, like gang violence. Secondly, in addition to having participants that are (or have ties to) gang members, gang actors may become brokers and mediate who gets to participate in projects or interfere with project activities. In Palmira, working with schools was found to be a reliable way of 'screening' workshop participants, while this may raise other inclusion issues.

Good practices

- Devising and implementing communication plans to ensure parents/guardians and other respected community leaders are informed about the project goals, safety measures and safeguarding protocols so they allow their adolescents to join activities. This can include *information* when participants have arrived and when participants leave, including when projects organise transport for them.
- Considering safe venues and optimal time for project activities, for instance enabling participants to leave and get home during day light hours.
- Considering safe transport in the design phase to select the best venue for activities and/or budget for transport.

Recommendations

- Have safeguarding protocols in place and communicate these with staff, participants, and their parents and carers, including avenues for reporting and complaints.
- Work with marginalised out of school youth or young gang members requires adjustments in project engagement: approaches, methods, didactics, but also means to safeguard trainers and co-participants.
- Enhance expertise on conflict-sensitive programming in cities affected by gang violence, by organising learning exchanges between relevant projects and inviting experts in conflict sensitivity.

5. Findings: Navigating trade-offs in HCA-II projects

This section reflects on some of the common trade-offs that consortia and project staff face when considering how to accommodate the range of E&I needs and challenges in project implementation. The first section (5.1) offers lessons on the depth vs breadth of youth participation in project consortia. This is followed by an assessment of trade-offs when working with local government authorities (5.2), before assessing considerations for engaging the most disadvantaged adolescents and neighbourhoods vs. scope and impact (5.3). Finally, the report discusses youth ownership vis-à-vis project sustainability.

5.1 Depth vs. breadth of youth participation in consortia

Project consortia involve a diverse and broad set of stakeholders, from formal to informal institutions including municipalities, schools, Community Action Boards, and customary authorities (e.g. chiefs, paramount chiefs). Looking at the dynamics of youth participation in these consortia, three types of trade-offs emerge.

Firstly, building strong relationships between adolescents and any stakeholder takes time. Involving many different stakeholders may extend the scope of opportunities for youth participation but may pose a risk to youth participation becoming less substantive and meaningful. Interactions with each stakeholder may be less frequent, and youth have relatively limited opportunity to build relationships with stakeholders and to engage. Challenges faced by marginalised youth in interactions with state authorities will exacerbate this trade-off as they are likely to need more

time and support. For instance, one respondent in in Ghana explained this trade-off in relation to promoting state accountability: "*Equity and inclusion are an important goal for our project. But I know that as a program, we also have other goals: sustainability, you are thinking about sustainability. You may also be thinking about working very well with the authorities"* (Ghana, KII, 12 November 2024). Besides wanting to avoid antagonising local authorities, the project could not make enough time available to adequately prepare disadvantaged youth for encounters with local authorities.

Secondly, certain stakeholders may not share a willingness to adapt their way of doing things to enhance youth and adolescent participation. While working with educational institutions brings advantages, interviewees in Colombia noted that this can also entail disadvantages. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have experienced the educational system as one that predilects a passive and didactical education, which young boys and girls find very dull. This means that young people begin their engagement in a project from the point of passivity, and it is then the challenge of the programme to captivate their attention, also by proposing more participatory methods and inviting experiential learning. "*They think from the start that it will be boring. What works best to engage them is experiential learning with more interaction.*" (Colombia, KII, 21 November 2024). In Senegal too, some respondents noted that *"The main resistance we encounter are from the young people themselves, who feel utilised by projects."* (Senegal, KII, 29 November 2025).

Thirdly, choice of location and stakeholders may result in having to deal with regulatory frameworks, which may affect the scope of the project. Many NGOs were reported not being able to work in Kerala due to its strong safeguarding rules and opt for working in other states instead. An HCA-II project in Thrissur aimed to engage 150 young people that were 13-17 years of age. However, "*state safeguarding mechanisms to engage with minors are very strong in Kerala, consequently a lot of the institutions were getting nervous about our action research.*" For the state government, safeguarding is not so much of an issue for those over 18 years. But below, you need state level permission to engage with them, from the Department of Education. These regulatory frameworks incentivised working with older adolescents (>18 yrs). The implementing partner responded by a) changing focus from including 11-19-year old children (with the majority being 13-17 years old) to participants in the age range 16-22 years (with the majority then being 18-21 years of age), and b) working with fewer adolescents (from 150 to 35). This resulted in a more accommodating stance of the authorities.

Good practices

- Adjusting educational activities that stimulate youth participation and restoring faith in learning being fun.
- Finding stakeholders that are willing to be flexible, to accommodate needs of marginalised groups of adolescents.

Recommendations

- Experiment with pedagogical strategies, to successfully enhance participation of marginalised groups of young people.
- Consider a strategic selection of a limited number of stakeholders in project consortia, enabling meaningful participation and engagement.
- Undertake long term efforts to create positive attitudes of local authorities towards meaningful youth participation.
- Match the operational scale of activities with difficulty of reaching subgroups of young people.
- Do not expect that hard-to-reach people want to participate in the projects – anticipate having to convince them.

5.2 Involving local authorities: buy-in vs. risk to meaningful participation

The HCA-II programme's principles of working in consortia and adopting a systems' approach, as well its aim to enhance youth participation in decision-making, results in city authorities being a key stakeholder in all projects. In some projects, local authorities are consortium partners. Activities that facilitate interactions between adolescent participants and city authorities are meant to overcome social norms that disqualify youth voices and help realise the implementation of adolescent priorities. However, this is not simply achieved by including local authorities in consortia. Discussions highlighted the importance of having/gaining a sound understanding of the political economy of local authorities to make collaborations work for the projects, which involves an understanding of the different governance actors, their interests, and their official and actual modes of operating. Findings also note that projects must account for historic relations between local authorities and (young) people in marginalised neighbourhoods, which have created enduring prejudice and distrust. Moreover, positive attitudes of local authorities towards meaningful youth participation cannot be taken for granted. Finally, whereas such aspects are addressed by the HCA-II programme, they cannot be expected to be overcome in the short run but require long-term efforts.

Across projects, there was a clear understanding of the necessity of working with the public sector, and city authorities. As an Indian interviewee noted: *"If you want to work with a city, work on public spaces, you must. But it comes with its own challenges."* (India, KII, 1 October 2024). In Colombia, projects thus sought to develop Memoranda of Understandings (MOU) with municipalities; have regular dialogue with specific departments and secretariats; invite people from the municipality to witness and take part in interventions and to document and share learnings with municipalities.

In Senegal, developing consortium collaborations with the education, youth and health sectors/departments at the city level, was *"a heavy and long process since it involved developing agreements and allocating to them a budget that they still claim as insufficient."* (Senegal, KII, 5 December 2024). In Ghana, respondents were positive about the involvement of government agencies including the Municipal Authorities of Ho and the National Youth Authority (NYA). The interviewee highlighted how effective relationships with these stakeholders have been instrumental to the project's success, facilitating access to spaces, such as schools and parks, and resources. The NYA played a pivotal role by directly engaging with out-of-school youth through door-to-door outreach. These collaborations not only enhanced project visibility but also enable sustained support and influence.

Having a partnership arrangement in place with local authorities was an important first step, but did not ensure meaningful participation of young people. *"Meaningful participation of young people is not understood. They only invite young people, but don't wish to consider their opinions."* (Colombia, KII, 1 October 2024). *"Although the municipality is a fundamental ally…There is a risk of tokenisation on behalf of the municipality when they come to put up a giant sign and take photos."* (Colombia, KII 12 December 2024). In Ecuador too, project participants felt disappointed as their efforts were 'politicised' when activities they had organised were misrepresented by municipal authorities as organised by the city. One adolescent recalled: "*At my school we went to paint some murals on the walls outside the school, so we asked the municipality for support, but the idea was ours, the young people of the school, and they took the idea and then he (the mayor) came and in an interview he said, this is on behalf of the municipality, we gave it to the young people so that they could develop their creative minds. And they attributed our idea and our work to political interests. We got no credit"* (FGD 24 October 2024). While this dynamic suggests that there is some acceptance of the value of projects for political leaders, willing to parade them as their own, the dynamic for projects and youth participants is one of being relegated to an unequal, junior partnership role.

In Bhubaneswar, India, project partners experienced city authorities to be resistant to their bottom-up approaches to city planning and dismissive of involving adolescents and considering their opinions. "*They said this is not a technical process and hence are not confident that we can follow it or use the findings from it.*" (India, KII, 13 December 2024). Thus, by framing city planning as a "technical" process, city authorities dismissed young people's non-expert views and opinions on public space. In Colombia too: *"Oftentimes, people in local authorities want to instruct how things need to be changed- how public space is organised"* (Colombia, KII, 1 October 2024).

Implementing partners sought to build relations by offering to make urban spaces vibrant, receiving a positive response for instance in Bhubaneswar. However, here, city authorities had already invested in terms of public spaces for children, inspired by the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities framework. This strength however appeared to make authorities more reluctant to receive lessons emerging from HCA-II programming. The local authorities thus resisted accepting that adolescents shared a report about how public spaces in their city are not accessible to disabled children.

In Jaipur too, several meetings were organised with local authorities, however working with them was very difficult as the idea of including young people's opinions on public spaces was new and unwelcome. They did not understand the need to include young people in decision-making around public spaces, rather considered them as insignificant stakeholders in cities and as incompetent, dependent beings who do not have opinions. Grantees sought to challenge and overcome such attitudes by arranging repeat meetings with city authorities. The sustainability of such initiatives however is not certain since young people are still not viewed as political/important stakeholders. When the project was going to be reported in the media, city leaders became hesitant to publicly make a commitment to support the project findings.

In some instances, grantees encountered the multifaceted political economy and distribution of power within local authorities. Having agreed plans with certain departments, they found these were overruled by more powerful actors within the local government. For instance, the HCA-II grantee in Colombia had been in dialogue with the Secretary of Mobility and they to do a public space intervention, e.g. building a Ciclovia (cycle track) in Cali. After some complaints about the initiative

on X (formerly Twitter), the mayor asked to abort the project, while all materials for the intervention had been purchased (KII, 21 November 2024). The lesson drawn from this incident was parallel engagements with both the general secretariat as well as with specific secretariats are required to ensure a joint up approach. "*We realized we had to do more lobbying and need more backup from the municipalities.*" (Colombia, KII, 21 November 2024). It was suggested: "*I think at the program level, it might be valuable for Botnar to take a role in this lobbying with municipalities. In particular, the donor could use its positionality to do this lobbying."* (ibid.)

In other instances, challenges had to do with the nature of city bureaucracies and bureaucratic expertise, and out of the control of grantees. Thus, in Jaipur, India, "*every 6-8 months, officials are changing (Jaipur) – it becomes very difficult to maintain the relationships, this is a limitation. There is no way around it, we have made peace with it, haha.*" (India, KII, 1 October 2024).

In Colombia, the state was reported to have historically neglected informal settlements of forcibly displaced internal populations and/or to currently have very little presence (considering them 'illegal'), and residents' trust in city authorities is low and fragile. For instance, in Cali, the project hosted a dialogue between political candidates and young people seeking to build bridges; strikingly, the candidates had never even visited this part of town (Colombia, KII, 12 December 2024). Such neglected informal settlements may also have alternative governance arrangements, including by gangs and other armed groups, with potential to affect project activities (as shown above in section 4.6 in the example of how this affected project trainings). Likewise, municipalities sometimes showcased significant prejudice regarding these settlements, to inflect on HCA-II programming: *"We made an alliance with municipality – but then we received comments such as: 'but why are you going to make these physical interventions in parks, these people (from marginalised neighbourhoods) are going to steal that!' Marginal urban communities are viewed as irresponsible. Making the argument for investment is challenging"* (Colombia, KII, 1 October 2024).

In other instances, poor trust in city authorities affected project implementation. In Senegal, some implementing organisations reported that when conducting enquiries in neighbourhoods, having local government agents accompany staff can distort the communities' perception of the project. *"Due to the political affiliation of those agents, community members may be reluctant to participate."* (Senegal, KII, 9 December 2024).

Another dynamic that surfaced was that adolescents find it difficult to imagine what state responsibilities are. They might express gratitude for what they perceive is a 'gift' by city authorities, for instance a safe space to play, while it is their right to ask for and receive services. They also lack understanding of policy processes. This shapes the trade-off between actively involving city authorities and realising substantive, meaningful youth participation.

In general, projects had to carefully consider power relations in the consortia work with local authorities (Figure 1).

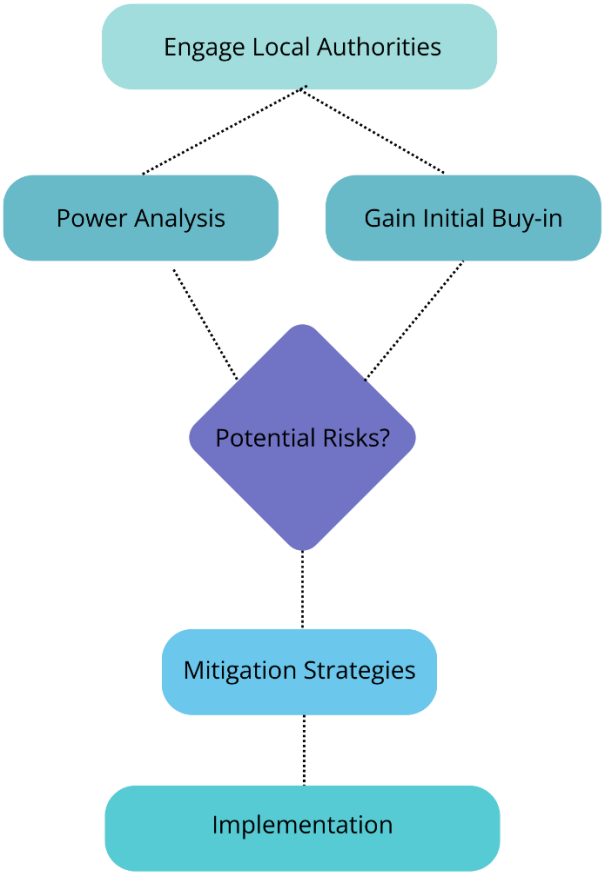

Figure 1: Power dynamics in working with local authorities

Despite these challenges, grantees also experienced how working with city authorities entailed opportunities and advantages. In Senegal, because as decentralized bodies, cities have been delegated specific competencies and Mayors have the financial resources to invest for the development of their cities, "*This*

provides the ground for the young people to advocate for more resources to be allocated to their health and well-being.; and to be involved in decision-making process." (Senegal, KII, 5 December 2024).

Being conversant with the political and bureaucratic make up of municipal corporations in Jaipur and Bhubaneswar, and developing a wide network of relations with commissioners, mayors and corporators/councillors – opened multiple possible routes of support for the project. "*Sometimes if things don't work, we seek their support.*" Grantees can be quite pragmatic about such relations: "*We look for whomever willing to support us, we reach out to.*" (India, KII, 1 October 2024).

Moreover, this required projects to understand the modus operandi of city authorities. Grantees in Colombia thus sought to ensure a legacy to the project by aiming to transmit the process and the lessons learned. *"The challenge is to work with the rhythm of the municipalities, capture their interest and have clear communication…. It's hard to find this balance between not fight with municipalities, but also not compromise."* (KII, 21 November 2024).

Finally, in some instances, working with city governments through HCA-II has opened new and bigger opportunities for creating impact at scale. Thus, one of the grantees reported that the project enabled them to become technical knowledge partners to authorities, such as the Public Management Unit in Bhubaneshwar, who work on public space and water bodies. "*This channel was created by the HCA-II project, but it has transpired to be something bigger – it has expanded its remit, aligning with city priorities. Our technical expertise helps cities achieve their own agenda, but we also keep cognisant of our own requirements.*" (KII, 1 October 2024).

Good practices

- Having a clear understanding of the necessity of working with the public sector, and city authorities, as part of consortia to affect change.
- Inviting people from the municipality to witness and take part in interventions and to document and share learnings with municipalities.
- Facilitating interactions between adolescent participants and city authorities to help realise the implementation of adolescent priorities.
- Making continuous efforts to persuade individuals in local government about the value of youth programming, as an integral part of partnerships.
- Making efforts to learn about how local authorities work, administratively and politically.

- Pragmatically drawing on support from various persons within local authorities, when the need arises.
- Anticipating that important contacts within local authorities may be transferred during the course of projects.

Recommendations

- Develop a MoU with city authorities/municipalities, which include provisions on how activities can be presented to external audiences.
- Ensure a joint up 'whole of municipality' approach, by working with both general secretariats and with sectoral secretariats.
- Integrate activities that increase knowledge of policy process, rights and responsibilities among adolescents.
- Anticipate and strategize on resistance to youth programming from within city authorities (as large heterogeneous organisations), even if partnerships are formalised.
- Understand whether local government authorities have institutionalised policies, positions and practices that prevent or make it difficult to work in marginalised informal settlements.
- Be aware that informal settlements neglected by local government authorities may have alternative governance arrangements, including by gangs, that may affect programming in these areas.
- Foster political nous: develop a sound understanding of the political economy of local authorities, the actors and their interest, and their formal and informal (actual) workings of local authorities to make collaborations work.

5.3 Engaging the most disadvantaged adolescents and neighbourhoods vs. scope and impact

Trade-offs between reaching more marginalised participants and achieving other goals were recognised across all projects. The trade-offs were particularly clear for reaching those from poorer backgrounds, PWDs, and marginalised youth in informal settlements and in relatively harder to reach areas. Reaching these groups has significant budget implications, demands more time from staff, and may require different professional skill sets. Respondents highlighted that working with PWDs or with adolescents from disadvantaged economic backgrounds requires skills and patience to build their confidence, while this may also require an awareness of how class-based differences between staff and project participants may shape

interactions. For instance, in Senegal, a respondent noted: *"It is challenging to include both school and out of school young people because the communication strategies, methods and tools are different for the two categories. More resources are needed if we want to equally include the two group categories."* (Senegal, KII, 29 November 2024). The project in Ecuador highlighted the diverse needs among PWDs, and addressing all would compromise the realisation of other project objectives.

Where participants are recruited through third actors, project staff noted that the project needs to dedicate time to raise awareness about E&I among such third actors, to avoid that they reproduce stereotypes and ensure they communicate openly with vulnerable adolescents. This was raised in Vietnam, where schools were reluctant to include disadvantaged groups in the project.

Including more marginalised youth requires reallocating time and resources. While some respondents spoke of logistical costs (organising transport, meals and facilities for PWDs), having enough dedicated and adequately capacitated staff to work with marginalised youth might incur significant other costs.

In the light of budget constraints, projects may decide to reduce the overall number of project participants, trading off depth vs breadth of project engagement and outcomes, or to shift balances in the allocation of budget for engaging youth participants vs e.g. resources spent on advocacy activities and engagement with key stakeholders. Budget realities compelled Senegalese grantees, in line with the funder's (Fondation Botnar) position, not to focus on some groups who were neediest: "*it is not our intent to include the neediest but the largest group of vulnerable adolescents."* (Senegal, KII, 10 December, 2024). Here too, demands for inclusion from communities were responded to, but hard to sustain. Thus, activities with disabled adolescents were stopped after an initial period, while school micronutrient provisioning faced similar dilemmas. *"Seeing the impacts on those micro-nutrients and vitamins on girls, boys started to pledge in order to receive the same treatment. We decided to include them but could not continue because we could not sustain the increased budget."* (Senegal, KII, 10 December, 2024).

In this respect, it is also insightful to note that some topics of HCA-II programming, despite holding intrinsic and innovative value, were not always of instant recognisable value to local stakeholders. It may thus require more effort to bring them on board. For instance, an implementing partner in Jaipur observed that *"when starting working with adolescents, this subject of empowerment, [and, ed.] public spaces was very new for the community and they could not relate to it. Because this was not their priority. Other issues of water, poverty, electricity – having basic standards of*

living were bigger challenges. So, it took longer to create an understanding of the significance of this project." (India, KII, 11 November, 2024).

Trade-offs were also deemed to exist between working in neighbourhoods where socio-economic needs are highest, yet neglected by policymakers, and an ability to influence public policy. *"I ask myself: would the impact of the conversation on public space be greater if we were walking with people from socioeconomic strata (estrato) 3, instead of 1 and 2 [lowest income neighbourhood type, ed.]? Of course, we are working where it is most needed, but maybe the impact in terms of advocacy remains lower."* Putting it more bluntly: "*If someone dies in Potrero Grande it does not get named, while in other neighbourhoods of Cali it is mentioned.*" (Colombia, KII, 12 December 2024). This quote underlines disparities in public recognition and response to violence in (public spaces) in different neighbourhoods, highlighting systemic neglect of marginalised areas.

Good practices

- Being responsive to emerging needs and demands for equity and inclusion expressed by community members.
- Reflecting on current organisational capabilities and limitations to work with the most disadvantaged young people.
- Considering the financial feasibility of efforts to enhance project inclusion and equity.
- Making deliberate choices about the possibilities and limits of equity and inclusion initiatives in projects.

Recommendations

- Consider that reaching the most disadvantaged and hard to reach groups can enhance equity and inclusion, however it may have significant budget implications, demand more time from staff, and may require different professional skills sets.
- Clarify whether projects aim to reach marginalised groups from design and inception phases. If so, integrate mappings of and measures to address their needs.
- Consider how recruitment of sufficient number of staff with the right expertise alongside allocating costs to meet logistical needs, can enable sustained addressal of marginalised groups' requirements.

- Weigh and be explicit about possible trade-offs between a desire to enhance equity & inclusion and the possibility of achieving policy impact.
- Develop strategies to raise awareness about project goals and value among stakeholders, from early on.
- Be aware that projects focusing on innovative topics may need a longer inception phase, to allow them to adequately bring local stakeholders on board with the relevance and importance of the project.

5.4 Youth ownership vis-à-vis project sustainability

Promoting youth inclusion through supporting youth ownership over project priorities and the implementation of activities is a central principle of HCA-II. But as projects will end and as adolescents grow older, they no longer belong to the programme's target group and may leave projects to pursue new life goals. The trade-off between having youth in charge of (parts of) a project vs. project sustainability emerged as a consideration in several projects. Projects made efforts to build lasting relationships with other stakeholders like schoolteachers and local leaders to contribute to the continuity of project activities and allow new participants to join.

Some interesting reflections were also raised by grantees: *"What is sustainability? If the park is getting damaged, is it a failure or does it mean it was used a lot? How do we measure it?"* (Colombia, KII, 12 December 2024). In India, implementing partners asked questions about the ethics, safeguarding and sustainability of projects. They noted that because of the project, adolescents feel empowered and they feel the need to communicate with city stakeholders more often, and wanted a WhatsApp group. "*We wonder if it will be safe for adolescents since we will leave the space. And how can we leave them in direct contact with adult city stakeholders?*" (India, KII, 13 December 2024)

In other instances, project insights point to the need for a deep understanding of the local power dynamics that may shape youth ownership and sustainability, from an early stage: *"(In Puente Colores) We have made a deal with the gangs, so they allowed children/young people to pass over the bridge. But now the gangs have taken over the park next to the bridge. At night, it is not safe. But it is fair to say we did not have a plan for sustaining the efforts. The community was not involved then in thinking about sustainability. At this moment, we are better prepared."* (Colombia, KII, 1 October 2024).

Nevertheless, one of the lessons in Colombia across different phases of the project was that adopting a co-design approach enhanced a sense of ownership because the young people are more closely connected to the public space (Colombia, KII, 21 November 2024). Moreover, now, the school in Palmira is interested in continuing with the project and integrating it in the curriculum, challenging the grantee to figure out how to transmit the learning so that the school can implement it (Colombia, KII, 12 December 2024).

Good practices

- Building lasting relationships with other stakeholders like schoolteachers and local leaders to contribute to the continuity of project activities and allow new participants to join.
- Critically reflecting on what 'sustainability' entails in youth programming, and how it may be grasped and evidenced.
- Nurturing youth ownership of projects and their legacies through co-design processes.
- Working with local stakeholders may foster their enduring adoption of youth participation processes and activities.

Recommendations

- Adopt a co-design approach to enhance a sense of ownership over project outcomes amongst young people, which in turn may support sustainability of project gains.
- Involve young people and community members in thinking through as an integral part of the project, what sustainability looks like, and how to support good ethics and safeguarding of project participants after the project ends.
- Strategically integrate local stakeholders in project consortia to enable their adoption of youth participation processes and activities beyond the timespan of the project.

6. Findings: Programming opportunities and limitations in intermediary cities vs. large cities

This section offers some comparative reflections about the advantages and disadvantages that programming in intermediary as compared to large cities entail, as per HCA-II project stakeholders. These reflections do not lend themselves to be expressed in terms of good practice and recommendations. Hence, Section 6 does not present good practices and recommendations like previous sections.

Across HCA-II countries, there was consensus that working in intermediary cities offers some advantages and opportunities as compared to large cities. Some projects were able to make such active comparisons as they covered both (e.g. Palmira and Cali in Colombia). Reflections emphasised the importance of size and scale. They noted that intermediary cities enabled them to cover all areas/neighbourhoods in an inclusive manner, entailed less institutional density and complexity, and often provided ease of access to local government authorities. This section provides examples of these various opportunities.

Interviewees considered that in India, metropolitan cities such as Delhi or Mumbai are quite stagnant and 'fixed in their ways'. Their sheer size and inequalities between areas within the city make it difficult to work coherently and inclusively at the city level. In contrast, they felt that intermediary cities are more dynamic, as they strive to attract investors to further economic growth. Intermediary cities like Thrissur are on the cusp of becoming a major city. These cities develop and urbanise rapidly.

The smaller size and a concomitant sense of cultural cohesion also make it possible to work inclusively at the city-scale, e.g. in Thrissur. "*I think it makes a world of a difference working in these*" (India, KII, 7 October 2024). Likewise, in Senegal, respondents observed that intermediary cities present opportunities to be focused, and to be inclusive and reach all neighbourhoods in project implementation (Senegal, KII, 10 December 2024). *"During our NACD we were able to survey all neighbourhoods that compose the city."* (Senegal, KII, 29 November 2024). Nevertheless, sometimes, local partners and authorities were concerned that by

focusing exclusively in urban areas, *"They found it inequitable to exclude [young people living in] rural areas that are linked to the city."* (Senegal, KII, 29 November 2024, ed.).

Some interviewees however pointed out that despite these important differences working in intermediary as opposed to larger cities, there remained many similarities, especially when focusing on neighbourhood-level dynamics: *"At the neighbourhood level they are more similar you might think."* (Colombia KII, 21 November 2024).

Many respondents noted that working in intermediary cities brings opportunities to engage and influence local government priorities, and for grantees to bring new ideas to the table. For instance, because the issue of adolescents and public space has never been planned for in India, this new idea gained a lot of interest in intermediary cities. In Colombia, building closer relationships with municipalities, working in Palmira, an intermediary city, was easier than working in the large city of Cali. *"In Palmira the neighbourhoods are smaller and more manageable. The relationship with the administration is a lot more direct. So far, we worked with two administrators, and I have the direct phone contact of an assistant of the mayor. This would not happen in Cali. We manage to get in touch with the mayor more easily, for example, to sign the MoU. Palmira Municipality acted as a counterpart in the project in the first phase of the Project, and now put in-kind resources for the second phase."* (KII, 12 December 2024).

Likewise, there was a perception that bigger cities are less interested in small 'tactical urbanism' interventions, as their attention is on mega construction efforts. *"There is less interest in small interventions with participatory processes because they are not so photogenic." (KII, 21 November 2024).* And finally, *"In intermediate cities, the relationships are more straightforward, although the technical capacity of the municipality is more limited."* (India, KII, 12 December 2024).

Whereas access to city authorities is easier in smaller cities, the institutional density and richness of civil society is not as pronounced. Palmira has fewer NGOs or local organisations than Cali, for instance. This affects opportunities for advocacy, and there is a limited number of stakeholders to consult (Colombia, KII, 1 October 2024). This issue was confirmed by respondents in Ghana, who noted that the presence of more diverse civil society actors and also donors is beneficial to upscaling projects but often lacking in smaller cities. Likewise, Thrissur not being a major city yet, it is lacking a strong civil society. However, "*This is a perfect time to do build new structures, for youth participation and stakeholder participation*" (India, KII, 7 October 2024). Furthermore, respondents in Ghana noted that customary authorities are more

difficult to localize and reach in intermediary cities than in rural areas, where they help mobilize project participants (Ghana, KII, 21 November 2024).

Ghanaian interviewees suggested that youth populations in intermediary cities are keen to learn and take on new ideas. The respondent referred to 'moderate exposure' of adolescence in intermediary cities. Rural youth are more likely to have literacy challenges, whereas adolescents in large cities have had 'too much exposure' and may have less interest (Ghana, KII, 12 November 2024). Another respondent in Ghana reflected that intermediary cities are bridges between large cities and rural areas, saying: "*A secondary city like Ho is in the middle. Rural areas need this project more, but Ho serves as a hub where rural communities can access resources and take them back.*" (KII, 12 November 2024).

Despite the relative ease of working in intermediary cities, the larger political and administrative architecture of a country could still complicate matters. In Thrissur, responsibilities for youth programming are dispersed within but also across administrative layers of the local, district, state and central governments, where diverse political formations dominate. Aligning across these layers was challenging (India, KII, 7 October 2024). "*The Education Ministry at Central government aims to increase literacy across the country. In Kerala, this is not an issue of priority. We found central level connects [leverage points, ed], but they actually made things more difficult for us. State level officials did not appreciate this (using central government leverage), as they have different policy priorities.*" (KII, 7 October 2024).

To conclude, intermediary cities offer a more workable scale to operate in for project grantees. Access to decisionmakers is enhanced, and urban complexity less. Nevertheless, the cities are embedded in broader political economies and administrative structures, and working across these requires significant political nous.

7. Conclusion and programme-level recommendations

The findings in sections 4 and 5 show that although Equity and Inclusion were not a central part of HCA-II strategy and projects remit, projects encounter these daily, engage these issues conscientiously, and have taken various steps to address E&I challenges. This was done sometimes by design and based on mappings and in other cases using a 'learning by doing' approach and making innovative adaptations,

where possible. However, these responses are rarely strategic and do not capture learning systematically to inform future programming.

This paper has furthermore demonstrated that projects have through such processes gained new understandings of some of the important trade-offs that may present in addressing E&I in adolescent health and wellbeing projects in intermediary cities. Some challenges are experienced across multiple countries and contexts, while others are more context specific. Drawing on good practice recorded in the paper as well as insights from other work in this space by its authors, this concluding section of the formative learning paper offers several programme-level recommendations.

The HCA-II programme is nearly halfway through its implementation and the objectives and activities are planned for most projects. The findings of this paper underline the importance of considering E&I priorities and trade-offs at the design stage of projects. Many, if not all, of the challenges listed in this report would need to be thought through, where possible, at the design stage of new projects. At this stage, decisions are needed concerning which E&I issues and/or marginalised groups will be a priority and how these can be meaningfully addressed with planned resources, while acknowledging limitations and not spreading resources too thinly. It is also clear that participatory approaches that involve adolescents in the design stage help map relevant needs.

However, given the progression of most projects, it may be a challenging for most projects to come up with new measures and implement these for the remainder of the HCA-II programme. Interviews made it clear that projects could not radically overhaul existing project designs and reallocate budgets to address all emergent E&I challenges and trade-offs they currently face.

Despite such limitations, evidently, important learning occurs within projects, as new conditions and needs are detected that implementers are keen to respond to. Certain projects have been able to adjust, mobilising resources for the inclusion of marginalised groups and/or adjusting activities. Others undertook a light touch shift of emphasis. For instance, by identifying which forms of stakeholder engagement should receive more attention, or by prioritising which good practices that address restrictive social norms can be amplified or expanded. Such steps could be considered for the remaining time of current HCA-II projects.

While this paper captures some of the existing good practices and learnings across the HCA-II programme, arguably there is further scope for embedding this in the remainder of programme. One of the potential advantages of operating at the scale

of a programme is that lessons learnt in individual projects can – and perhaps should – be shared across the project portfolio to allow for elevated levels of learning for project stakeholders. Creative solutions, innovations and mistakes made in individual projects can inform good and better practice elsewhere. Moreover, beyond the current projects, good practices and lessons could inform the design of a future programme and inform other Botnar Foundation programmes that address young people in urban settings. The recommendations included below provide some suggestions for how to do this.

7.1 Recommendations for the short-term

The following recommendations for immediate next steps can be considered for the remainder of the HCA-II programme, including in the case of project extensions.

- Organise one "Next steps on E&I" session per project to discuss which of the issues and recommendations included in this Formative Learning Paper the project wants to prioritise in the remainder of the programme.
- Encourage project grantees to make explicit the potential trade-offs they may face when deciding on E&I priorities to focus on in the remainder of the programme and document the justifications for choices made in this respect.
- Based on the findings, E&I challenges resulting from age, gender and class identities would be likely areas of priority, as these are currently encountered by all projects.
- Provide support in terms of reflecting on strategies for stakeholder engagement, for instance using a light-touch stakeholder analysis to map how the values and interests of different stakeholders align with the project's values around youth and adolescent participation, to determine e.g. new engagement strategies or shift in emphasis, or prioritisation of which stakeholders should be prioritised.
- The HCA-II programme can consider setting up a 'Flex Fund' making resources available to projects, facilitating, for instance, additional staffing and supporting the development of professional capacities, based on priorities elicited in a "Next Steps" session.

- Where project funds are already available to support E&I interventions within HCA-II, ensure that project grantees are aware of how they may apply for these.
- Develop principles and guidelines on when grantees and implementing partners can offer financial or material support to young people, aiming to facilitate their project participation.
- Initiate further activities to facilitate active, online and in-person learning between projects facing similar E&I challenges, including at the next Global Learning Forum.
- Commence conversations with project partners about a suitable process that can involve young people and community members in thinking through what sustainability looks like, and how to support good ethics and safeguarding of project participants after the project ends.
- Share findings of this formative learning paper widely, including with stakeholders in other 'youth in cities' oriented programmes supported by the Fondation Botnar.

7.2 Recommendations for the longer term and a potential HCA-III programme

Finally, we set out some recommendations that can be considered for the longer term, including in the case of a future HCA-III programme.

- Outline processes of consultation and reflection concerning how to address the HCA-II programme's "legacy questions", which includes questions around programme and project sustainability, and the ethics and safeguarding practices of youth participants after the programme ends.
- Explore the scope for Fondation Botnar to support lobbying with municipalities across the programme, where these take place in the same cities.
- Set realistic parameters for how E&I can be addressed in the absence of a programme strategy or Fondation Botnar strategy on E&I.
- Consider steps for using the findings of learning exercise paper and other evidence gathered by the HCA-II programme to inform a process through which Fondation Botnar can articulate an approach and develop strategic

thinking on E&I, which can guide existing efforts to address E&I in projects. For instance, a Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) approach may drive a more programmatic effort towards addressing such issues across the project portfolio, enabling learning across projects, programmes and better assessment of contributions to impact.

- Exchange learnings on E&I across Fondation Botnar-funded programmes to mobilize a collective approach to developing good practices on E&I.
- Develop an advocacy briefing note that brings together key lessons on E&I from the HCA-II programme that can be used to inform Fondation Botnar and other programmes for adolescents that are funded by the Fondation.

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9. ANNEX 1. Overview of HCA-II projects

Active Projects

Project	Project aim	Project approach and activities
Vivo mi Calle VMC, Cali & Palmira, Colombia	The project aims to improve public spaces for and with adolescents in vulnerable urban neighborhoods promoting physical activity, safety, and gender equity.	The project strengthens adolescents' leadership and communication skills; co-designs solutions with adolescents and local communities to enhance public spaces and promote their use through sports, dance, and creative activities; and strengthens collaboration between youth, communities and local authorities in transforming public spaces and promoting healthier cities.
Alza tu Voz, by Lab XXI, Quevedo & Riobamba, Ecuador	The project aims to empower adolescents to transform their cities into safe, healthy and intercultural spaces, focusing on three key areas: education and learning, youth participation and advocacy, and mental health.	The project works closely with city leaders and other city stakeholders, as well as 'nucleus groups' of adolescents in each city, to advance its three priority areas for intervention. Activities include creating safe and supportive school environments and strengthening adolescents' and teachers' soft skills; promoting mental health through community-based arts and sports activities; and positioning adolescents in city decision-making platforms.
Young and Safe, Ho, Ghana	The project aims to create a youth-friendly city by enhancing the overall wellbeing and participation of adolescents, focusing on	The project leverages relationships with the Ho Municipal Assembly, the Ghana Education Service, and other local civil society organisations. It develops adolescents' leadership and advocacy skills

	youth leadership and advocacy empowerment and access to essential knowledge and skills in priority areas.	through activities such as the Youth Policy Hackathon and the Y-Radio show as well as improving public spaces. It provides workshops to strengthen adolescents' mental, sexual and cyber health knowledge and builds digital literacy to improve employability.
Resilient Cities for Adolescents, Sunyani, Ghana	The project aims to create a resilient city system that aligns city planning and policies with the needs of adolescents, promoting healthy and supportive environments in which they can thrive. It focuses on adolescents' social, political and economic empowerment.	The project empowers adolescents to become changemakers through offering courses in journalism, digital innovation and entrepreneurship, and mobilising adolescents to improve public spaces. It has also established an Adolescent Parliament with representation from all parts of the city. Participants debate urban issues and present ideas to city authorities, building civic knowledge and capacities in the process.
Fort pour le Future, Thies, Pikine, Tivaouane, Senegal	The project aims to enhance adolescent nutrition and sexual and reproductive health, and to empower adolescents to take a more active role in decision-making within their cities.	The project works with municipal authorities and other state to non-state actors to offer training and capacity building for adolescent-led advocacy; improve infrastructure, systems and services to better meet the needs of young people; educate adolescent about how to adopt a healthy lifestyle and take up local services; and advocate for policy changes and greater resource allocation in priority areas.
Co-Creating Healthy Cities, Da Nang, Vietnam	The project aims to support the development of Da Nang as a vibrant, healthy and adolescent friendly city. It focuses on ensuring access to essential quality services for adolescents, advocating for	The project delivers targeted service improvements to advance equitable access to quality essential services; promotes meaningful participation of adolescents and young people through innovative digital platforms; and collates and uses evidence to advocate for policies that

	local investment in young peoples' needs, and empowering adolescents to engage in city development	address adolescents vulnerabilities and deprivation to guide planning, budgeting and programme design.

Projects in Design Phase

Project	Project aim	Project approach and activities
Adolescent-Centered City Solutions, Thrissur, India	To identify the priority health and wellbeing issues for adolescents in the target cities and co-design a systemic intervention to address root causes and catalyse transformative and sustainable change.	Engaging adolescents, their caregivers, local municipalities and other state and non-state actors in a participatory needs assessment and co-design process. Involved a range of activities including focus groups, surveys, creative mapping and photo journalism and joint workshops.
My Path My Pledge, Kolda & Tambacounda, Senegal		
Green Citizens, Healthy Cities, Hoi An & Tam Kyi, Vietnam	As above, but with a focus on the environment and sustainability.	

This report finds that while Equity and Inclusion were not a central part of HCA-II strategy and projects' remit, multiple E&I challenges were encountered by all HCA-II projects. Many of these reference socio-cultural norms, including regarding age-based social hierarchies; gender; class; race, ethnicity, caste and religious minorities; and disability. Project staff are often aware of these, and some projects had included measures to address E&I challenges into their design and activity plans. Where E&I challenges were not part of the design and not centrally addressed, project staff are gaining expertise on how to address these on an everyday basis but are constrained by time and resources. Projects constantly need to consider trade-offs in terms of addressing E&I challenges. The paper identifies four types of trade-offs. These concern: a) Depth vs breadth of youth participation in consortia; b) Involving local authorities: buy-in vs risk to meaningful participation; c) Engaging the most disadvantaged adolescents and neighbourhoods vs scope and impact; and d) Youth ownership vis-a-vis project sustainability.

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