

# EVIDENCE TO ACTION DIALOGUE SERIES

## YOUNG PEOPLES' WELLBEING IN SOUTHERN CITIES

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Melbourne Centre  
for Cities

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### Webinar Series Report

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Between April and July 2021, the Melbourne Centre for Cities (C4Cs) at the University of Melbourne and Fondation Botnar jointly organised the **‘Evidence to Action Dialogue Series: Young Peoples’ Wellbeing in Southern Cities’**. This included a set of four online dialogues around learning and evidence building on issues pertaining to young peoples’ wellbeing in Southern cities. The objective of the series was to generate a youth led, globally engaged dialogue on effective processes around youth empowerment and wellbeing, urban partnerships, city systems strengthening and pro-poor planning, and inclusive digital technologies. This was done with the aim of nurturing a community of practice focused on issues of youth wellbeing, evidence, and action in Southern cities.

The dialogue series was guided by the [Evidence to Action \(E2A\) Framework](#) which was developed through a collaboration between the C4Cs and Fondation Botnar, with the aim to facilitate the co-creation of evidence that can inform sustainable development outcomes in diverse urban contexts and promote young peoples’ wellbeing. The E2A Framework outlines five critical principles, a set of six strategic actions, and five domains of change that can enable both Fondation Botnar staff and a wide range of external stakeholders, to drive and establish processes of generating and translating evidence into action for systemic urban change. The five guiding principles of the E2A, operationalised through the six strategic actions, seek transformation across the five domains of change, which are: Empowered Youth and Communities; Equitable Partnerships; Transformative Innovation; Effective City Systems; and Global Learning. These interlinked domains of change represent areas for common investigation and qualitative change that combined can help deliver on Fondation Botnar’s goal to create cities fit for young people.

The four themes of the webinars: **empowering youth and communities; building equitable partnerships; strengthening city systems; and fostering transformative innovations**, reflect the four of ‘domains of change’ within the E2A Framework, with global learning the expected outcome across each of the webinars. This report presents the critical discussion points and key takeaways emerging from these intergenerational dialogues among youth leaders and activists, international development practitioners, city officials and policy actors, and academics. In the subsequent sections, it first presents a high-level overview of insights generated from the discussions, which is then followed by brief summaries of each individual dialogue sessions.

### Reading this report

This report offers a summary of the ideas that emerged from the conversations throughout the dialogue series. Therefore, these narratives represent the collective voice of the panellists who participated in these sessions, as a part of building a global ‘community of practice’ on these themes. The quotes and reflections captured here represent the lived experiences, research work, and practice of our panellists. And so, while they are rich illustrations from practice, they are not an exhaustive or comprehensive representation of all issues faced by different young people around the world. We hope that the dialogue series and this report offers a starting point in the discussion on the creation of healthy cities for young people, while addressing the discrimination and exclusion that occurs along multiple axes of power: age, ethnicity, caste, gender, sexuality, religion, ability.

## 2 HIGH-LEVEL SUMMARY

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The following section outlines several high-level reflections which cut across the four sessions of the dialogue series. These have been structured according to five principles that resonate with those outlined in the C4Cs and Fondation Botnar's [E2A Framework](#), to reflect the ideas shared by the panellists on how interventions and learning can generate 'cities fit for young people'.

### **Actions must be 'Fit for Context':**

This requires moving beyond tokenistic approaches to youth engagement, and 'buzzwords' such as empowerment and participation. Young people have a key role in articulating their challenges, lived experiences, and aspirations if interventions are to be fit for context. But they often find their participation bound to 'youth issues' or are engaged in only limited ways. Challenging tokenistic forms of engagement requires nurturing **brave spaces**, where young people can engage in conversations with one another, and with other city stakeholders. This may require the dual strategy of investing in both **horizontal and vertical structures**: spaces where young people can creatively reflect on their cultural norms and values, and in doing so, build their own capacities to understand the challenges they face and identify solutions, along with other spaces to connect directly with policy makers to advocate for these changes.

### **Sustainable change requires fostering an 'Enabling Environment':**

Existing city systems have largely been designed by and for able-bodied heterosexual men, and many of the modalities of resource distribution within them are unequal. As a result, diverse social groups, including across gender, class, age, ability, sexuality, religion (amongst others), have long experienced uneven access to opportunities and decision-making within the city. This requires a rethink of our city systems if we are to build an enabling environment in which young people can flourish. As between 30-90% of cities may have been produced informally, investing in resources to support these **informal structures, systems, and processes** to influence dominant stakeholders in the city is crucial. This requires **incremental but long-term change to bureaucratic and procedural structures**: creating opportunities for young peoples' involvement in budgeting, public hearings, the formulation of city development plans, community ownership models, and addressing unwieldy barriers for officials to partner with youth organisations.

### **'Inclusion and Equity' must be a central focus in all activities:**

Young people within any given context represent a diverse group, and will experience vulnerabilities differently across gender, religion, ethnicity, race, ability, class, or other facets of identity. It is crucial that these **differences are celebrated and supported**, ensuring that it is not only the most privileged youth that 'get a seat at the table', and promoting diversity in representation. It is also important to recognize the **intersectional risks** faced by young people when playing a leadership role - young people may struggle with cultural expectations, or discrimination when speaking out, especially in relation to gender and class. As such, in addition to building capacities of young people, interventions must be focused on fostering a culture of respect from policymakers to support the participation of young people in intergenerational dialogues with confidence. For partnerships to be equitable and inclusive, they must be built on a shared purpose and respect. It means **putting those with the most at stake first**, and centring dialogues on the aspirations of the most vulnerable groups. Young people need to be included and treated as equal partners in shaping city planning and development processes.

### **Building upon 'Mundane Innovation' can support just transformations:**

While innovations are focused on shifting existing urban processes, they can play a role in **both addressing or entrenching inequalities**. In many Southern cities, for instance, digital tools are offering opportunities for young people to engage in urban planning and decision-making through activities such as grassroots journalism, mapping, and media. However, 'top-down' innovations, which enable powerful actors such as property developers, can also lead to the further disenfranchisement or even displacement of vulnerable groups. Likewise, issues of **accessibility, inclusion, and the digital divide** are a serious issue, with significant disparities in access to vital infrastructure across diverse social groups in many Southern cities. Therefore, not all innovations generate 'just' forms of transformation, nor do all transformations require a complex 'innovation'. Building upon everyday experimentations, adapting old methodologies in digital formats, and supporting the engagement of a broad range of voices can support transformative innovations which are **critical, counter-hegemonic, emotionally connected, and highly imaginative**.

**‘Global Learning’ must be collaborative and reflexive:**

The production of knowledge is deeply intertwined with uneven legacies of power—this requires forms of research and learning which **recognise the invisible voices** from the margins, and which can **mobilize this evidence** to influence policy makers and planners. As such, global learning processes must recognise and address the **different contexts and histories** within which knowledge is produced to generate evidence and action. These forms of knowledge-building cannot be reduced to numbers, nor is such data useful without the participation of communities—they must also **be immersive and account for subjectivity**. In this regard, there is a key role for digital technologies in supporting non-traditional and creative ways for young people to generate narratives in their own words and formats, such as through digital ethnographies, song, or video. Maintaining a focus on this politics of knowledge entails asking critical questions around **who gets to be recognized as a knowledge producer** and investing in processes to ensure that youth narratives are considered by local and national governments.

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## 3 SESSION REPORTS

### 3.1 EMPOWERING YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES

The dialogue session on Empowering Youth and Communities was held on 28 April 2021. In this session, facilitated by youth leader and environmental activist Kehkashan Basu, a global panel of speakers consisting of youth leaders and experts, international development practitioners, and academics engaged in an interactive dialogue around learning and evidence building on effective approaches, strategies, principles and actions for empowering young people and marginalised communities (further information about the speakers/panellists can be found in Annex 1: List of Speakers/Panellists on page 21). Key takeaways from the dialogue including learnings and recommendations are summarised below.



#### Understanding Empowerment

Building evidence on effective ways to empower young people and marginalised communities in cities requires starting with a clear and shared notion of what empowerment means. Viewing empowerment simply as a buzzword without properly defining it can only lead to tokenistic engagements. For young people, it may be defined as a process through which they can become stronger and self-directed:

*“I think empowerment is the process of becoming stronger, more confident and having a degree of autonomy and self-determination, which will help young people to present their ideas in a self-determined way as acting on their own authority.” (Najat Jibreel, Youth Leader)*

Empowerment is about young people being able to learn, explore, engage, have a voice, dignity, and confidence. Three critical aspects of empowerment include: a) improved tangible outcomes, b) more enabling structural environment, and c) expanded horizons of possibility. It is, however, important to understand that the same definition of empowerment may not be applicable for everyone or in every context.

#### Barriers to Young Peoples’ Empowerment in Southern Cities

One of the key barriers to empowering young people is the culture of not respecting them, not listening to them, or engaging them in decision-making processes. In many societies, there is a cultural expectation for young people to be non-assertive and not raise their voice or disagree. And a lack of access to education, basic services, safe and nurturing environments, skills, and employment only serves to further hinder young peoples’ empowerment:

*“Young people, if they cannot make their basic needs, and we’re looking again at the poorest of the poor, when they can’t access basic services, when they can’t access proper housing, and safe and nurturing environments - without that they also cannot be empowered.” (Douglas Ragan, UN-Habitat)*

Another major barrier to empowerment are gender norms that exclude young women and girls from decision-making processes. Other forms of gender-based discrimination such as limited access to education and employment, unequal workloads, and pay gaps, can exacerbate these challenges, while such discrimination may remain hidden due to lack of gendered data. And as a result, the existing modes of young peoples’ participation are not always meaningful and do not address their real concerns. This engagement often remains limited to the tokenistic participation of young people from privileged backgrounds.

#### Ways to Empower Young People: What Works

##### Creation of Spaces of Reflection, Voice and Representation

The empowerment of young people requires the creation of new spaces for critical reflection and youth leadership. These spaces are necessary to allow them to come together, and collectively and critically interrogate the assumptions, cultural norms, and values that they have grown up with and have internalised. Nurturing such spaces for young people may require a dual

strategy: creating spaces only for young people, to allow for conversations and critical reflection amongst young people, as well as creating other platforms for them to engage directly with other stakeholders. These can serve as critical platforms for mobilising young people to identify the challenges they face, raise their voice, and engage in collective action together with various city stakeholders including the local government. These spaces can facilitate meaningful engagement and representation of young people in city planning and agenda setting, programming and resource allocation, and research:

***“Especially in global South, in our municipalities, are they really budgeting for the children? Are they really thinking about the adolescents? Are they really doing the master planning or city planning exercise in consultation with them? If they are doing this then it is possible to fund interventions in cities where children are resilient not only in relation to their health, education, and in response to disasters, but where they can voice their views with municipalities” (Manish Thakre, Save the Children India)***

#### *Investment in Education, Skills, and Capacity Building*

Inclusive access to education is regarded as one of the most critical components of achieving young peoples’ empowerment, as it enables them to recognise their own abilities and understand their human rights. Peer-to-peer education can work as an effective tool in this regard, particularly in societies in which traditional norms act as barriers to empowerment. Skills and employment opportunities can give young people a vision for their future, and are thus key to their empowerment:

***“I think that for the youth to be empowered we should, first of all, educate ourselves and also obtain skills. I think that is the first stage of empowerment ... Then we should also be able to take risks responsibly and face the challenges that come with them.” (Najat Jibreel, Youth Leader)***

Hence, support needs to be provided for their skills development, entrepreneurial training, and employment generation. Moreover, building the capacities of young people enables them to effectively engage with city stakeholders for realisation of their rights and to take actions towards making cities more inclusive. Support for education, skills, and capacity building needs to be given while also ensuring inclusive access to basic services, proper housing, and safe and nurturing environments.

#### *Recognition of Self-Determination, Autonomy, and Confidence*

Being respected and to be meaningfully engaged are of critical importance to young people. Hence, respect and engagement are critical for their empowerment:

***“It’s not just about education and jobs, it’s about their respect and meaningful engagement. If you have a job as a young person that disrespects you because of your age, and that disrespect is also exacerbated by other social determinants like gender, sexuality, race, socioeconomic status, etc. then that is not a job that a young person would want to stay in. And it does not provide any kind of empowerment.” (Kehkashan Basu, Green Hope Foundation)***

Enabling young people to understand their passion and what they are good at can help them to make better choices about their future. Supporting them to voice their concerns, engaging in collective actions with other city stakeholders and participating in programs can make them more confident, develop their sense of responsibility and enable them to hold themselves accountable and do their part.

#### **Community Platforms to Ensure Young Peoples’ Participation in City Planning, Kolkata**

In Kolkata, India, the creation of community platforms by Save the Children India with the participation of young people and other community actors, mobilised them to identify the challenges they face in the city, and built their capacities to act towards making the community more resilient. These platforms, both online and on the ground, connected the communities with the local government/ city officials to facilitate better access to municipal services for young people and the most vulnerable residents of the city. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these platforms were mobilised to support the identification and mapping of the most affected communities, connecting them with government services.

*(Manish Thakre, Save the Children India)*

### Co-designing with Young People to Produce Context-responsive Solutions, Mogadishu

In Mogadishu, Somalia, when planning to establish a youth centre with support from UN-Habitat, local government officials recommended setting up entirely separate centres for male and female youth due to religious restrictions. Engaging young people in the planning process and working with them to co-design the centre resulted in a more nuanced solution. As suggested by the young people, they set up a single centre for both males and females, while remaining culturally sensitive and delivering services focused on their needs. After a while, the youth centre became a place where young people came together regardless of gender and could learn together and from each other.

(Douglas Ragan, UN-Habitat)

### Key Takeaways

- Understanding context and local culture is of critical importance. This means **solutions need to be context-responsive** so that they can cater to the diverse and unique challenges faced by young people in various settings.
- Young peoples' involvement in programmatic interventions and research **must extend beyond tokenistic participation** and should ensure their meaningful engagement.
- Conversations with and among community stakeholders, including young people, should start as early as possible to inform program models and approaches as they are developed. **Young people need to be engaged from the very beginning.**
- The **diversity** of gender, race, class, etc. **needs to be central** to help broaden participation beyond a handful of selected young people. It is important to keep in mind that **young people across the world are a heterogenous group** who face very different challenges depending on context:
 

*"Young people are not the same everywhere. We have different needs and that has to be understood by the rest of the world." (Kehkashan Basu, Green Hope Foundation)*
- It is necessary to **address the power differentials** that may come about through the process of participation itself. This means ensuring young people who participate in research and programs **remain accountable** to the wider cohort of their peers that they represent. Likewise, to engage policy-makers to engage with respect.

- The empowerment of young people and marginalised communities is a **long-term process** which means practitioners and researchers need to **be prepared to invest time**:

*"The time that NGOs and researchers have to invest is long-term time. There are no magic bullets. Let's invest the time to understand the issues and be flexible to revise or reframe our approaches" (Joyati Das, Botnar Healthy Cities for Adolescents Program)*

### Knowledge and Evidence Building

- Listening to the language of people, their stories from lived experiences and understanding their real meanings is critical for research and evidence building.
- Theories and frameworks developed in the global North may not always be applicable in Southern cities. Those need to be critically analysed and contextualised to fit the local setting.
- Researchers and practitioners need to be aware of preconceived notions that can generate flawed assumptions about young people from dissimilar cultural contexts. It is critical for researchers to acknowledge their positionality and privileges, and how this shapes value judgements and preconceived notions.
- Research and programmatic interventions must have honesty about the extent and scope of young peoples' participation in the co-production of knowledge:

*"There's a lot of research that says it's co-produced or it says that it's collaborative or it's co-created where adults still really hold the power. So, I think that's the first thing - to be honest ... with young people about the scope that they will have within different parts of the research process. Are they simply going to be there gathering data? Are they going to be involved in terms of the analysis, in terms of the writing, in terms of the critical reflection? So, it's about being honest and obviously being as inclusive as you can be." (Sarah C White, RW-Colab)*

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### 3.2 BUILDING EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

The dialogue session on Building Equitable Partnerships was held on 07 June 2021. In this session, facilitated by youth leader Shamoy Hajare, a global panel of speakers consisting of youth leaders, international development practitioners, and academics engaged in an interactive dialogue around learning and evidence building on effective approaches, strategies, principles, and actions for building equitable partnerships in cities (Further information about the speakers/panellists can be found in Annex 1: List of Speakers/Panellists on page 21). Key takeaways from the dialogue including learnings and recommendations are summarised below.



#### **Barriers to Young Peoples' Participation as Equals in Partnerships**

A key barrier to young peoples' engagement in urban partnerships is the lack of interest from municipal bodies, who may perceive young people to be incapable of understanding or contributing to policy and planning processes. Moreover, in countries with highly centralised governance structures, city government officials have little freedom to make decisions on their own about partnering with youth organisations. Concerns over any political affiliation/motivation of youth organisations can also discourage municipal bodies from deeper engagement. As a result, young peoples' participation in partnerships frequently remain merely tokenistic, and often initiatives to ensure their participation do not go beyond policy briefs or policy recommendations. Participation is even more challenging for disadvantaged young people such as migrants from low-income backgrounds, who already face various challenges in trying to come to terms with cities that they find inhospitable. Declining funding for ground-up approaches is also creating barriers to the establishment of equitable partnerships.

#### **Ways to Build Partnerships: What Works**

##### *Adoption of a Goal-oriented Approach with Shared Purpose*

Equitable partnerships require a synergy of interests and a practical purpose. Partnerships develop when different stakeholders feel the need to do something that requires support from each other. Thus, partnerships need to be purposeful—to have a common goal and a shared connection among all stakeholders. Crucially, in a partnership, all stakeholders may not have the same stake, or they may not even get along, but having a shared purpose based on common needs can bring on board diverse stakeholders, and support cooperation and sustainability over the long-term:

*“A whole range of people might need to be involved who will not all get on together. So, it's a sort of network of connections and partnerships that that can come together because in some way there are connections that make sense to people and everybody in that chain or that network gets something out of it.” (Ruth McLeod, UCL)*

##### *Relationship-Driven Process Built on Mutual Respect*

Partnership building works best when it is a relationship-driven process, as each stakeholder will have their own interests and agendas. Creating meaningful relationships with relevant stakeholders can support the achievement of goals, and articulation of solutions to complex problems. Often a partnership does not start with formal contracts or agreements, but through the cultivation of informal relationships which later get codified into formal partnerships. Hence, interpersonal relationships are key to partnership building. It is critical to understand who the partners are and what their interests are, and what relationships need to be created. It is also important to ensure that all stakeholders have mutual respect:

*“It's about being able to strategically integrate everyone and ensuring that everyone sees value. And that everyone is valued in our partnership.” (Shamoy Hajare, Radicle Global)*

### Long-term Engagement and Appropriate Resourcing

Building effective and sustainable partnerships involves developing capacities, appropriate mechanisms, and adequate resourcing to facilitate engagement on the ground. Moreover, building trust and meaningful relationships requires time that is spent listening to people and understanding their interests. This means that driving change requires a commitment to long-term engagement with stakeholders beyond discrete projects (entailing time investments) and ensuring appropriate resource allocation (entailing funding investments) for partnership building. Partners need to be prepared for unavoidable challenges and be committed to going through those together:

*“We come up with very fancy principles in one way or another. But when I was asked about [equitable partnerships], there was one phrase that kept coming to my mind which was ‘through shit and shine’ ... Because that meant you were going to go through things, and you knew you were going to hit problems ... But you were making a commitment to actually going on that journey together.” (Ruth McLeod, UCL)*

### Purposeful Partnership Built Around Common Interests, Kingston

In Kingston, Jamaica, despite restrictions imposed by the government, an initiative to provide a construction training programme to women to build their skills and ensure decent employment was successful. This approach adopted a respectfully strategic approach, that started with a grounded understanding of the barriers, cultivating relationships across a diverse range of stakeholders that might not usually connect, such as the master builders, the Ministry of Education, vocational trainers, and urban activists. The success of this programme was demonstrated through 96% placement rates, generating reliable and dignified work for women, while simultaneously reducing young women's unplanned pregnancy rates. Working with stakeholders who might not normally get along, but who have a shared purpose ensured cooperation amongst diverse stakeholders, and the sustainability of the intervention in the longer term.

*(Ruth McLeod, UCL)*

### Sustained Engagement with Policymakers to Change Mindsets, Dhaka

In Dhaka, Bangladesh, long-term, continued engagement with policymakers by SERAC Bangladesh, a youth-led organisation, contributed to changing their mindsets in favour of ensuring meaningful participation of young people in national policy planning processes. This was possible, on one hand, by knowing the policymakers and understanding their interests and, on the other, by building young peoples' capacities through the establishment of an urban youth council that enabled them to contribute to the policy and planning processes. This led to an acknowledgment from the relevant policymakers about the usefulness of young peoples' participation, and the need to allocate adequate resources to support continued youth engagement.

*(S. M. Shaikat, SERAC Bangladesh)*

### Key Takeaways

- It is important to **map out partners and understand their interests**. Partnership building requires knowing and understanding the partners that are to be engaged. There are a diverse range of stakeholders in the urban space, all of whom are not immediately visible.
- It is critical to **ensure that all stakeholders have a genuine and transparent stake in the partnership**. Moreover, those who have the largest stake in the partnership i.e., young people, should be able to guide it.
- Partnership building should **focus on both vertical and horizontal engagements**. This means partnerships need to be created not only between communities and city authorities/institutions but also within or across communities.
- It is also important to **understand how various donor organisations work**. Knowing people personally in donor organisations, building alliances with them and being able to navigate their system, can help connect them with the people on the ground, and allow resource mobilisation in a manner that is not top-down.
- It is necessary to **recognise the context specific vulnerabilities** of young people because different people in different settings experience vulnerability differently. The **participation of young people needs to be genuine** as opposed to their often- tokenistic engagement:

*“I’m not talking about having young people speaking at particular engagements or a tick in the box saying, ‘Hey, we’ve included youth’. It’s about genuine youth participation and ensuring that young people are really integrated in decision-making. (Shamoy Hajare, Radicle Global)*

- The lack of young peoples' engagement in meaningful partnerships with city stakeholders is a system-wide challenge and thus **requires a systemic and strategic approach** to address it:

***"You can't just change a system by just speaking. Rather you need to change the system by working and it is together, not against. So, we work with the system to change the system." (S. M. Shaikat, SERAC Bangladesh)***

- It is important to **plan for long-term engagement and investment**. Programs that involve urban development, settlement upgrading, etc. require a significant investment of time. Often this can involve a timeframe of no less than ten years.

### **Knowledge and Evidence Building**

- When building evidence, researchers and practitioners need to think beyond numbers, as quantitative measures cannot truly capture the lived experiences and unique challenges faced by young people especially in Southern cities:

***"Research and evidence has to be immersive. It has to account for subjectivity. Because if we reduce the experience of the youth ... if we try and reduce that to numbers, it's doing injustice to what that is. Because that's a vibrant living phenomenon of young people coming to terms with what it is to live in these extremely inhospitable cities." (Jagan Shah, FCDO)***

- Listening to the people on the ground in their own settings can help gain an understanding about the sector and better inform programs that can deliver results:

***"There's nothing really magical about it. It's actually just hanging out ... a lot of it is actually just taking the time to go and find out what's actually going on." (Ruth McLeod, UCL)***

- Governments need to focus more on understanding and measuring the outcomes of policies and programs. They are often more interested in measuring inputs (i.e., spending) rather than monitoring outcomes. It is important to start conversations around outcomes of government and community actions.

### 3.3 STRENGTHENING CITY SYSTEMS

The dialogue session on Strengthening City Systems was held on 01 July 2021. In this session, facilitated by youth leader Chandana Das, a global panel of speakers consisting of youth leaders, international development practitioners, city officials, and academics engaged in an interactive dialogue around learning and evidence building on effective approaches, strategies, principles, and actions for strengthening urban systems in Southern cities (Further information about the speakers/panellists can be found in Annex 1: List of Speakers/Panellists on page 22). Key takeaways from the dialogue including learnings and recommendations are summarised below.



#### Barriers to Making City Systems Effective and Inclusive

Strengthening city systems towards making them effective and sustainable requires introducing inclusive and participatory planning approaches. Existing city systems were initially designed to serve the purposes of able-bodied, heterosexual men. These systems often do not adequately consider the concerns of women, young people and children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups. Likewise, the existing resource distribution modalities in city systems are flawed which results in some neighbourhoods receiving disproportionately more resources and infrastructure than others. This means that young people in the city do not all have access to the same opportunities:

***“The evidence that we got very clearly pointed out that the city system had flawed resource distribution practices. For instance, during our ground assessment we found that there were many schools, hospitals or even parks in certain kinds of neighbourhoods than the others. So, this meant that not every child or every young person had access to the same privilege.” (Chandana Das, Veolia)***

The problems of inequality and discrimination exist not only in low-income neighbourhoods but also in more affluent ones, albeit in different forms. Policymakers do not readily see the potential and value of engaging young people in policy processes.

As a result, young peoples’ involvement in policy processes often remains limited.

The increasing reliance on internet-based digital technologies by national and city governments can be a powerful tool, however, it also can also lead to the exclusion of urban poor communities who do not have access to the internet. For instance, using internet-based platforms as the only means of community participation in city planning processes can both result in disadvantaged groups being left out, and allow powerful actors such as real estate agents to influence policy and planning in their favour. Technology can therefore be both inclusive and exclusive depending on how it is used and to what ends. Particularly considering the Covid-19 pandemic, when many things have moved to online/virtual platforms, it is of critical importance to ensure that alternate options remain available to allow community participation:

***“Our processes in the digital age have become so exclusive while we think we’re becoming more inclusive! ... The digital is both a source of exclusion and inclusion. And we must keep that in mind as we go forward. So that while we reap the benefits of its inclusion, we also are very aware where it continues to exclude, and have specific programs and voices, and initiatives and interventions, and protests or whatever it is to make sure that those voices are heard.” (Kalpana Viswanath, SafetiPin)***

#### Ways to Strengthen City Systems: What Works

##### *Adopting a Participatory Approach with Attention to Intersectionality*

Strengthening city systems requires creating processes and spaces of participation by communities including young people. Community voices need to be considered in city planning and resource allocation. It is important to recognise the intersectionality of voices and what each stakeholder brings to the table. Establishing processes that move beyond tokenistic participation can allow young peoples’ meaningful engagement and contribute to achieving key SDGs. Young peoples’ participation in city planning can involve engagement in activities such as: budgetary planning, public hearings, the formulation of city development plans, mapping and documenting issues and gaps, citywide assessment, and decision-making in investment programs.

##### *Engagement with Informal Processes and Ground-up Institutionalisation*

City systems in the global South go beyond the formal and dominant structures. Somewhere between 30 to 90 percent of Southern cities may be produced through informal processes. Working through informal systems, processes, and structures can offer new ways to reimagine an inclusive city system. This

requires understanding the informal systems and processes, as well as the exclusions and inclusions within them, and identifying the opportunities to leverage on these systems and mobilise resources to influence dominant stakeholders in the city. An approach involving gradual and incremental institutionalisation of such processes, with ownership of the community, can provide a pathway for ensuring the rights of the marginalised groups in the city.

### *Investment in Skills and Capacity Enhancement*

Working with young people and building their capacities to better understand the challenges they face and identify solutions can drive important changes in city systems. The capacity enhancement of young people can involve building their own knowledge so that they understand local practices and how things should be. Equally important is providing leadership training and supporting them in accessing employment opportunities. It is important to demonstrate to young people that small changes achieved through their engagement can have a great impact, which can help to build their confidence. Governments can play a key role in capacitating young people to be engaged as change agents:

*“Involving youth in planning a healthy city depends on the government because youth need to be listened to about the problems they face in their living environment, education, at school, at home, at the gym, in the workplace, etc.... The youth must no longer be spectators but actors of change in their city.” (Anta Badji, Youth Leader)*

### **Engaging Young People in Small Changes to Build Trust and Confidence, Cali**

Despacio’s experience in Cali, Colombia shows that working with young people—using trainings and social mapping to build their capacities to better understand the challenges they face and to collectively identify solutions—helped to design effective interventions. Showing young people that even small changes achieved through their engagement can have a great impact helped build their trust and confidence. At the same time, demonstrating to policymakers that young people can meaningfully contribute helped to change negative mindsets regarding youth participation. In Cali, this approach to engaging young people led to positive outcomes in terms of reducing gang violence and making public space safer, particularly for young girls. It also helped young people to access and influence policy processes to create changes in the city system.  
(Natalia Lleras, Despacio)

### **Leveraging Readily Available Technologies to Participate in City Planning, Delhi**

In Delhi, India, the Main Bhi Dilli campaign organised by SafetiPin and local non-profit organisations demonstrated that leveraging easily accessible technologies in a participatory manner by grassroots communities can help challenge top-down, exclusionary city planning processes. Creating grassroots citizens’ platforms and mobilising various community stakeholders (women, youth, students, informal workers, etc) through digital platforms allowed their engagement in the city planning process and enabled them to raise their voice in claiming their rights. SafetiPin’s work in Delhi also shows that using non-traditional, creative tools, such as video and song, for disseminating evidence can result in greater reach and impact in terms of empowering women and making the city’s public space safer for them.

*(Kalpana Viswanath, SafetiPin)*

### **Key Takeaways**

- Interventions to strengthen city systems need to **acknowledge that there is a problem with the current systems** of city planning as those are in essence exclusionary, patriarchal, racist, and ageist. It is important to **understand the systems, processes, and structures that are already in place** and starting from there:

*“We need to recognize and start from the radical potential of what is already there. We cannot start from the perspective that we are working with a tabula rasa, that there are external agents that are going to come in... in my experience, often the spaces at the margins of the dominant structures, they are where the real possibilities of change are.”  
(Alexandre Apsan Frediani, IIED)*

- Creating **partnerships with communities is critical** for making interventions successful. This requires first identifying what organisations/platforms are already there in the community and then engaging with them and building trust. **Communities must be in the driving seat** when **institutionalising grassroots processes** in city systems.
- Enabling disadvantaged communities to generate their own stories/narratives** in their own formats about their experiences of marginalisation in the city can be effective in **changing public participation**, and in **serving as evidence** of human rights violations.
- It is necessary to **be flexible** and recognise that practitioners do not have all the answers and that communities might have their own ideas and solutions about specific problems.

- Along with safe spaces for women and young people, **‘brave’ spaces of engagement are also needed.** Creating ‘brave spaces’ where communities can engage in conversations with one another as well with other city stakeholders can widen the scope of engagement with different narratives and experiences of peoples’ lives in cities. **This might require ‘re-inventing’ existing spaces.**

### **Knowledge and Evidence Building**

- Research is intertwined with politics and various power asymmetries. It is necessary to recognise which voices or perspectives from the margins are not acknowledged and create spaces for engaging with them.
- Being *innovative* about the ways in which researchers and practitioners disseminate knowledge and evidence can increase the reach and impact of their work. Listening to young people can help identify highly innovative and non-traditional ideas for the knowledge and evidence dissemination:

***“We need to be brave; we need to be innovative; we need to look back as well as look forward for tools that have worked—well beyond the written word.”  
(Kalpana Viswanath, SafetiPin)***

- The process of collecting data by young people in and of itself can be empowering, as it enables them to produce knowledge and see that their voice matters. However, it should not be only about collecting data. Instead, it is necessary to ensure that this data is considered by the government and other city officials:

***“It’s not about just collecting data. What processes are there to make sure that data is taken into account? I think that’s the biggest thing about a people centred approach.... making sure there’s a process to include that information and have it taken into account— this is key for any urban planning process.” (Natalia Lleras, Despacio)***

### 3.4 FOSTERING TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATIONS

The dialogue session on Fostering Transformative Innovations was held on 22 July 2021. In this session, facilitated by a youth researcher Rewa Marathe, a global panel of speakers consisting of youth activists, international development practitioners, and academics engaged in an interactive dialogue around learning and evidence building on effective approaches, strategies, principles, and actions for promoting transformative innovations in Southern cities (Further information about the speakers/panellists can be found in Annex 1: List of Speakers/Panellists on page 22). Key takeaways from the dialogue including learnings and recommendations are summarised below.



#### What Makes Innovation Transformative

Innovation entails embracing new ideas, new means, and new approaches in work. An innovation is transformative when it can change the way people live, work, and in general function within a society. A transformative innovation can act as a catalyst of change for those systems that are not working equitably:

***“Depending on the context in which they are promoted, these innovations can be critical, be transgressive and anti-hegemonic and, in spirit, I think they are highly imaginative and creative.” (Dr Gynna Farith Millan Franco, GREAT Program)***

Digital innovations, in particular, can be harnessed to respond to current and urgent problems and have a valuable role to play in ensuring ‘no one is left behind’. Moreover, just as innovations can lead to transformation, in the same way transformations can also lead to innovation. For example, the transformations taking place in many cities due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic have pushed practitioners and researchers to be more innovative in using existing and new digital technologies to overcome these new challenges.

#### Limitations of Technological Innovations

Depending on how they are used, digital innovations can be both catalysts of change but also a means of discrimination against the urban poor. Top-down innovations in urban development can lead to the further disenfranchisement of informal settlement residents, and even their displacement from the city. Moreover, often technologies do not reach all people, particularly marginalised or excluded communities. Many Southern cities have spectacular technological capacities and human resources, and are leveraging digital innovations, yet also have communities which are entirely excluded from basic everyday infrastructure for water, energy, public transport, and lack digital access. As a result, there is often significant disconnect between the narratives of ‘smart cities’, and the realities on the ground. Building on ‘mundane’ innovations can help to address this gap:

***“All innovation is not necessarily transformative, and we don’t need very complex innovations to create transformation. In the recent years, you’ve seen the rise of surveillance-driven interventions for safety: apps, AI, and cameras and CCTV. They have claimed to be innovative, while offering the same traditional surveillance of women’s lives and bodies, just in a digital flavor. But on the other hand, we have old methods of women’s safety audits, involving women walking around the neighbourhood making notes, and making recommendations to their elected representatives. So to borrow a word from the E2A framework, very very mundane, but transformative.” (Rewa Marathe, the University of Melbourne)***

#### Ways to Make Innovations Transformative: What Works

##### *Adoption of an Inclusive Approach to Innovation*

Transformation comes from inclusion, which is possible when a broad range of voices are heard and responded to. This requires a deep understanding of context when interpreting data and knowledge. The adoption of an inclusive approach is particularly important when it comes to engaging young people, because even within a city, young people are heterogeneous and can have different needs:

***“Young people at the age of between 15 and 19 tell very different stories and want very different things than young people between 20 to 24. So, it reminds me of this heterogeneity of young people and youth, and the things that they want.” (Anni Beukes, Neubauer Collegium Visiting Fellow)***

This means that innovations need to be adaptive and be able to meet the end users' needs. If a solution is to be used by communities, then that is where the co-design needs to happen. For this, it is necessary to listen to diverse communities, and provide platforms for them to express their aspirations. Involving young people in the development and testing phase of technological solutions, especially from the very beginning, can ensure that innovations are youth friendly, and that young people can take ownership of solutions. To effectively engage young people, it is important to find the right language that best speaks to their needs and aspirations, and to find the common language that both city stakeholders and young people will understand.

#### *Promotion of Capacities to Engage with Grassroots Processes*

Supporting grassroots organising and the formation of social collectives aimed at producing ground-up solutions is a vital route for addressing diverse urban challenges. Grassroots journalism and community media, for instance, have been used to create critical awareness amongst young people, even among younger children. Supporting these grounded processes can enable marginalised urban communities to critically engage with top-down processes that are at times exclusionary:

***[Popular neighbourhoods in Medellín are] not only contesting, but proposing and putting on the table community plans, their own neighbourhood upgrading proposals, and writing their stories in very innovative ways.*** (Dr Gynna Farith Millan Franco, GREAT Program)

Enabling communities to use digital tools for data collection and settlement mapping, requires building their capacities to use such technologies, and to engage with city officials for citywide impact. Likewise, building the capacities of city officials can enable them to identify which tools and frameworks can be used to better engage with different community groups or stakeholders. Introducing new tools to city officials can be challenging however, and requires the identification of key champions to take this forward. However, these champions do not necessarily have to be city officials, they can be local leaders or youth activists.

#### *Investment in Making Innovation Sustainable*

Transformation does not happen in a day; it requires time and nurturing. This means innovation needs to be long-term. Rather than looking at innovation as something 'radical', it is necessary to approach it as something that can be sustained, so that it can provide stability and add value by bringing in new ideas and new changes. To make innovation transformative it is thus necessary to create the space to foster and nurture changes, and to make appropriate investments to ensure its sustainability:

***"That requires leadership, that requires developing new cultures, open-mindedness, and creativity, as well as looking for the right partnership with the private sector as well in order to translate all this into action."*** (Christelle Lahoud, UN-Habitat)

#### **Creating a Common Language through Creative Digital Tools, Cali**

In Cali, Colombia, UN-Habitat interventions achieved positive outcomes in engaging young people in city planning using a video game—Minecraft as a part of their Block by Block program. The video game serves as a language that enables young people to effectively communicate and generates interest to learn more about urban planning, and to be engaged in city planning processes. It also helps them learn about marginalised urban populations such as refugees and vulnerable migrants. In the workshops organised for the program, Minecraft works as a digital bridging tool to facilitate dialogue amongst young people as well as between young people and city officials. Through this creative and non-traditional outlet, the video game has been able to transform mindsets.

(Christelle Lahoud, UN-Habitat)

#### **Changing Relationships through the Use of Digital Tools, Yogyakarta**

Arkem Indonesia's work in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, shows that capacitating communities to use innovative digital tools enabled them to gather data more efficiently for settlement mapping, and in the creation of settlement profiles. The use of online data collection platforms in this manner created possibilities for undertaking ground-up, participatory citywide mapping which is challenging to do with traditional tools. During lockdowns and other mobility restrictions imposed in Indonesia due to Covid-19, such capacities opened opportunities for new forms of engagement between grassroots urban communities and city officials. This allowed communities to directly engage with the city officials using apps like Zoom, on issues around access to housing and finance.

(Annisa Hadny Zakiyaturrahmah, Arkem Indonesia)

## Key Takeaways

- **Technological innovations must be inclusive and accessible for everyone.** If communities and marginalised groups are excluded from accessing the benefits of digital technologies, then new gaps in urban development processes will emerge:

*“The use [of technology] is very important, but we also have a responsibility to make sure that no one is left behind. Because if there is another generation, or another stakeholder that cannot access these technologies, we will find other gaps that will emerge, and development cannot be.” (Annisa Hadny Zakiyaturrahmah, Arkom Indonesia)*

- It is critical to change the way that technological innovation is viewed, as a singular tool or application. Instead, the focus must be on **how an innovation can influence processes and approaches** so that when applied it can create a shift from existing systems to new ones.
- Processes of innovation should start with gaining an understanding of how particular challenges or problems are framed and if the innovation is able to **bring a change in existing paradigms and perspectives**.
- Emphasis should be on how various technologies or ideas fit together in a process operating at the city level, to ensure that innovations are **adding value to urban processes**:

*“It’s only useful when we are adding value. It’s not about the number of applications we come up with. Are we adding value to what we are producing as a solution? Are we accelerating service delivery? Are we delivering impact at scale? Are we putting the people at the centre?” (Christelle Lahoud, UN-Habitat)*

- It is necessary to **stay critical** about digital innovations and tech-based solutions as they can act as ‘double-edged swords’ which can both include and exclude dependent on how and by whom they are used.

## Knowledge and Evidence Building

- Building evidence is key to creating trust among both city officials and young people. However, merely generating data without the participation of communities does not add any value. Ensuring community participation in building evidence and producing knowledge can sustain innovations.
- Even in ground-up, participatory, grassroots evidence building processes, young peoples’ voices can remain invisible unless specific measures are taken to include them:

*“What knowledges, I think this is important, what knowledges are activated or are invited to take part in the dialogue, in the framing, in the process, and then into the action, in the promotion, in developing this innovation.” (Dr Gynna Farith Millan Franco, GREAT Program)*

- Using digital technologies that allow citizens/users/young people to generate data can provide a nuanced understanding regarding the diverse needs of diverse populations, and create global images for what access looks like across diverse groups. Innovative data gathering tools that allow for distributed ethnographies can allow for the collection of stories from underrepresented groups such as young people.
- In the use of data technologies, it is critical to have a clear understanding of the source and purpose of the data, especially when used for building machine learning algorithms and creating AI:

*“The availability and the accessibility - that’s a question we still have to talk about. What data is available, who is generating this data, why is this data generated and how far does this data objectify or subjectify?” (Anni Beukes, Neubauer Collegium Visiting Fellow)*

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## ANNEX: LIST OF SPEAKERS/PANELLISTS

### SESSION 1: EMPOWERING YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES

Speaker/Panellist	Affiliation
Najat Jibreel	Youth Ambassador at Tamale Senior High School Youth Club; Peer Educator at Botnar Healthy Cities for Adolescents Program. Tamale, Ghana
Manish Thakre	Head of Urban Program and Policy, Save the Children. Delhi, India
Douglas Ragan	Program Management Officer, Human Rights and Social Inclusion Unit, UN-Habitat. Nairobi, Kenya
Sarah C White	Co-founding Director, Relational Wellbeing Collaborative (RWB-C); Honorary Professor, University of Bath. Bath, United Kingdom
Kehkashan Basu [Session Facilitator]	Founder-President, Green Hope Foundation; Council Lead at St. Paul's Constituency Youth Council. Toronto, Canada
Joyati Das [Discussant]	Director, Botnar Healthy Cities for Adolescents Program, Fondation Botnar. Melbourne, Australia
Dr Stephanie Butcher [Session Chair]	Research Fellow, Connected Cities Lab, the University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia
Dr Susanna Hausmann-Muela	Chief Program Officer, Fondation Botnar. Basel, Switzerland

### SESSION 2: BUILDING EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

Speaker/Panellist	Affiliation
S. M. Shaikat	Executive Director, SERAC Bangladesh. Dhaka, Bangladesh
Jagan Shah	Senior Infrastructure Adviser, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK Government. Delhi, India
Ruth McLeod	Senior Teaching Fellow, Development Planning Unit, University College London. London, United Kingdom
Shamoy Hajare [Session Facilitator]	Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Radicle Global. Kingston, Jamaica
Dr Stephanie Butcher [Session Chair]	Research Fellow, Connected Cities Lab, University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia
Dr Susanna Hausmann-Muela	Chief Program Officer, Fondation Botnar. Basel, Switzerland



### SESSION 3: STRENGTHENING CITY SYSTEMS

Speaker/Panellist	Affiliation
Anta Badji	Youth Representative, Healthy Cities for Adolescents Program. Thies, Senegal
Natalia Lleras	Vivo Mi Calle Project Director, Despacio. Cali, Colombia
Ibrahima Bakhom	Secretary General, City of Thies. Senegal
Dr Kalpana Viswanath	Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer, Safetipin. Delhi, India
Dr Alexandre Apsan Frediani	Principal Researcher (Human Settlements) International Institute for Environment and Development. London, United Kingdom
Chandana Das [Session Facilitator]	Innovation Manager and Business Development Executive, Veolia. Barcelona, Spain
Dr Stephanie Butcher [Session Chair]	Research Fellow, Connected Cities Lab, University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia
Dr Susanna Hausmann-Muela	Chief Program Officer, Fondation Botnar. Basel, Switzerland

### SESSION 4: FOSTERING TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATIONS

Speaker/Panellist	Affiliation
Annisa Hadny Zakiyaturrahmah	Community Architect and Urban Designer, Arkom Indonesia. Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Dr Gynna Farith Millan Franco	Postdoctoral Research Fellow, GREAT Program. Cali, Colombia
Anni Beukes	Urban Researcher and Neubauer Collegium Visiting Fellow. Windhoek, Namibia
Christelle Lahoud	Associate Program Management Officer, UN-Habitat. Nairobi, Kenya
Rewa Marathe [Session Facilitator]	PhD Researcher, Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia
Dr Stephanie Butcher [Session Chair]	Research Fellow, Connected Cities Lab, University of Melbourne. Melbourne, Australia
Dr Susanna Hausmann-Muela	Chief Program Officer, Fondation Botnar. Basel, Switzerland



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