Healthy Cities for Adolescents

Managed by ECORYS

Answering tomorrow's challenges today

a **Fondation Botnar** initiative

Shift the status quo

Applying a systems approach to improving adolescent health and wellbeing in cities: a guide for practitioners

September 2025

Content

Executive summary

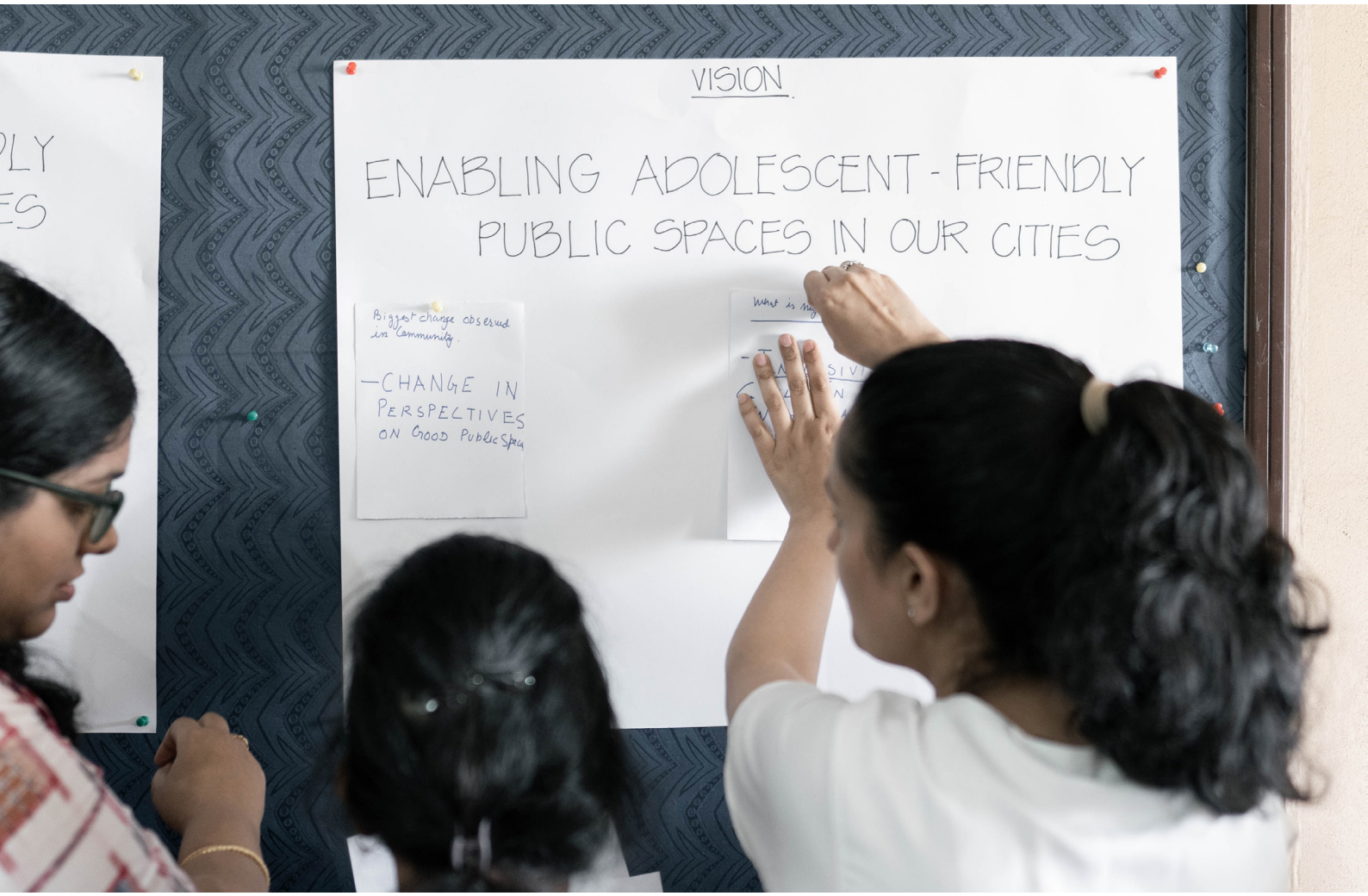
Healthy Cities for Adolescents Phase II (HCA-II) is a multi-country programme that supports projects working to improve adolescent and young people's health and wellbeing in intermediary cities. Guided by the principle of shifting the status quo, with adolescents at the centre of this, HCA-II aims to catalyse meaningful changes in how cities function for young people.

This guide aims to help you influence the systems that shape adolescent and young people's health and wellbeing in the cities where they live. You don't need to be a 'systems expert' to use it. It's designed for anyone working on HCA-II projects (or similar) – whether you're a project manager, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) lead, consortium partner or youth worker – who wants practical ideas for planning, delivering, and learning from work that aims to make cities fairer and healthier for adolescents.

A core focus of this guide is helping projects **shift system conditions** – the underlying structures, relationships, and beliefs that shape how things work. It's not about fixing everything at once, but about identifying where small changes, like who's involved in decision-making, how resources are shared, or how people relate to one another, can unlock bigger, longer-term improvements.

Focusing on how our work shifts system conditions helps us move beyond surface-level problems and get to the root causes, like policies, resources, relationships, and behaviours that shape adolescents' lives. It's a practical way of thinking and working that leads to more joined-up, fair, and lasting change.

This guide is designed to be flexible; dip in and out depending on where you are in your project. It includes practical tools, examples, and ideas across five key areas of systems practice.



Each section includes tools and examples from HCA-II projects to help you apply a systems approach in your settings.

1. Deciding what needs to change

Learn how to explore your city's context, involve adolescents and young people in identifying issues, and spot where small changes could lead to bigger impact.

2. Building strong and fair partnerships

Tips for working across sectors and with adolescents as equal partners, so your project is more joined-up, inclusive, and sustainable.

3. Using advocacy to influence change

Support for planning advocacy efforts that shift policies, attitudes, and power dynamics – especially when led by adolescents and young people.

4. Sustaining, scaling and deepening your work

Ideas for making change last beyond the project, whether through embedding new practices, building capacity, or influencing policy and mindsets.

5. Embedding learning and adaptation

Guidance on how to stay flexible, track signals of positive change, and learn as you go so your project can respond to what's working and what's changing.

This is not meant to be a checklist or a set of rules. It's a resource to support your journey, whether you're just starting out or looking to deepen your approach.

Many HCA-II projects are already applying systems thinking in creative ways, and this guide intends to build on that experience.

1 How to use this guide

This guide is here to help you explore and influence the system conditions that affect young people's health and wellbeing in cities. You don't need to be an expert in systems change to use it.

Who is it for?

It's designed for anyone working on HCA-II projects (or similar) – whether you're a project manager, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) lead, consortium partner or youth worker – who wants practical ideas for planning, delivering, and learning from work that aims to make cities fairer and healthier for adolescents.

How to use it?

You don't need to read the whole guide in one go. Instead, dip in and out depending on where you are in your project journey. Some sections may be especially useful for early-stage planning, while others support reflection, learning, and adaptation as your work progresses.

If you're...	Go to this section
Trying to understand what systems change means and where to start	**Section 3** What does it mean to shift system conditions?
	Section 4 Taking action: Putting systems thinking into practice
Deciding what needs to change and how to do it	**Section 4.1** Deciding what, and how, systems conditions need to shift
Considering how to build strong and fair partnerships	**Section 4.2** Building effective, and equitable, partnerships to drive change
Mobilising advocacy to influence change	**Section 4.3** Using advocacy to shift system conditions
Thinking about how to keep your work going or grow it	**Section 4.4** Sustaining and scaling systems interventions
Wanting to ensure you are learning and adapting as you go	**Section 4.5** Embedding continuous learning and adaptation
Tracking progress and knowing if it's working	**Section 5** How will we know if it's working? Tracking progress in shifting system conditions
Looking for more tools and inspiration	**Section 6** Further resources

2 Why this guide exists

Strategic Goal of the HCA-II Programme

Phase II of the Healthy Cities for Adolescents programme (HCA-II) is guided by a strategic goal to catalyse shifts in system conditions that impact adolescent health and wellbeing (AHW) in intermediary cities[1] – an aim reiterated in the programme's core operating principle to 'shift the status quo'. This ambition highlights the importance of prioritising this age group for healthy and sustainable urban futures, and the current complexity of that challenge.

Rather than expecting to fully change systems within the programme's lifespan, HCA-II focuses on creating catalytic shifts – small but meaningful changes in how cities function in relation to their young people, which can lay the groundwork for deeper, longer-term improvements in their lives, and in urban environments for all.

Alignment with Fondation Botnar's Vision

HCA's goal is closely aligned with Fondation Botnar's vision for AHW and its aspiration to influence city systems, policy and planning processes to promote equity, inclusion and accountability. Doing so requires a deep understanding of the governance, cultural, and power dynamics that shape our cities.[2] Applying a systems perspective, central to Fondation Botnar's Philanthropic Strategy,[3] helps uncover the complex, interwoven factors that affect young peoples' lives. This is essential for designing approaches and solutions that are relevant, effective, and sustainable.

Systems Approach: A Way of Thinking and Working

We see a systems approach as both a way of thinking and a way of working: a lens to better understand AHW in cities, and a practical method for shaping urban environments that actively support young people and city residents more broadly.

Purpose and use of this guide

This guide is designed to help HCA-II project partners and stakeholders apply systems thinking in their own city contexts. It offers tools, guidance, and examples to support shifts in system conditions and build more impactful, lasting change.

The guide is being released at a point when HCA-II projects are already underway or exploring potential extensions. We know many projects are already applying systems thinking in creative and thoughtful ways – and this guide builds on some of that experience. This is not a checklist or set of rules, but a resource to support ongoing and future-facing practices. While some of the ideas may already be familiar or in use, others may help deepen your approach or spark new thinking as your project evolves.

---

1 Healthy Cities for Adolescents (2023). Our ambition and approach: Driving systems change, inspiring impact.

2 Butcher, S., Das, J., & Dam, J. (2020). Evidence to Action Framework: A Participatory Approach to Action Learning. Connected Cities Lab, University of Melbourne: Melbourne.

3 Fondation Botnar (2024). Pathways to young people's wellbeing: Fondation Botnar Philanthropic Strategy.

3 What does it mean to shift system conditions?

Why is a systems approach different?

- Looks at the bigger picture, not just individual problems
- Seeks to address root causes of issues, rather than symptoms
- Pays attention to how things are connected – relationships and key areas to influence change
- Prioritises multi-sector collaboration and cross-cutting solutions
- Stays flexible and learns as things change, rather than seeking one-size-fits-all solutions

Shifting system conditions means making small, practical changes that can lead to bigger, long-term improvements. The aim is to help people and organisations rethink how they work, including their habits, values, and ways of making decisions, so that policies, relationships, and power dynamics begin to shift.[4]

This kind of change is often needed when addressing the complex and deeply rooted challenges that affect adolescents' experience and potential in today's rapidly urbanising world. These challenges are shaped by many factors – social, economic, cultural, political, and emotional – and they're not easy to fix with one-off solutions. That's why it helps to focus on specific areas where change is possible, or where shifts in the system can be catalysed, rather than trying to fix the whole system at once. This is also important considering the shorter duration and scope for most HCA-II projects.

A systems approach helps us understand the complexities that adolescents face growing up in urban environments. Instead of focusing only on symptoms, it encourages us to explore the deeper causes: the patterns, structures, and beliefs that shape what we experience. By paying attention to how people, organisations, and their environments interact, we can design solutions that are more likely to last. This is often shown through the iceberg model: what's visible is only a small part of a much bigger system underneath (see graphic on next page).

You don't need to be a 'systems expert' to apply this way of thinking. What matters is being curious about how things connect, and how your work fits into the bigger picture. It can help you plan better by spotting relationships, power dynamics, or barriers that might affect your impact. It also encourages reflection and flexibility.

For example:

- Are there rules or habits keeping the problem in place?
- Are some voices being left out?
- Could a small change lead to bigger improvements elsewhere?

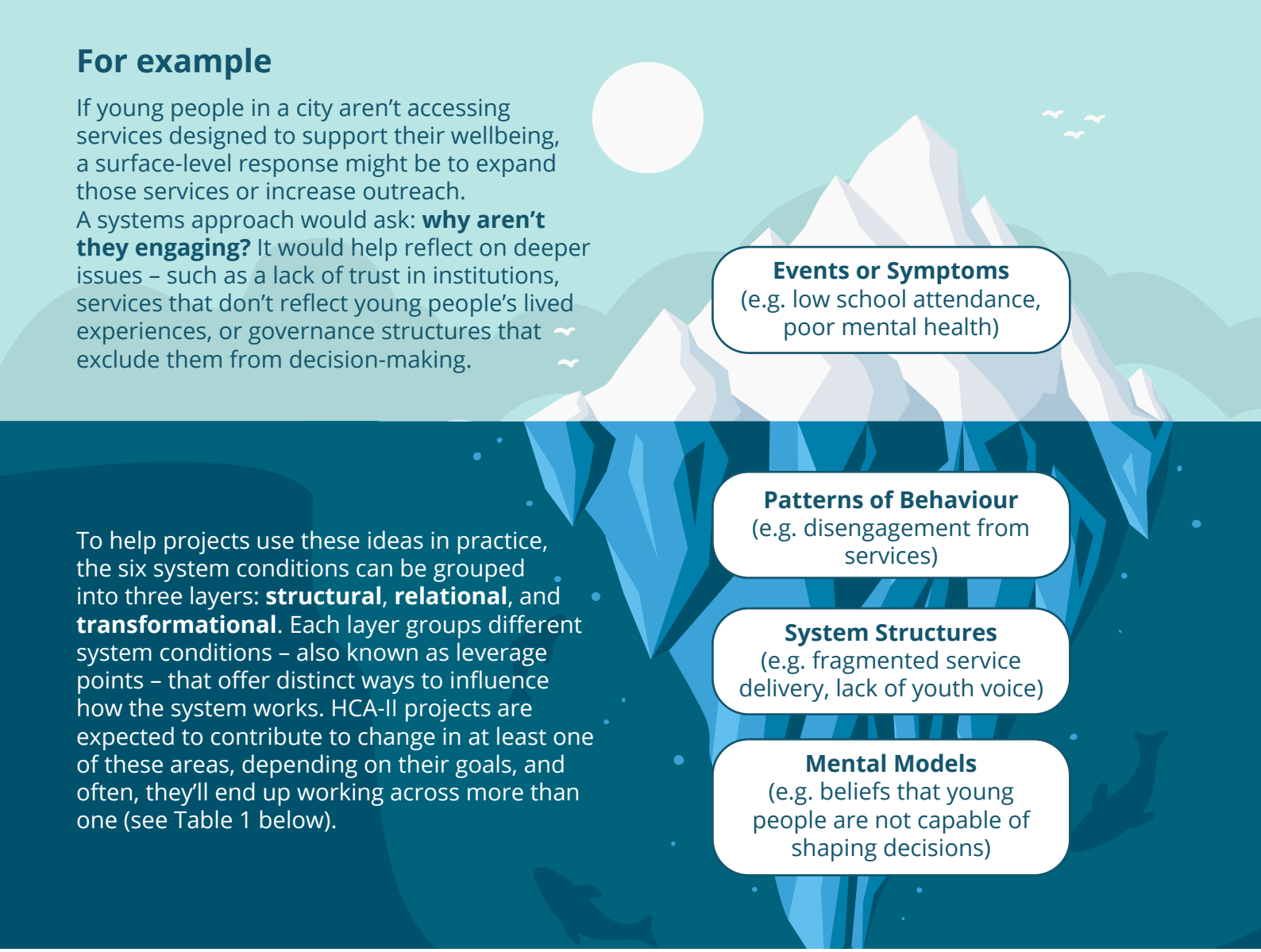
HCA-II seeks to influence six key system conditions (see Table 1), based on the Water of Systems Change framework[5]. These include how decisions are made, who's involved, and how resources are shared. These areas are all connected – changing one can influence the others, like how a new policy might lead to different practices or unlock new resources.

[4] This definition is adapted from the Urban Institute (2022) 'Five Questions to Create Systems Change in Your Community'.

[5] The Water of Systems Change framework was developed in a 2018 paper by John Kania, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge and provides an in-depth account of the different conditions for systems change.

For example

If young people in a city aren't accessing services designed to support their wellbeing, a surface-level response might be to expand those services or increase outreach.
A systems approach would ask: **why aren't they engaging?** It would help reflect on deeper issues – such as a lack of trust in institutions, services that don't reflect young people's lived experiences, or governance structures that exclude them from decision-making.



To help projects use these ideas in practice, the six system conditions can be grouped into three layers: **structural**, **relational**, and **transformational**. Each layer groups different system conditions – also known as leverage points – that offer distinct ways to influence how the system works. HCA-II projects are expected to contribute to change in at least one of these areas, depending on their goals, and often, they'll end up working across more than one (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: The six systems conditions

Structural conditions are the most visible:	
Policies	The formal rules, regulations, and institutional priorities that shape action.
Practices	The day-to-day ways institutions, organisations, and networks operate.
Resource flows	How money, people, knowledge, and infrastructure are allocated or withheld.
Relational conditions sit beneath the surface, and focus on interactions:	
Relationships and connections	The quality of communication, trust, and collaboration across actors, especially those with different experiences or power
Power dynamics	Who holds influence, who gets to decide, and how formal and informal authority is distributed.
Transformational conditions are implicit – invisible and deeply embedded, influencing how people think and act at a deeper level	
Mental models	The deeply held beliefs, assumptions, and narratives that shape how people see the world, make decisions, and act.

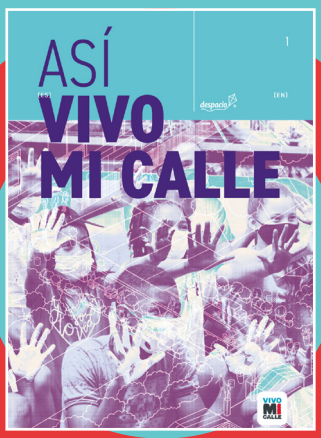
In the short term, progress might look like small changes, and that's OK. Shifting how systems work often starts with small steps. Even modest progress in one area can help break stuck patterns or spark change in others. But for change to last, it usually needs to happen at different levels – not just in policies or practices, but also in relationships, power dynamics, and the beliefs that shape how things are done. That's why projects are encouraged to think about how their work might influence structural, relational, and transformational conditions over time, even if they start with a narrower focus.

It's important to be clear about the boundaries of the system you want to influence. That means deciding which parts of the system your project will focus on. If the boundary is too wide, you might try to change too many things at once, which can make progress difficult. If it's too narrow, you could miss some of the deeper causes of the problem. There will always be other systems and factors that affect your work, but the key is to focus where your project can make the biggest difference. This depends on things like your team's experience, the networks you're connected to, and the time and funding you have.

Remember that shifting system conditions takes time. It often happens through small, steady steps, which is why it's important to notice and celebrate the small wins along the way (see Box 1). These moments help build belief, motivation, and momentum for the journey ahead.

Box 1. Examples of small wins enabled by HCA-II projects

In Sunyani, Ghana, the Adolescent Parliament – a structured, policy-influencing body of elected youth supported by HCA-II's Resilient City for Adolescents project – successfully debated public library access, prompting city officials to begin discussions on reviving a long-abandoned youth library. It was a modest but meaningful policy ripple, driven by young people newly equipped with the tools of governance.



In Colombia, the HCA-II-supported Vivo Mi Calle project in Cali initially faced setbacks and was not implemented as planned. However, rather than being discarded, its materials and learnings were repurposed in the neighbouring municipality of Palmira to create the Healthy Route – a bike path that supported the municipality's preparations for the Junior Pan American Games. This also offered a proven model for future bike path initiatives in the region. These examples show how interventions can generate ripple effects – unlocking new opportunities, inspiring follow-on action, and building momentum for broader systems change.

4 Taking action:
Putting systems thinking into practice

This section introduces five core practice areas that support practitioners to apply systems thinking in their cities:

1. Deciding what, and how, systems conditions need to shift
2. Building effective, and equitable, partnerships to drive change
3. Using advocacy to shift system conditions
4. Sustaining and scaling systems interventions
5. Embedding continuous learning and adaptation

These are not strict steps or technical instructions, but rather flexible areas of work that connect with each other and can be used at different points in your project, depending on what you're working on and what you're trying to achieve. For example, early-stage projects might focus more on defining system shifts and building strong partnerships, while later stages may prioritise learning, sustainability, and scaling up, replicating or further embedding their efforts.

4.1 Deciding what, and how, system conditions need to shift

Use this section if you are:

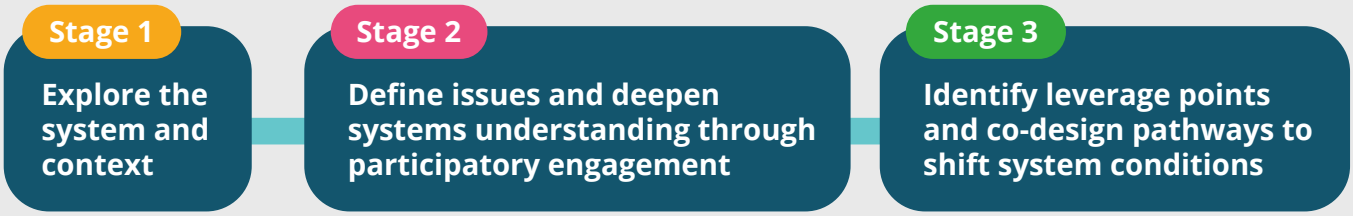
- Starting a new project or revisiting your strategy mid-way through the project
- Trying to understand the broader system that shapes adolescent health and wellbeing in your city
- Looking for practical ways to work with adolescents and partners to explore problems and identify where change is needed

This section walks you through three stages: (i) Exploring your systems and context; (ii) Deepening your systems understanding through participation and engagement (iii) Identifying entry points for change.

To understand how things work now, start by exploring the current situation and the systems that shape it. Make sure this process includes young people and other key groups from the beginning, since they bring crucial perspectives on what's really happening and what needs to change. Adolescents can spot patterns and power dynamics that adults might miss. They're not just there to share experiences – they help make sense of what's going on and come up with ideas for change. When we treat them as equal partners, the process of understanding the system becomes more honest, useful, and collaborative.

Three interconnected stages

can support your project to identify what system conditions need to shift, and how to shift them.



These often overlap in practice and should be revisited as you learn, and your insights deepen.

Stage 1 – Explore the system and context

Start by developing a working understanding of how the system operates, both in terms of how it affects AHW and how it might be reshaped to better serve young people and future generations. This initial context analysis should, at a minimum, identify key structural conditions that shape AHW in the target city context(s), such as relevant policies, institutional practices, and the flows of resources like funding, information, and services across actors and places. This can be done through a combination of desk research, consultation with local stakeholders, and early engagement with adolescents and community members.

At this point, your goal is not to capture the full complexity of the system but to build a grounded entry point for further exploration. This includes understanding the formal institutions and actors involved, how decisions are made, and where gaps, bottlenecks or contradictions may exist. Consider both the delivery or experience of AHW services, and also the broader urban systems that shape them. Consider also where there may be current strengths or opportunities for change, including how these align with the systems condition framework outlined in Section 3.

It's important to include adolescents and other stakeholders in your initial context analysis, however informally. This can help surface gaps in your understanding earlier and begin to build trust and relationships for later stages of the work (see Box 2). You can use the guiding questions below as a starting point:

What are the main challenges and trends affecting adolescent health and wellbeing and the broader urban systems that shape it in this context?

What policies, services, and infrastructure (like health, education, or urban planning) support AHW, and where are the gaps or conflicts?

What data exists on this issue or group, where are the gaps, and how is data used in decision-making?

Where are the biggest differences in outcomes or access to services across the city, and which areas are most at risk or underserved?

Who are the key stakeholders (those who hold power, shape systems, or drive change), and who should be engaged to co-create more adolescent-responsive urban environments?

What are the best ways to connect with different groups of adolescents in this context – not just to understand their experiences, but to involve them meaningfully in shaping the city?

Box 2. The value of city-level context analysis for project design and implementation

HCA-II experience shows that context analyses and needs assessments are not only essential for informing project design, but they can also be powerful tools for shifting system conditions, especially when they generate baseline data for the first time in a city. In Ho, Ghana, the Young & Safe initiative published the city's first-ever Ho Youth Well-being Index report, creating a foundation for tracking how well the project and other local efforts are meeting young people's health and wellbeing needs. The report is now planned as an annual publication to support accountability and learning. In Riobamba, Ecuador, under the Alza Tu Voz project, similar data has been made publicly available through open-source platforms and is already being used by the municipality to guide local government action.

Stage 2 – Define issues and deepen systems understanding through participatory engagement

With a preliminary understanding of the system in place, the next stage is to co-define the key issues and build a deeper, more inclusive view of how the system operates. This means engaging adolescents and other stakeholders not simply as informants, but as co-analysts who help shape how the problem is understood, where the system is stuck, and what change might look like. What may appear as a policy gap from a project's perspective might be experienced as exclusion, neglect, or fear by young people. To understand these realities, it's important to go beyond structured consultation and enable more exploratory processes.

In HCA-II, we believe adolescents should be at the heart of this exercise. Since adolescents are not a homogeneous group, approaches must be inclusive and responsive to age, background, identity, lived experience and other intersecting factors. For instance, younger adolescents may not feel confident to share in front of older adolescents. Others may face barriers or stigma, such as adolescents with disabilities or LGBTQ+ youth. Many may be unfamiliar with being asked their views as well. Creating safe, supportive spaces, and adapting your approach where needed, will be essential.

We recommend using participatory tools to help people, especially adolescents, share how they see the issues affecting their health and wellbeing (see Box 3). These tools can show not just what's happening, but also why it's happening, by helping us understand the deeper causes, relationships, and beliefs that shape the system. At this stage, you can use these tools build on your earlier system analysis.

Box 3: Surfacing real needs in Ecuador

As part of their Needs Assessment and Co-Design (NACD) grant, partners in HCA-II's Alza Tu Voz project – operating in Quevedo and Riobamba, Ecuador – used a participatory process to identify adolescent priorities and shape their response. To support this, they trialled the Onion Framework, which helped uncover the deeper needs, interests, and motivations that are often hidden beneath surface-level concerns. In safe, facilitated spaces, adolescent and youth participants were guided to peel back these layers, resulting in a powerful visual representation of their lived realities and those of their peers. This process not only deepened their understanding of the issues but also strengthened their role in shaping solutions. The most engaged young people from each city have since formed 'nucleus groups', which are core youth partners within the consortium, who now help steer project activities locally.

The table below gives a quick overview of some key participatory tools and when they can be most useful. Each tool helps with a different part of the process, like understanding who's involved, what matters to them, or how power and influence work. Choose tools that suit your context and the people you're working with. Visual and hands-on methods often work best, especially with adolescents. You can use paper and pens, but also online platforms like Miro or Kumu – visual methods often work best, but choose what helps people express their ideas clearly, comfortably, and inclusively.

Table 2: Participatory tools for deepening your understanding of systems

Tool	Purpose	When to use it
Iceberg Model	Helps people look beneath surface-level problems to understand what's really going on.	When you want to explore the deeper causes of issues.
Onion Framework	Helps people reflect on their needs, values and motivations.	When working with adolescents and young people. consortium partners and other key actors to understand what matters most to them.
Actor mapping	Helps people understand who is involved in adolescent health and wellbeing, what roles they play, and how they relate to each other. It can help show who has influence, who is being left out, and where change is needed.	When you need to identify key stakeholders, their roles, and relationships within a system or initiative.
Power analysis (e.g., Power Cube)	Helps people understand who has power, how it is used, and how stakeholders including adolescents experience it. This includes formal power (like government roles) and informal or hidden power (like community influence).	When exploring dynamics of influence, decision-making, and equity in programmes or partnerships.
Factor mapping, including problem trees and causal loop diagrams	Helps people trace the drivers of an issue, or set of issues, and how they are connected.	When diagnosing complex problems and identifying leverage points for change.
Rich Pictures, storytelling & creative mapping	Help people share their views in creative, low-pressure ways based on their own experience.	When you want to explore how adolescents and young people see the system, especially relationships, trust and influence.

Pay close attention to how people describe their relationships, trust, as well as their ability or willingness to influence. These can reveal important things that aren't always easy to see (i.e. relational conditions and mental models) but are key to making lasting change.

Where possible, bring adolescents together with other actors who affect – or are affected by – the issue(s). These might include caregivers, teachers, health providers, local leaders, or government officials. Including diverse perspectives in this way builds a fuller, shared picture of how the system is experienced, where it is stuck, and where opportunities for change may lie, especially those that may be invisible from any single viewpoint alone. This sets the stage for identifying leverage points across system levels, not only within formal structures but also in how people relate and the beliefs that shape the system itself.

Stage 3 – Identify leverage points and co-design pathways to shift system conditions

Once you have a shared understanding of how the system operates and what issues matter most, the next step is to co-design pathways for change. This means working with adolescents and other stakeholders to identify where the system might be most open to influence and what kinds of interventions are both meaningful and feasible in your context. Importantly, the co-design process is not just about producing a plan but about building shared ownership and laying the foundations for partnership, alignment, and sustainability during implementation.

In HCA-II, we encourage projects to use a Theory of Change (ToC) as a core design tool to clarify their collective logic for change. In systems work, the ToC should be treated as a living tool, revisited regularly and adapted as the system responds to your work. It should also reflect the complexity of change, highlighting any potential feedback loops, critical assumptions, and uncertainties. NPC's guidance on systems-oriented Theories of Change offers useful support for this process. We recommend engaging as many of the key stakeholders as is feasible in the development of your ToC.

Start by helping the group imagine a city that truly supports young people and responds to their needs. What would things look like if the system worked well for all adolescents? How would resources be shared, relationships built, and decisions made differently? Use this visioning exercise to spot what's getting in the way of that future, and what could help make it happen. Build on earlier tools like system maps and stakeholder insights to highlight both the practical changes and the shifts in relationships that are needed.

The key to shifting systems conditions is to focus on the places where small actions can lead to bigger improvements. These are called **leverage points.** For example, this might be aligning local budgeting or service commissioning with adolescent priorities (resource flows). It could involve strengthening collaboration between schools, clinics, and community organisations (relationships), or establishing youth advisory councils with decision-making influence (power dynamics). It might focus on shifting adult mindsets about adolescent capability and voice or changing how institutions view adolescents (mental models).

4.2 Building strong and fair partnerships to drive change

Use this section if you are:

- Part of a consortium or partnership – as required for all HCA-II projects – and want to strengthen how you collaborate
- Planning to engage with new stakeholders, especially those with power or influence
- Looking for ways to build trust, share leadership, and ensure adolescents and community groups are treated as equal knowledge-holders

This section offers ideas and examples for making partnerships more inclusive, accountable, and responsive to your shared goals.

Building partnerships across sectors is essential when working to improve AHW in cities. These challenges are complex and can't be solved by one organisation or through traditional, single-sector approaches. That's why all HCA-II projects are delivered through consortia – bringing together a range of people and organisations, each with different perspectives, knowledge, resources and networks, to work towards shared goals. Strong partnerships can lead to more joined-up, effective, and lasting solutions that not only improve AHW, but also help shape cities to better support young people now and in the future.

To be effective, these partnerships should aim to shift the conditions of the system itself. This means involving people and organisations with different kinds of influence, as well as those with lived experience of the issues (see Box 4).

Box 4: Key partners in shifting systems conditions

Adolescents and their caregivers

Adolescents and their caregivers should be recognised as central partners in creating change, even if they aren't officially represented in formalised partnerships. Some HCA-II projects include adolescent representatives in their consortium governance, or have separate adolescent steering groups for the project. This sends a strong message about the value of adolescent voices and helps build their confidence and sense of agency.

Non-state organisations

Private sector and non-profit organisations that focus on specific wellbeing issues (like mental health, sexual and reproductive health, digital skills, or employment support) can offer specialised expertise and services.

Schools and local civil society organisations

These groups often have direct experience working with adolescents and supporting youth development in the target cities. Their involvement brings valuable local knowledge and trusted relationships.

State actors/agencies

Government departments at the city or municipal level, such as those responsible for urban planning, health, education, or policing; play an important role in shaping the systems that affect adolescent wellbeing.

Research institutions

Academic and research organisations can contribute skills in participatory research with young people and provide insights into the specific wellbeing areas targeted by the initiative.

It's especially valuable to bring the right people together during the early 'discovery' phase of an initiative. This helps everyone build a shared understanding of the issue and the wider system around it, and to work together to design solutions that can make a real difference. Doing this early often leads to stronger commitment and longer-lasting involvement.

At the same time, partnerships should stay flexible. As the project moves forward, new people or organisations might need to join, and some who were involved at the start may step back once their part is done. Projects should be set up to support this kind of flexibility, including in contracts and budgets.

All HCA-II projects are delivered by multi-stakeholder consortia, bringing together diverse expertise and resources to improve adolescent health and wellbeing in cities. Many HCA-II projects involve adolescents directly and at the centre of their work – giving them a say in decisions or including them in the design process – because their views are key to creating change that truly matters and lasts.

While consortia are a powerful way to address complex challenges, they also come with unique demands. In HCA-II, different models of consortia have been used, each with its own strengths and challenges.

Regardless of the model, some core principles help make partnerships work well:

A clear and shared purpose with mutually agreed roles and responsibilities.

Fair distribution of resources (e.g. funding, time, expertise), considering the needs, capacities and contributions of each partner.

Collaborative and inclusive leadership structure, actively involving all partners with open communication.

Active listening to ensure all partners' perspectives are heard, acknowledged, and able to influence decisions and direction.

For practical support, the TPI/Bond guide on Effective Consortia and the University of Wageningen's Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships Guide and Toolkit offer a collection of relevant insights and potential tools for designing and managing collaborative processes.

To support ongoing collaboration, HCA-II consortia are encouraged to use a partnership agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). While not legally binding, this document outlines shared goals, roles, responsibilities, and ways of working. Even now, with all projects underway, the MoU remains a valuable tool for maintaining alignment, navigating challenges, and reinforcing equitable collaboration, including for any future projects. A sample template based on HCA-II project experience is available to guide this process.

4.3 Using advocacy to shift systems conditions

Use this section if you are:

- Looking for ways to amplify adolescents and young people's voices
- Trying to influence decision-makers or policies
- Wanting to build momentum for change beyond your project

This section explores how advocacy can support efforts to shift system conditions and offers practical steps for planning and delivering advocacy activities.

Advocacy means taking deliberate action to influence selected individuals, governments, private sector actors, or other institutions to achieve a desired policy, practice, social, or political change. Advocacy plays a crucial role in a systems approach: it can be used to raise awareness and influence public opinion around an issue, but also has the potential to shift structural systems conditions – such as policies, practices, and power dynamics – which shape how issues are prioritised, resources allocated, and services delivered. This can influence change not just now but into the future, and potentially at much greater scale.

HCA-II experience has shown that involving adolescents in advocacy is especially powerful, not only because it brings attention to the issues they care about, but because it positions them as active agents in shaping the cities they live in. This builds their confidence and capacity, demonstrates their potential to lead change now and into the future, and reinforces the idea that cities must evolve with and for adolescents (see Box 6).

Box 6: Adolescent advocates – the case of 'Fort pour le Futur'

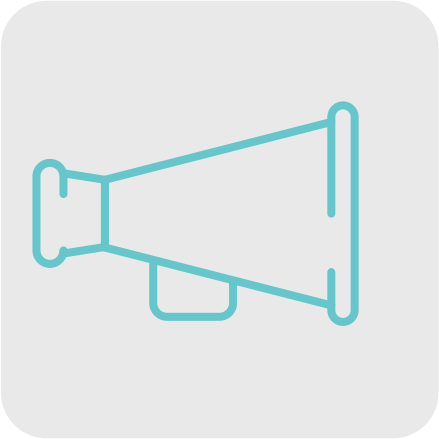
In Senegal, the Fort pour le Futur project, funded under HCA Phase I and expanded in Phase II, began by engaging young people to co-develop a city-wide action plan before identifying the systems they aimed to influence. To improve accountability in adolescent nutrition and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in Thiès, the project supported adolescents to create accountability mechanisms and lead advocacy efforts. Over two years, a youth network and formal youth organisations were established and connected to the mayor's office, enabling young people to highlight gaps in youth engagement in city planning. This collaboration led to concrete outcomes, including a commitment from the Mayor of Thiès to allocate at least CAF 10,000,000 (around USD 17,000) to adolescent health.

As the INTRAC Advocacy Toolkit for small NGOs highlights: when advocacy is grounded in solid analysis, aligned with system conditions, and inclusive of the voices most affected – such as adolescents – it can be a powerful lever for lasting change.

The following considerations and recommendations are intended to guide advocacy strategies within urban AHW initiatives. While many of these principles apply broadly to advocacy work, the examples drawn from HCA-II projects offer practical insights tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of advancing AHW priorities in cities – and of influencing how cities themselves are shaped with and for adolescents .

1. Define your advocacy goal and the change you want to see

Be clear about what you're trying to achieve through your advocacy work, and how this relates to your wider project goals. Are you aiming to shift a specific policy, increase investment, change harmful attitudes, or make services more inclusive? Defining your advocacy objective sharpens your focus and provides a clear basis for planning, messaging, and measuring progress. We encourage you to distinguish between goals (long-term change) and objectives (specific, measurable steps toward that change).



2. Identify who holds power, and how you can influence them

Advocacy is context specific. Analyse who has the authority or influence to make the change happen – city councils, local education or health authorities, civil servants, media actors, or influential community leaders. As highlighted in Section 4.1, political and power analysis, as well as an understanding your team's capacity, can help you prioritise your efforts. The Advocacy Capacity Tool (ACT!) is a self-assessment tool for nonprofits and coalitions to gauge their readiness to engage in advocacy efforts. Based on this, choose tactics that suit your context: quiet influencing through meetings, public mobilisation via campaigns or events, or storytelling and media to shift public narratives. Many successful strategies combine multiple approaches.

3. Use data and evidence to support your case

Effective advocacy is grounded in credible evidence and compelling human stories. Policymakers and other decision-makers are more likely to engage with advocacy that is politically relevant and well-researched. Use relevant data and real-life examples from adolescents to illustrate both the scale of the issue and its human impact. Disaggregating data by age, gender, identity, or location can highlight inequalities and strengthen your case for change.

4. Equip adolescents with advocacy skills and contextually appropriate tools

Adolescents are experts in their own lives and powerful advocates. Equip them with the skills, confidence, and tools to engage meaningfully in advocacy. This could include media training, digital storytelling, understanding how government systems work, or knowing their rights. Always adapt methods to the context and prioritise adolescents' wellbeing, informed consent, and safety.

5. Build alliances with others to amplify youth voices

As highlighted throughout these guidelines, shifting system conditions is rarely achieved alone. Seek out partners, such as youth groups, civil society organisations, researchers, or local champions, who share your vision. Broad-based, strategic alliances can increase your reach, credibility, and influence, especially in contexts where political support is weak or contested. Over time, this collective advocacy can strengthen the legitimacy and resilience of your cause.

6. Do no harm

Advocacy can be a powerful tool, but it can also carry risks, especially when challenging powerful institutions, social norms, or sensitive issues. Before acting, consider potential risks such as political pushback, reputational damage, or risks to adolescent safety. Good advocacy requires anticipating these risks and developing mitigation strategies. Always involve adolescents in assessing risks and deciding what actions they're comfortable with. Safeguarding, emotional support, and informed consent should be integral throughout. Marshall Wallace's User's Guide on Do No Harm is a useful resource on this.

Although produced in 2018, PMNCH's toolkit Advocating for Change for Adolescents is a useful resource to support advocacy efforts to promote adolescent health and wellbeing.

4.4 Sustaining and scaling interventions for shifting system conditions

Use this section if you are:

- Wrapping up a project, or planning for an extension or future phase
- Trying to ensure that the positive shifts you've helped initiate can continue, deepen or spread
- Looking for practical ways to embed system shifts in institutions, relationships, and culture

This section shares key strategies and considerations for sustaining and scaling interventions that aim to shift system conditions. It covers how to build capacity across the system, use learning and peer exchange, advocate for lasting change, and join or create alliances to keep momentum going.

Interventions that aim to shift system conditions, such as empowering adolescents, changing caregiver mindsets, or fostering new relationships, may be critical steps in a pathway to shifting systems conditions. However, unless these are embedded in community practices, institutional structures, or policy frameworks, their impact may be short-lived and limited to the duration of a project.

Sustaining and (where appropriate) scaling such interventions requires intentional design, adaptive strategies, and long-term thinking from the outset.

Design for sustainability from the start

Sustainability should be a guiding principle and shape project design from the beginning, not an afterthought. This means selecting interventions that align with leverage points in the system and planning for how delivery methods and responsibilities will evolve over time (see Box 7). It also means thinking carefully about who will carry the work forward, and whose ownership is prioritised. Is it led by adolescents, communities, institutions, or a mix? What support will they need?

Box 7: An illustrative example of embedding sustainability as an adaptive approach

In the absence of adequate digital skills support for adolescents in schools, it may be necessary for external agents (such as NGOs or private sector actors) to design and deliver a curriculum and training directly to students and teachers in the first year of a project. By the second year, the strategy may shift to phasing out of certain schools as teacher capacity grows and toward supporting curriculum integration or offering training in new schools. By the third year, the emphasis may be on full phase-out and advocating for budget allocations to sustain the changes, such as through ongoing teacher training or periodic external support.

Build capacity across the system

Shifting system conditions requires new skills, behaviours, and ways of working. As part of your initial project design, you will have likely carried out a more or less formal 'capacities assessment' to understand where the capacity gaps lie in the system you seek to influence and what types of capacity interventions may be needed. The World Health Organisation's Urban Health Capacity Assessment and Response Resource Kit is a useful resource to understand whether the right capacities are in place. Capacity strengthening should be tailored to different actors, such as adolescents, caregivers, duty-bearers, and civil society, and embedded throughout the project lifecycle.

In HCA-II, we recognise that capacity strengthening is an ongoing process that needs to be fostered at different levels and through different approaches. At a project level, we encourage exchange of learning across contexts and topics. All projects are expected to deliver at least one webinar for the HCA-II Global community during their lifecycle, and we offer funding for peer learning visits between projects. We also invest in research and the development of toolkits and guidance (like this one) to strengthen understanding and capacities across the programme and the wider practitioner community.

Support learning and peer exchange

Sharing what works, and what doesn't, helps others build on your experience and strengthens the wider system. Learning can happen in lots of ways, such as through consortium reflections, peer visits, webinars, or informal conversations. What matters is creating space for people to share ideas, ask questions, and adapt together. In HCA-II, projects are encouraged to host webinars for the global community, take part in peer learning visits, and share tools, stories and lessons with others. These exchanges help build a stronger network of people working on adolescent health and wellbeing in cities, and support sustainability by spreading useful practices, building relationships, and helping others take ownership of change.

Harness advocacy to embed change

Sustaining and scaling systems interventions often requires influencing the broader environment in which they operate. As highlighted in Section 4.3, and throughout these guidelines, advocacy can help secure the policy shifts, institutional commitments, and budget allocations needed to embed change. These efforts are more powerful when undertaken in collaboration with others.

Join or create alliances for long-term momentum

Alliances and networks can amplify your voice, create shared momentum, and influence system conditions beyond the reach of a single project or organisation. Consider how these can be built into your work from the start.

Sustainability checklist:

This checklist below offers simple prompts to help you think through what needs to continue, who will lead it, and what support is needed to keep the work going or growing after the project ends:

What does sustainability mean for our project?

What aspects of our work do we need to sustain?

Who will own and lead this after the project ends?

Who benefits most if this continues? Are their voices shaping the sustainability plan?

What support, skills, relationships or resources will they need?

What risks could threaten sustainability?

What could be done to reduce or manage those risks?

How will we know if the work is being sustained meaningfully? What signs should we look for?

4.5 Embedding continuous learning and adaptation

Use this section if you are:

- Working in a complex or shifting urban context where flexibility is key
- Trying to create space for reflection and responsiveness across your team, partners, and stakeholders

This section promotes ways of working that are responsive and reflective. It shares ideas for using monitoring to guide decisions, involving adolescents and other stakeholders in shared learning, managing budgets flexibly, and building confidence in adaptive ways of working. It's about making learning part of how you work.

In complex urban systems, there's rarely a straight path to change. What works in one place or moment might not work in another, especially when aiming not only to improve AHW, but also to reshape the systems and environments that influence it. That's why interventions to improve AHW in urban contexts need to stay flexible and responsive. Learning what's working and what's not, how, why, for whom, and in what contexts (when intervening across cities) is essential to making informed decisions and adapting along the way. Here are some ways to build continuous learning and adaptation into your project:

Use monitoring and learning to guide your decisions

Set up simple but effective systems to track whether activities are happening as planned and what kinds of changes they're creating – both expected and unexpected. This information helps you decide what to keep doing, what to change, and where to go next. The next section of this toolkit shares ideas on what to monitor and how.

Develop flexible financial and budget management systems

Try to design your budget so that funds can be moved between activities if needed. This might mean using broader budget categories or allowing for line-item flexibility. That way, if something isn't working, or a new opportunity arises, you can respond without being constrained.

Create spaces to reflect and adapt with others

Create regular opportunities to reflect on what's working, what's not, and what needs to change with others involved in the work. This includes your project team and consortium partners, but crucially also adolescents, whose lives are directly affected by the interventions. Their insights are essential for understanding how change is experienced and where adjustments are needed. It's also important to involve other key stakeholders who may play a role in sustaining or scaling the work, and who can help you stay responsive to shifts in context, new opportunities, or emerging challenges. Learning-focused meetings, check-ins, and short learning memos can all support this kind of shared reflection and timely adaptation.

Recognise that learning and adaptation takes time and support

Working in adaptive and reflective ways can feel different from more traditional project delivery. It often involves more coordination, more openness to change, and more time to pause and think together. That's OK, and it is expected. It's important to allow space for teams to build confidence and capacity in these ways of working. It's also worth recognising that this kind of learning and adaptation can take more time and resources, and may need to be planned and budgeted for accordingly.

5 How will we know if it's working?

Tracking progress in shifting system conditions

Use this section if you are:

- Trying to understand whether your work is helping shift system conditions
- Looking for ways to measure change beyond outputs or short-term results
- Wanting to involve young people and partners in building a culture of reflection, curiosity and responsiveness to tracking progress

This section helps you think differently about monitoring and evaluation, especially with the complex and changing realities of adolescent health and wellbeing in cities. It explains the move away from linking change to one activity and instead understanding how your work contributes to meaningful shifts in system conditions. You will find guidance on combining structured tools (like indicators and results frameworks) with more flexible, exploratory approaches.

Tracking how your project is shifting system conditions means thinking differently about monitoring and evaluation. It's not about proving direct, step-by-step impact or linking change to one specific activity. Instead, it's about understanding how your work contributes to shifting behaviours, relationships, resource flows, or the deeper beliefs that shape how things work. Because systems are complex and often unpredictable, it helps to use a mix of tools – combining structured approaches like results frameworks and indicators with more flexible, exploratory ways of learning. As highlighted in the previous section, staying curious, asking questions, and adapting as you go are all part of the process.

HCA-II has not defined a common approach for how projects should set outcomes and indicators to capture shifts in system conditions. That's because each project is different – with their own focus, location(s), and context – and systems behave differently depending on where you're working. The programme's overall Theory of Change is also evolving as learning continues.

So, instead of following a fixed approach, projects are encouraged to choose methods that make sense for their context, using the guidance and tools available to support them.[8]

Develop outcomes and indicators that can evolve over time.

Most projects begin with a set of intended outcomes – what you hope will change in the system, and for whom. These are often captured through your Theory of Change and results framework, which the programme encourages every project to develop. These tools help clarify your project's aims and assumptions, and how your activities are expected to contribute to system shifts (see Section 4.1). Your project's change pathways will already have helped shape these ideas.

But systems don't stand still. Sometimes, new priorities or opportunities emerge, or your original assumptions might not hold true. That's why we encourage projects to treat outcomes and indicators as flexible. As you gather new evidence or observe unexpected effects, you might want to update or adapt what you're tracking in response to your evidence, learning, or the changing context. This is a sign of good systems thinking, not a failure to plan.

We recognise this can feel like a lot. Many projects face the same challenge with their own partners: balancing accountability with adaptability. Our annual reporting templates are shifting towards giving space to reflect on what's changed, why it matters, and how your approach is evolving in response. Projects are encouraged to make updates to results frameworks and Theories of Change based on learning and changing contexts.

Look for signs that change is unfolding over time.

Systems change is often slow and messy. It doesn't happen all at once, and rarely within the short timeframes of individual projects. More often, we can capture how system conditions are shifting through small, iterative actions which build up over time. One helpful approach is to use a signal of change framework, such as the United Nations Development Programme's Early Signals of Change Self-Assessment Tool. This helps you observe whether your work is laying the groundwork for deeper, longer-term change even if the full transformation lies beyond the project's end. Signals can show up in different ways and at different stages.

You might begin to see :

Early signals:
one-off activities, first-time collaborations, new voices joining the conversation, or a change in how people talk about an issue

Interim signals:
patterns forming, behaviours spreading, priorities shifting, or new ways of working gaining traction

Advanced signals:
durable changes in policies, budgets, institutions, or power dynamics

Even weak or one-off signals – if tracked over time – can show progress toward deeper system shifts. That's why it's useful to define your project's time frame for change and revisit these signals regularly to see what's building. This doesn't need to be complicated either. Asking simple questions like 'what are we seeing?', 'what might it mean?', 'what's changed since last time?' can go a long way to demonstrating how our work is shifting system conditions.

[8] Relevant resources include: Springfield Centre (2023), A Pragmatic Approach to Measuring System Change; Cities Connecting Children to Nature (n.d.), Creating Systems-Level Change in Cities Toolkit; Cabaj (2023) Evaluating Systems Change: An inquiry framework; Latham (2014) A Practical Guide to Evaluating Systems Change; Cabaj and Tamarack Institute (n.d.) Sets of Principles for Evaluating Systems Change Efforts.

Use meaningful evidence to explore what's changing and why

We often need to look beyond numbers to understand what's really shifting. Indicators can still play a useful role, especially if they're tailored to your outcomes and context, but they should support learning, not just accountability. You might track things like participation, collaboration, or service improvements using quantitative indicators. But qualitative indicators, such as changes in trust, perceptions of adolescent voice, or how decisions are made, can tell us more about how the system is shifting.

To support this, we encourage projects to draw on a mix of data sources and methods, aligned to your aims, context and capacity. Even simple stories or observations, when gathered thoughtfully, can offer powerful insights. It's important to involve adolescents in identifying, gathering, or interpreting evidence, as this supports their sense of ownership and brings in perspectives that might otherwise be missed.

The table below outlines a range of exploratory, outcome-based approaches that projects can use. You can use methods like journaling or diaries[9], creative-based tools (such as drawing or storytelling)[10], and sensemaking workshops[11] in addition to more conventional methods like surveys and interviews to support these approaches and help make sense of what's emerging. Box 8 highlights the value of Participatory Video Most Significant Change – a methodological approach that is being offered across HCA-II as part of the Phase II endline.

Tool	Purpose
Contribution analysis	Helps you understand how your work may have contributed to changes, even when many things are happening.
Outcome Harvesting	Looks at what has changed and works backwards to understand how and why it happened.
Most Significant Change	Collects stories from different people about the biggest changes they've seen and why those changes matter.
Ripple Effects Mapping	Draws a picture of how your work has spread and influenced others, even in unexpected ways.

Box 8: Participatory Video Most Significant Change (PVMSC)

PVMSC is more than just a monitoring method. It can be a powerful way to advocate for and learn from adolescents and young people, particularly those that are often left out of formal data and decision-making (see sample videos). As part of their endlines or extensions, all HCA-II projects can access funding to use this youth-led, story-based method with technical support from InsightShare, a leading expert in this approach. Through video storytelling, adolescents and young people share real stories of change in their own words. This helps surface outcomes that matter most to them, especially in complex settings where change isn't always easy to measure, and gives young people a direct role in documenting and driving change. InsightShare have produced numerous resources on the practice of PVMSC.

Make time for reflection and adaptation.

As highlighted in Section 3.5, tracking change is most useful when it leads to learning and adaptation. That's why we encourage projects to build in regular reflection moments within your team and with key stakeholders to make sense of what's changing, why, and what that means for your work. This includes revisiting your outcomes, indicators, and assumptions, and adjusting your approach as needed.

[9] People write down their thoughts and experiences over time to show how things are changing.

[10] Uses creative activities like drawing, storytelling, or art to explore and express changes and experiences.

[11] Brings people together to talk about what the data means and what actions to take next.

6 Further resources

We hope this toolkit is useful to support your project in shifting systems conditions that not only improve AHW, but also help shape your cities to better support young people now and in the future. In addition to the resources we have referenced and linked to across this document, we recommend the following resources to deepen your understanding around systems practice. While the resources have been categorised into a few areas for clarity, many will naturally overlap. This is expected and reflects the integrated thinking that is central to systems approaches.

6.1 Applying systems thinking in practice:

The 50 Percent. (2025). *Young person's guide to systems change*. Club of Rome.

Hacking, T. (2022). *Demystifying systems thinking*. University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership.

Abercrombie, R., Harries, E., & Wharton, R. (2015). *Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it*. New Philanthropy Capital.

Reynolds, A., & Rose, C. (2024). *Systems practice: A toolkit to help you think, act and work systemically*. New Philanthropy Capital.

Reynolds, M., & Holwell, S. eds. (2020). *Systems approaches to making change: a practical guide*. London: Open University and Springer.

Mahajan, S. L., Glew, L., Ryan, M., Griffin, J., Murphy, R., de Villiers, S. P., & Rieder, E. (2022). *The craft of systems change: Practical tools for a complex world*. 1st edn. Washington, D.C.: World Wildlife Fund.

Renaisi. (2024). *Our guide to systems change: Learning from an enquiry into "What does it take to change a system?"*. Renaisi.

Orlando, L., Newton, C., Jain, S., Mantri, P., & White, A. (2024). *What works in systems change interventions: A review of national and international evidence*. Institute for Employment Studies.

Reos Partners. (2024). *Lessons on designing and implementing systems change initiatives*. Reos Partners.

6.2 Understanding and measuring systems change:

Preskill, H., & Gopal, S. (2014). *Evaluating complexity: Propositions for improving practice.* FSG.

Berterman, S., Coffman, J., Mutheu, A., Ash, S., & Vant, A. (2024). *Embedding learning in systems change: A learning framework for testing uncertainties*. Center for Evaluation Innovation.

Miehlbradt, A. O., Shah, H., Posthumus, H., & Kessler, A. (2020). *A pragmatic approach to assessing system change: How to put it into practice*. Miehlbradt Consulting, Springfield Centre, HPC & The Donor Committee for Enterprise Development.

Davies, J., & Goldie, M. (2023). *Navigating system change evaluation: A white paper*. Social Finance.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2022). *Documenting systems change through effective collaborative action: The early signals of change self-assessment tool*. UNDP.

6.3 Building strong, equitable partnerships that support systems change:

Fraser, D., & Sinha, R. (2020). *Building ecosystems for positive change*. The Systems Sanctuary.

Brouwer, H., Woodhill, J., Hemmati, M., Verhoosel, K., & van Vugt, S. (2019). *The MSP guide: how to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships*. (3rd ed.) Practical Action Publishing.

Brouwer, J. H., Brouwers, J. H. A. M., Hemmati, M., Gordijn, F., Herman Mostert, R. M., & Mulkerrins, J. L. (2017). *The MSP Tool Guide: Sixty tools to facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships: companion to The MSP Guide*. Centre for Development Innovation.

Baidenmann, J.D. (2017). *The essence of transforming partnerships: Their vital role in system change and innovation and their essential elements*. J.D. Baidenmann.

Houghton, R., Marriott, N., Pyres, J., & Russ, C. (2022). *Effective consortia: A guide to emerging thinking and practice. Learning from Consortia Programme*. The Partnering Initiative & Bond.

Living Cities. (2016). *Cross-sector partnership assessment*. Collective Impact Forum.

Hunjan, R. & Pettit, J. (2011). *Power: A Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change*. Carnegie UK Trust.

6.4 Advocacy and influencing systems change:

Coffman, J., & Beer, T. (2015). *The Advocacy Strategy Framework. A tool for articulating an advocacy theory of change*. Center for Evaluation Innovation

Catalysts for Change (2023). *Tools, Models and Approaches for Advocacy and Organizational Development Capacity Strengthening*. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Collinson, H. (2022). *Advocacy – A Toolkit for Small NGOs*. INTRAC and UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

World Health Organisation (2017). *Advocating for Change for Adolescents! A Practical Toolkit for Young People to Advocate for Improved Adolescent Health and Wellbeing*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

Plan International (2025). *Youth Campaigners Toolkit*. Plan International.