

Promoting Equity & Inclusion for Healthy Cities

Stories and insights from
adolescents around the world



A summary of research by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS)
in their capacity as global learning partner for Phase II of
the Healthy Cities for Adolescents programme.



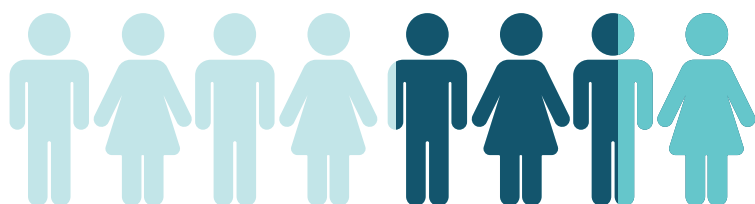
Why equity & inclusion matter

Over half the world's adolescents now live in cities – but many are unheard by their societies and communities.

In 2020,

4.4 billion people of the global population lived in urban areas.

56%



1.8 billion people were under the age of 18.

Yet adolescents are rarely included in decisions about the cities they live in, whether it be on public policy, household decision making or other elements that shape their lives.



a Fondation Botnar initiative

Healthy Cities for Adolescents is a global programme supporting young people to thrive in urban environments. It brings together local governments, civil society, youth groups, and global partners to co-create healthier, safer, and more inclusive cities for adolescents.

The programme is supported by Fondation Botnar and managed by Ecorys UK. HCA operates in six countries – Colombia, Ecuador, Ghana, Senegal, India and Vietnam – funding projects that seek to improve conditions for adolescents in intermediary cities. Each project aims to create lasting solutions through partnerships with diverse stakeholders at the city level.



Adolescents are at the heart of HCA's mission –

to make cities healthier, safer, and more equitable for young people, and ultimately for all.



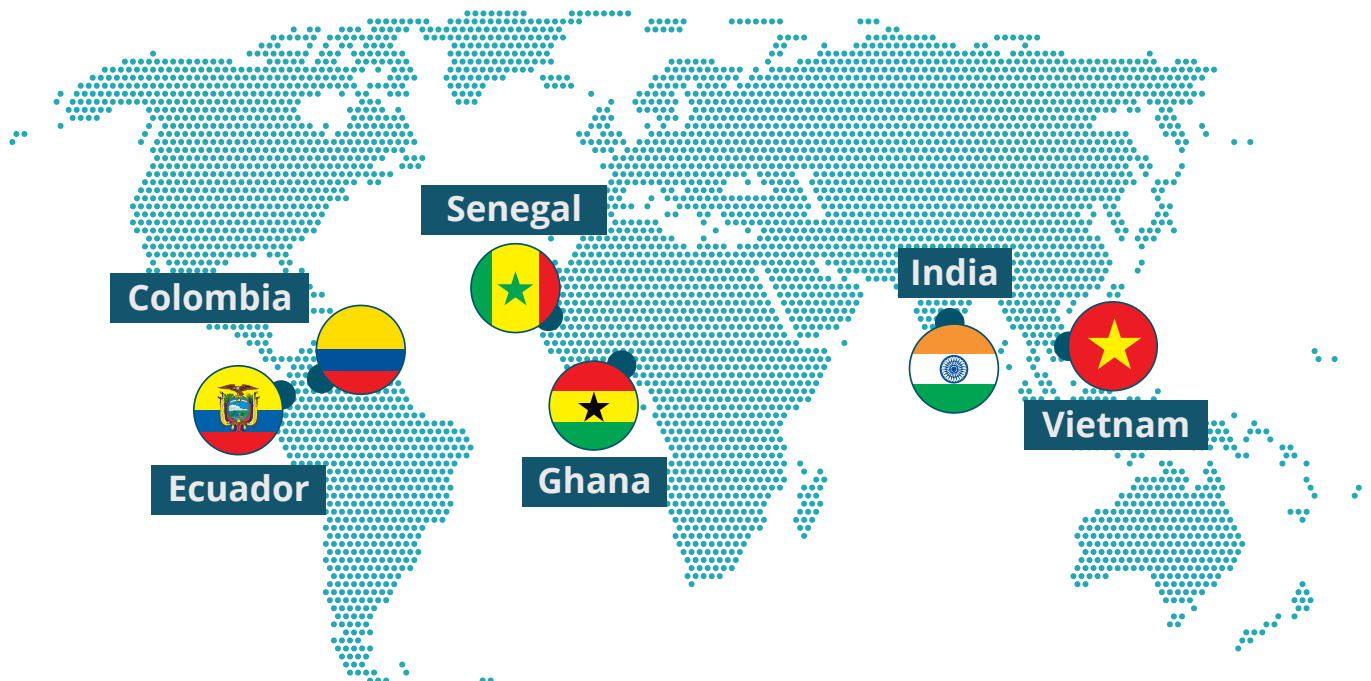
Where we work

HCA-II is active in
6
countries

The programme currently supports

10
local projects

to tackle adolescent health and wellbeing
in fast-growing intermediary cities – with
unique challenges and opportunities.



About this research

This summary is based on fieldwork conducted across 6 countries in the HCA-II programme between May – December 2024:

11

focus group discussions

group sessions with adolescents to explore lived experiences and challenges

9

projects studied

local consortia-based initiatives working to improve adolescent wellbeing in intermediary cities

22

key informant interviews

one-on-one conversations with project leaders, community figures, and experts

106

participants involved

individuals interviewed, such as project and programme staff, stakeholders, and including

77

adolescents

directly consulted through interviews and focus groups



The barriers adolescents face

This research confirmed that adolescents living in intermediary cities face a web of interconnected challenges that limit their ability to participate fully in urban life, including in shaping the policies that affect them. These challenges also have implications for their ability to participate in project activities that aim to enhance their lives in cities. Many of these challenges relate to wider social and cultural norms in each country; some are specific to particular city contexts.

They include:

Age

In many societies, adolescents are excluded from meaningful participation due to cultural norms that prioritise adult authority. *In Senegal, for example, adolescents we spoke to perceive themselves as having responsibilities but not rights.* Frequently, adolescents' lack of confidence reinforces their lack of opportunities and their exclusion from decision-making in families and communities.



It is considered that adolescents don't have rights, but only duties. Even if during family meetings, they are not included."

KII participant, Senegal



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."

KII participant, India

Gender

Gender norms in some contexts significantly limit the participation of girls in decision-making, especially outside of the home. *In HCA-II projects in India and Senegal, concerns over girls' safety, risks of sexual harassment, and fear of social judgment cause parents to restrict their movement. In Ghana, girls from low-income households are also burdened with domestic work, making it difficult for them to join activities. In Vietnam, parents hesitate to allow girls to attend events held at night or far from home.*

Class

Our research highlighted that adolescents from poorer households often cannot afford transport needed to attend project activities because they are struggling to address even basic needs such as access to food. *In Ghana and Senegal projects, this financial barrier is particularly acute for those living in peripheral neighbourhoods. In India, some adolescents must work in informal jobs, limiting their free time.*



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... and it is sometimes controversial to be talking about public space when you don't know if the young people ate at home."

KII participant Colombia



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."

KII participant, India

Disability

Disability inclusion was rarely prioritised in project design of HCA-II projects. This resulted in few accessible facilities or activities. Adolescents with disabilities also faced stigma and required extra support, such as transport or sign language facilitators. *In a HCA project in India, for instance, some adolescents were unable to join because venues lacked proper accommodations.* Adults also came with a focus on young people's disabilities, not their abilities, failing to recognise what they were capable of.

Ethnicity & Religion

Ethnicity and religion (and the intersectionality between these and gender) also play a critical role in enabling or hindering inclusion in many contexts. *In India, our research confirmed that caste discrimination affects access to public spaces – low-caste youth were barred from public parks in middle-class neighbourhoods. In Ecuador, Indigenous norms restricted girls' public participation. In Ghana and Senegal, ethnic and religious concerns influenced parents' willingness to allow adolescents to engage, especially when project activities were seen as introducing foreign or Western ideas.*

Security

Security concerns are also a major barrier to inclusion in some country and city contexts. For HCA-II projects *in Colombia and Ecuador, gang activity threatened adolescent boys with recruitment and violence. In India, both boys and girls faced risks of harassment in public spaces and schools. In Vietnam, parental fear over safety limited participation in evening or overnight programmes.*

“

Slum children are not allowed to enter into these neighbourhood parks by guards of the residential societies.”

KII participant, India



These barriers are deeply rooted but not insurmountable. Across the HCA-II programme, projects have responded with thoughtful, locally-rooted strategies to promote adolescent participation and inclusion.

What works: Stories from the field

Despite facing deep-seated barriers, adolescents across HCA-II project sites experienced moments of breakthrough. These examples show how inclusive strategies led to tangible results:



India: Visibility and voice through symbolic roles

To challenge gender norms, projects in India gave girls visible roles such as leadership badges and responsibility in activities. These symbolic actions raised their status within families and communities. Recognition helped shift parents' attitudes – girls reported being allowed to attend more events and speak up publicly. These approaches were key in environments where both age and gender restricted project participation.



Senegal: Shifting perceptions through responsibility and recognition

Projects in Senegal supported adolescents to move beyond tokenism. By creating spaces where youth could lead, some became recognized by NGOs and community groups. One girl led a hygiene campaign at her school and was later invited to sit on a community health board – earning her status and voice in broader conversations. Youth reported feeling more respected and even took on quasi-staff roles in other local projects.





Ghana: Building trust through community-rooted staff

In Ghana, trusted local project staff played an important role in persuading parents – especially in low-income or conservative households – to allow adolescent girls to participate in project activities. These staff engaged with faith leaders, community champions, and mothers to explain the benefits of involvement and outline safeguarding practices. This resulted in increased approval for project participation, particularly among girls whose families were initially hesitant.



Vietnam: Prioritising safety to enable access

Parents in Vietnam were concerned about the safety of girls attending late or overnight activities. In response, project teams adjusted the timing of activities and ensured safe, accessible, and well-lit venues. These logistical changes significantly increased participation, especially in the evenings, by making parents feel more comfortable about letting girls attend.



Ecuador: Respecting cultural norms to build inclusion

Among Indigenous communities in Ecuador, strict gender expectations limited girls' participation in public activities. Staff addressed this by adapting communication – using local languages and culturally sensitive messaging, including radio outreach – to gain community trust. By aligning activities with local values, they helped overcome parental resistance and made participation more acceptable.



Trade-offs in project delivery

Our research found that projects had to balance inclusion with scale and sustainability:

Depth vs Breadth

Working intensively with smaller groups of adolescents allowed for deep engagement, confidence-building, and leadership development. However, as projects scaled up, it became harder to maintain meaningful participation for each individual, reducing the transformative potential of the work.

Buy-in vs Tokenism

Engaging local authorities was necessary for projects' progress and helped enhance programme visibility and long-term sustainability. Yet in some contexts, this involvement resulted in youth being invited to participate symbolically without having their voices seriously considered in decision-making.



Meaningful participation of young people is not understood. They only invite young people, but don't wish to consider their opinions."

KII participant, Colombia

Inclusion vs Scope

Efforts to reach marginalised adolescents – especially from conservative or hard-to-reach communities – required more time and adaptation. While this improved equity, it also limited the speed and scale of broader project implementation.



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."

KII participant Senegal

Youth Ownership vs Sustainability

Encouraging youth to lead activities boosted empowerment and local legitimacy. However, when projects ended, those youth-led structures often struggled to continue due to a lack of mentorship, funding, or institutional support.

Recommendations: What helps projects succeed

Do:

- Build trust with families, community leaders, and local influencers
- Create safe, accessible, and gender-sensitive spaces for activities
- Use visible roles (e.g., badges, speaking opportunities) to boost youth confidence
- Involve adolescents in project co-design and feedback loops
- Adapt communication and facilitation to fit local norms and minority contexts
- Use role models to inspire participation, especially among girls and marginalised groups
- Strategically engage gatekeepers (e.g., parents, religious leaders) early in the process
- Allocate time and resources to reach the most disadvantaged adolescents
- Include project staff from target communities where possible

Don't:

- Assume marginalised adolescents will automatically engage – active outreach is key
- Tokenise youth by inviting them without empowering them to input
- Rely solely on short-term programming for long-term change
- Underestimate the time needed to work with hard-to-reach groups
- Beware that if not addressing sensitive issues like caste or religion, neutrality may reinforce exclusion
- Overlook the need for follow-up and sustainability once project funding ends



What comes next?

To improve equity and inclusion in current and future programming, HCA-II projects and partners should:

Prioritise long-term investment and programme continuity – equity outcomes take time and consistent effort.

Consult youth and communities early and often – especially during project design and strategy development.

Support local implementers with tools, training, and flexibility – to adapt to context-specific barriers.

Plan for sustainability from the start – including co-designing exit strategies with communities.

Clarify E&I ambitions in early phases – including definitions, target groups, and resourcing implications.

Recognise and prepare for trade-offs – between inclusion and scale, sustainability and speed.

Engage in advocacy with local authorities and donors – to embed youth participation beyond project lifespan.



Learn More

This visual summary draws from the full learning paper:
Equity and Inclusion Formative Learning Paper (PDF)

Read

For more in-depth insights, explore these sections:

- Introduction & Purpose – **p. 1**
- Methodology & Participant Profile – **p. 5**
- Sociocultural Norms & E&I Barriers – **p. 6-14**
- Trade-Offs in Youth Programming – **p. 15-17**
- Practice-Based & Programme Recommendations – **p. 18-22**
- Case Studies & Direct Quotes – **throughout**

This full paper includes detailed examples, interview excerpts, and country-specific strategies.



Let's build cities where every young person – not just the loudest or the luckiest – can be heard.
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healthy-cities.org

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