



a **Fondation Botnar** initiative

Key Reflections and Programme Learnings

HCA Global Learning Forum 2026



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Content

Executive Summary 3

Adolescents as Agents of Urban Change 5

Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Youth Engagement 7

Skills and Confidence Enable Youth Leadership 9

Digital Technologies as Tools for Engagement 11

Imagining Adolescent-Friendly Cities 13

Strengthening Systems for Sustainable Youth Participation 14

Key Programme Insights 16

Strategic Recommendations for Cities 17

Urban Youth Dialogue.

Young people speak, cities



2-6 February 2026
4
days

Executive Summary

The [Global Learning Forum 2026 \(GLF\)](#) was held in Ghana from 2-6 February 2026, bringing together adolescents, city partners, project teams and programme staff from across the Healthy Cities for Adolescents (HCA) programme. It [created a space](#) to exchange experiences, reflect on progress and explore how cities can better support adolescent health, wellbeing and participation.

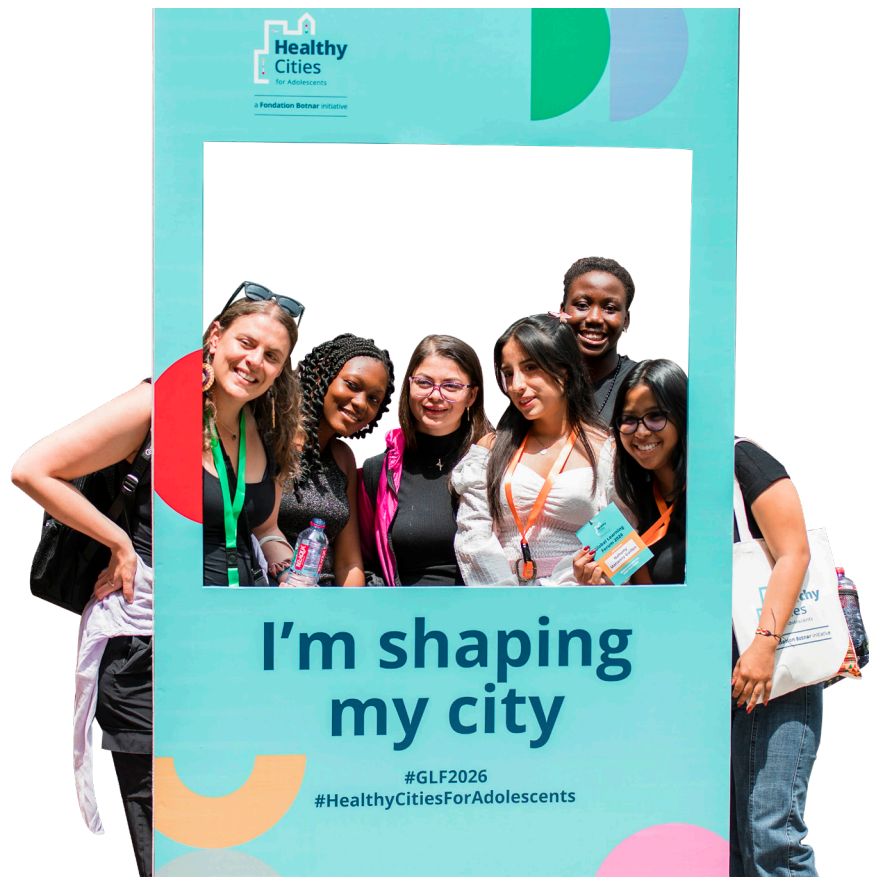
The Forum consisted of four days of internal learning and sharing in the project city of Ho, concluding with a half day externally facing event 'The Urban Youth Dialogue' in Accra. The agenda was structured around the core outcome ambitions of the programme, as set out in the [HCA Theory of Change](#).



Throughout the event, one message was overwhelmingly clear:

young people involved in HCA projects are actively helping to shape their cities.

In many contexts, adolescents are speaking with city leaders, improving public spaces and leading community initiatives. At the same time, their influence remains limited or constrained. Many decisions that affect young people are still made without them. The Forum showcased what is needed to change this.



Adolescents need safe spaces to meet and organise. Skills such as public speaking, storytelling and advocacy help them engage with decision-makers. And when cities create formal platforms for youth participation, young people can move from sharing opinions to shaping solutions.

The main challenge now is sustaining the changes that have been initiated – ensuring that youth participation becomes institutionalised within urban governance processes.

This paper brings together the key reflections and practical insights emerging from the Forum discussions.

Adolescents as Agents of Urban Change

A critical message emerging from the GLF 2026 was the recognition of adolescents as **active agents of urban change** rather than passive beneficiaries (or victims) of urban development.



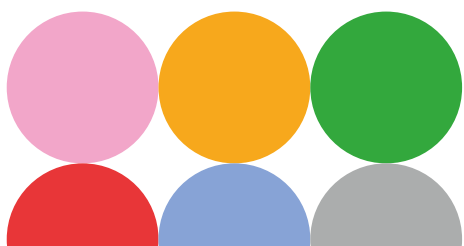
During the discussions, where participants mapped visual representations of their cities and identified how young people interact with them, adolescents pointed out that many decisions affecting their lives are made in spaces where youth voices are rarely heard, such as school boards, local government planning meetings and national decision-making processes. At the same time, they **identified opportunities where they can have more influence** – including youth councils, school clubs, community initiatives and online platforms.

Participants highlighted that strengthening these entry points means making them more accessible and effective for adolescents, ensuring that young people are aware of them, able to participate regularly, and connected to real decision-making processes.

Across programme cities, adolescents have participated in activities such as **youth councils, community initiatives and advocacy efforts** that allow them to engage with local decision-makers and raise issues affecting their communities.

However, adolescents also emphasised that **participation alone does not guarantee influence**. During discussions, young people highlighted that many decisions affecting their lives – including healthcare services, education systems and public infrastructure – are still made without meaningful youth involvement.

Adolescents stressed that participation becomes meaningful when young people are able not only to express their views but also to contribute to shaping solutions and influencing implementation.



What has already shifted?

Real stories from GLF

In several cities where HCA operates, adolescent engagement has already moved beyond consultation towards active participation in governance and city planning processes.



Youth co-designing public spaces in Colombia

In Colombia, HCA's *Vivo mi Calle* project has engaged adolescents and young leaders in Cali and Palmira in mapping exercises, mural activities and the design of city-wide improvement plans alongside families, neighbourhood committees, the Community Action Board, local partners, and Municipal authorities (including the Secretariats of Security and Justice and of Social Welfare).



Children's Councils in city governance in Vietnam

In Vietnam, Children's Councils established under HCA's *Co-Creating Healthy Cities* project in Da Nang operate at multiple levels of local governance, bringing together more than 300 young members who identify issues affecting adolescents and present them to local authorities. Through these councils, adolescents contribute to policy decisions including the provision of free school textbooks and the construction of playgrounds funded through municipal budgets.



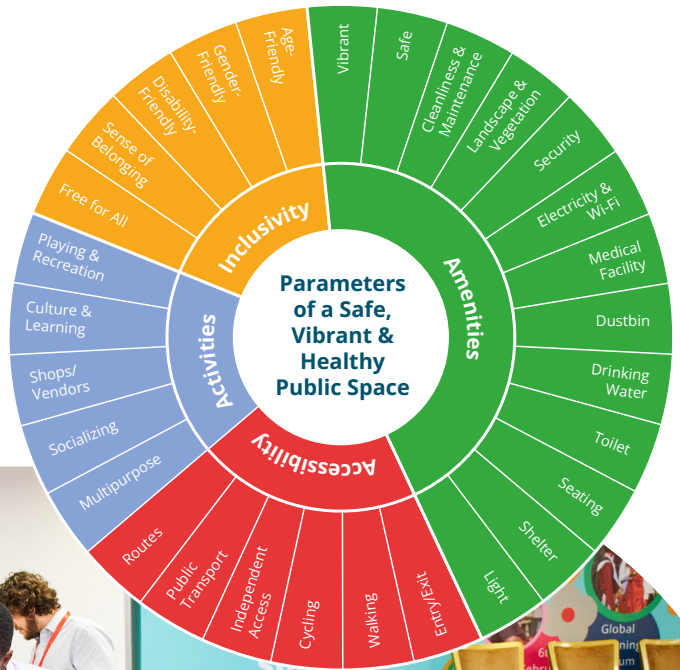
Youth-led urban placemaking and policy change in Ecuador

In Ecuador, adolescents engaged in HCA's *Alza tu Voz* project in Riobamba and Quevedo have been participating in urban placemaking workshops, working directly with municipal authorities to redesign public spaces. Through a participatory design process, young people used creative tools such as games and storytelling to express their experiences of the city and propose solutions. This collaboration contributed to the development of the first local adolescent law in Ecuador addressing issues such as youth participation, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, access to public spaces and digital skills.

Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Youth Engagement

Across several sessions, participants highlighted the importance of safe and inclusive spaces for adolescents in cities.

During one exercise, where participants worked in groups to map out what makes their cities healthy or less supportive for young people, adolescents described a clear and specific **vision of a healthy city**: green spaces, clean air, safe roads, recreational facilities, accessible healthcare, and social environments free from harassment, stigma and peer pressure.



At the same time, they identified **what undermines their wellbeing** – including drugs, sexual harassment, early marriage and pregnancy and patriarchal norms that disadvantage adolescent girls. Many also emphasised that being excluded from city planning decisions is itself a key barrier to creating safer and more inclusive urban environments.

Youth-friendly spaces, such as parks, youth centres and community hubs, create places where adolescents can meet, organise activities

and connect with their communities. These spaces can support peer learning, community initiatives and youth-led projects.

However, participants also noted that many of these spaces are created through short-term projects. Ensuring their **continuity and potential impact requires sustained partnerships with municipalities and community organisations** so that these spaces remain accessible and continue to serve young people beyond the lifetime of individual initiatives.

Building or restoring adolescent friendly spaces

Real stories from GLF



Ho Youth Park in Ghana

In Ghana, HCA's *Young and Safe* project in Ho has been working to transform a neglected public space into a Youth Park (the first of its kind in the city) where young people can gather, organise activities and connect with their community. Through collaboration between the municipal assembly, community leaders and the project consortia, the area was reclaimed and redeveloped, with adolescents contributing to its design and activation.

The park holds the potential to be a central meeting place for young people in Ho. Adolescents involved in its design and programming described a strong sense of ownership over the space. Young people can benefit from an open library and youth groups have been leading environmental initiatives in the park, such as upcycling discarded fabrics into picnic blankets for visitors.

There are ambitions to further develop the space, including an events area, a skate park, a floodlit sports pitch and a small restaurant to support long-term maintenance. Delivering these plans will require sustained collaboration between public sector actors, adolescents, and other local partners.



Revitalised neighbourhoods in Colombia

In Colombia, the HCA's *Vivo Mi Calle* project has improved public spaces such as Caimitos Sports Complex in Palmira and Parque de la Paz in Cali through participatory design processes involving adolescents and community members. Alongside physical upgrades, communities led initiatives including murals, community fairs and youth-led sports activities.

These changes helped transform previously underused or unsafe areas into spaces where adolescents and families can gather and participate in community life. Perceptions of safety improved significantly: in Palmira, 86.5% of adolescents valued the improvements, and overall safety perceptions increased by more than 50%. As one parent shared, *"Now my daughter goes to the park with her friends. Before she wouldn't dare."*



Regenerated public spaces in India

In India, HCA's *Safe, Vibrant and Healthy Public Spaces (SVHPS)* project is focused on improving urban environments and infrastructure in Bhubaneswar and Jaipur through active adolescent engagement. Over 1000 adolescents have been involved in assessing existing public spaces and proposing design improvements. The project also collaborates closely with over 200 city officials to foster dialogue and engagement with adolescents on public space interventions. Proposed changes are displayed in six temporary installations including parks and community spaces where play areas, artistic exhibitions, and events spaces have been constructed. These sites have become tangible examples of how adolescent-led and informed public space design can enhance the quality and usability of public spaces for all users, while also strengthening the case for prioritising adolescent health and well-being into mainstream urban development agendas.

Skills and Confidence Enable Youth Leadership

Skills development was another key theme during the forum.

Across programme activities, adolescents are gaining vital skills to support their leadership as urban change agents such as

public speaking

advocacy

digital

communication

storytelling

community
engagement

Many young people shared how participating in programme initiatives helped them build confidence and speak up in public settings or engage with community leaders.

At the same time, discussions showed that many adolescents still lack clear pathways to turn their ideas into action. Young people explained that while they often have strong

ideas about the challenges facing their communities, they do not always have access to the tools, resources or networks needed to implement solutions.

Participants highlighted the **importance of linking skills development with real opportunities** to engage with city leaders and take part in decision-making.

Building confidence through youth leadership

Real stories from GLF



Building confidence through youth expression in Ghana

In Ghana, participants in HCA's *Young and Safe* project in Ho shared how their engagement has helped them gain confidence in public speaking and express their views in community discussions. The project's Young and Loud Festival that showcases the creativity and energy of young people through arts, dance, poetry and music, has also provided a unique new platform for adolescents to express their ideas and voices.

Meanwhile in Sunyani, adolescents trained through HCA's *Resilient Cities for Adolescents* project have been participating in an Adolescent Parliament, which has enabled them to engage in discussions with local government committees and present community concerns and propose solutions directly to decision-makers.



Intergenerational dialogue building youth confidence in Senegal

In Senegal, HCA's *My Path, My Pledge* project activities in Kolda and Tambacounda have focused on helping young people speak openly about intergenerational issues and build the confidence to engage in dialogue with adults and community leaders.



Youth leadership through structured dialogue in Vietnam

In Vietnam, adolescents participating in Children's Councils in Da Nang established through HCA's *Co-Creating Healthy Cities for Adolescents* project have also developed communication and leadership skills through structured dialogue with city authorities.

While in Hoi An and Tam Ky, adolescents supported by HCA's *Green Citizens, Healthy Cities* project have been taking part in clubs, competitions and community activities focused on environmental protection, waste management and local culture. Through hands-on approaches such as field trips and "learning through play", young people have developed skills and confidence to engage with local issues. Adolescents have also contributed directly to local planning processes – including co-design workshops on ecotourism in Tam Ky and youth forums on waste management in Hoi An – where they presented ideas and discussed them with local authorities, community members and experts.

Digital Technologies as Tools for Engagement

Participants discussed the growing role of digital technologies in adolescents' lives.

Young people highlighted that digital tools can help them

access information

learn new skills

connect with peers

**engage in
civic issues**

But they also spoke about challenges such as misinformation, cyberbullying and spending too much time online.

Participants stressed that digital technologies should not be seen only as social media

platforms. They can also support learning, advocacy and youth-led initiatives.

Young people also emphasised the importance of including adolescents in conversations about how digital platforms are designed and used.



Digital storytelling for effective advocacy

Real stories from GLF

During the Forum, adolescents presented short films and digital stories they had created to communicate their experiences and priorities.



In Vietnam, adolescents from HCA's *Green Citizens, Healthy Cities* project received training in video production and editing to document their environmental initiatives such as upcycling waste. They use the videos they make to advocate for their work in their wider communities.



In Ecuador, HCA's *Alza tu Voz* project showcased a music video that was produced and led by adolescents, highlighting the importance of music and other artistic activities in improving mental health.



In India, the *SVHPS* project shared a video highlighting the issues adolescents with disabilities face living in cities; particularly in navigating the city. The video showed how the project supported these adolescents in advocating the local government for positive changes such as a tactile pavement and safe crossing to help adolescents safely reach their school on foot.

These digital storytelling activities not only helped adolescents develop technical skills but also created new channels through which young people could communicate their perspectives to local stakeholders and wider audiences.



Imagining Adolescent-Friendly Cities

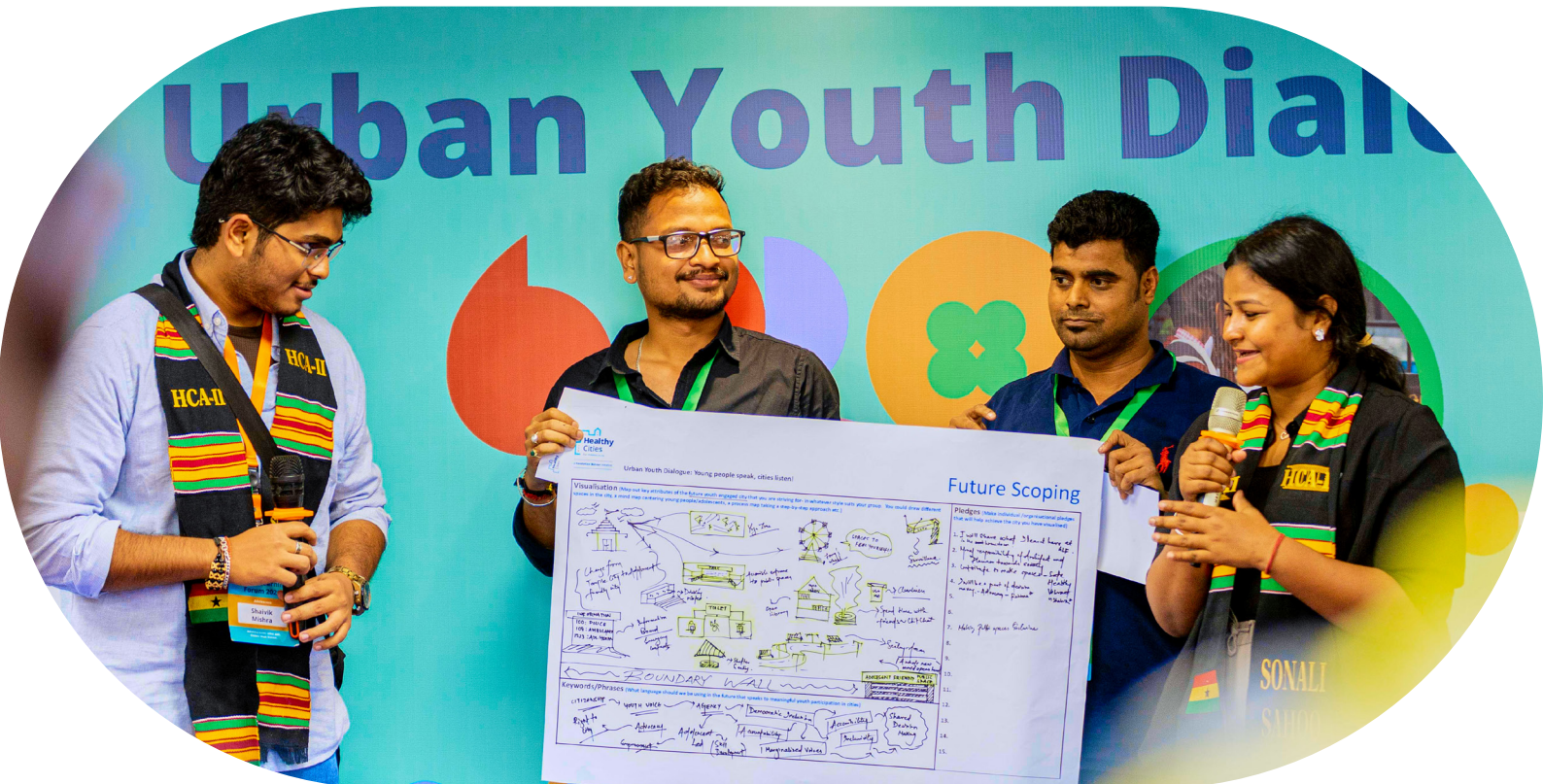
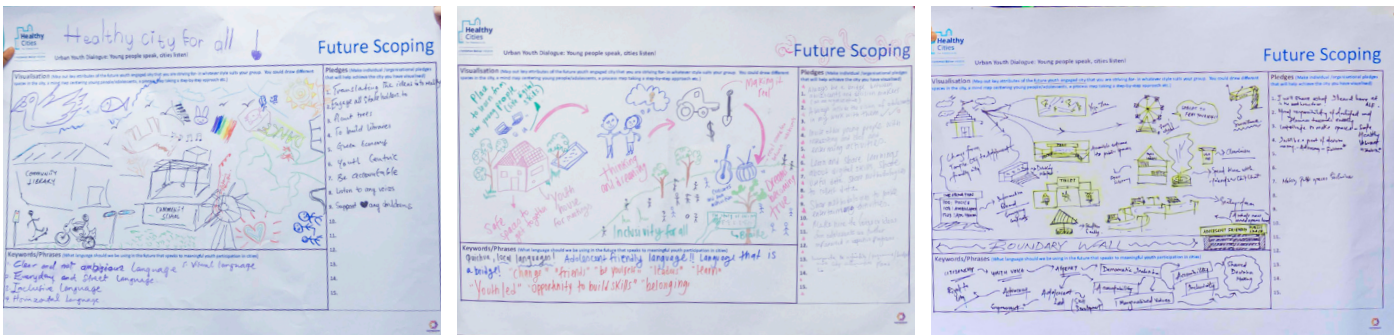
During the Urban Youth Dialogue on the last day of the Forum, a ‘futurescoping’ exercise invited participants to imagine what cities that support adolescent wellbeing might look like.

Across groups, young people described cities with green spaces, libraries, youth centres, accessible health services and safe public areas. They also emphasised the importance of social connection, community interaction and visible youth presence in public life.

Participants highlighted the **need for accessible public spaces, disability-friendly walkways, safe pedestrian crossings and youth centres** where adolescents can gather and organise activities. They noted that communication with adolescents should use clear language and formats that young people can easily understand and relate to.

Safety, belonging and accountability emerged as key principles shaping their vision of adolescent-friendly cities.

Visualisations produced by adolescents, showing what their ideal future adolescent friendly cities might look like:



Strengthening Systems for Sustainable Youth Participation

A recurring theme throughout the Forum was the importance of shifting systems to sustain and support adolescent engagement over time.

Participants noted that many youth initiatives are linked to short-term project cycles and may struggle to continue once programme support ends.

Discussions therefore emphasised the importance of **strengthening institutional mechanisms and system conditions that embed adolescent participation within city governance processes.**

Participants also highlighted the need to generate stronger evidence demonstrating the impact of youth engagement initiatives in order to strengthen advocacy efforts and inform policy development.



Strengthened systems for sustained change

Real stories from GLF



Institutionalising youth participation through an Adolescent Parliament in Ghana

In Ghana, the Adolescent Parliament model in Sunyani developed by HCA's *Resilient City for Adolescents* project provides a structured platform where young representatives engage with municipal committees and contribute to discussions on issues such as sanitation, gender equality and public safety. Adolescents now participate in local committees on sanitation, gender, health and security, and their recommendations have been reflected in the Sunyani Regional Development Plan 2025-2029.



Youth Fellows driving climate action in India

In India, HCA's ACT *Indore* initiative has created a Youth Fellows network for Indore working with city stakeholders on climate-related urban challenges. Fifty fellows are currently leading community projects addressing issues such as heat stress, waste management and water scarcity, while engaging with municipal departments and academic institutions to strengthen the evidence base for youth-led climate action. Youth fellows are also working to institutionalise the Youth ACT framework in Indore, a co-created strategy that brings adolescent and community voices into Indore's urban planning, shaping healthier, climate-resilient futures.



From participation to policy: institutionalising youth engagement in Ecuador

In Ecuador, the local government in Quevedo has begun to replicate advocacy and placemaking approaches introduced by HCA's *Alza tu Voz* project, adapting them into its own initiatives for adolescent engagement in public space use and policy dialogue. In Riobamba, the designation of Bellavista as an "adolescents' neighbourhood" through a municipal resolution represents an institutional recognition of adolescent participation in urban planning.



Shifting perceptions of youth in city governance in Colombia

In Colombia, there has been a significant change in how local stakeholders perceive adolescents in HCA project sites in Cali and Palmira. Data shows that more than half of urban actors (public sector and communities) improved their perception of young people's capacities to participate in planning and decision-making spaces, while adolescents themselves reported that communities and authorities are now more open to their ideas. These shifts were also echoed in interviews. A community leader described adolescents as "more assertive, better prepared, and able to lead". A Palmira municipal official observed that "*for the first time, difficult actors in the commune came together and worked in synergy because of the adolescents*".

These examples demonstrate how youth engagement can move from project-based participation towards more sustained changes and institutional partnerships with city authorities.

Key Programme Insights

The discussions across the Global Learning Forum 2026 highlighted several insights relevant for future work focused on adolescent wellbeing in cities, and sustainable urban development more widely:

Adolescents want meaningful participation, not symbolic consultation.

1

Safe spaces and youth-friendly environments are critical entry points for adolescent engagement.

2

Skills development must be linked to opportunities for real civic participation.

3



4

To improve adolescent wellbeing, cities need to open up decision-making processes and create more opportunities for young people to be heard and influence decisions.

5

Digital technologies can support youth engagement when adolescents are involved in shaping their use.

6

Sustained youth participation in urban development requires long-term institutional support and partnerships with cities.

Strategic Recommendations for Cities



Institutionalise youth participation

Move beyond one-off engagement mechanisms by embedding young peoples' participation into formal governance processes, planning cycles and decision-making structures. This includes linking youth councils, adolescent parliaments or advisory groups directly to municipal committees, budgeting processes and sectoral planning (e.g. health, urban planning, climate). Clear mandates, feedback loops and accountability mechanisms are critical to ensure that adolescent input influences decisions.

Invest in sustainable, city-owned youth-friendly spaces and platforms

Cities should treat youth-friendly spaces – both physical and social – as essential urban infrastructure. This includes allocating municipal budgets for their maintenance and programming, embedding them within existing public systems such as parks, libraries and community centres, and involving adolescents in their design and management. Supporting youth-led models can help ensure these spaces remain relevant, inclusive and actively used over time.

Strengthen partnerships

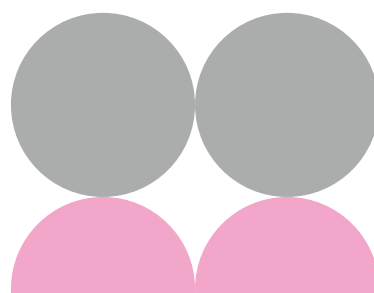
Collaboration between municipalities, youth organisations and other civil society and private sector actors are key to promoting more sustainable youth engagement initiatives.

Invest in evidence and learning

Cities need stronger, more actionable evidence on what works to improve adolescent wellbeing and participation. Monitoring and evaluation efforts that document the impact of adolescent engagement initiatives are critical evidence sources that inform better future policy development.

Leverage digital ecosystems as enablers of inclusion, engagement and accountability

Cities have an opportunity to use digital platforms to enable participatory planning, gather feedback and facilitate ongoing civic dialogue between young people and decision-makers. However, this requires deliberate attention to risks such as misinformation, digital exclusion and online harm, which can undermine both participation and wellbeing if left unaddressed. Crucially, young people themselves should be actively involved in shaping how digital tools and platforms are designed and used.





a **Fondation Botnar** initiative

Learn more about Healthy Cities for Adolescents programme:

healthy-cities.org

