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Laying the Foundations for a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework: Reflections From an International, Interdisciplinary Collaboration

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Abstract

Children, a unique yet marginalized social group, hold immense potential for driving meaningful social and environmental change, both in their current lives and as future stewards of the planet. However, their significant contributions often depend on the mechanisms and opportunities adults create to facilitate their participation and inclusion. This places local governance at a crucial juncture, mediating children's involvement in shaping their urban environments. This research was initiated by the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy in 2022, gathering international scholars and practitioners to critically assess the "child-friendly city" concept. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the study sought to advance the notion from simply being "friendly" to a deeper commitment to amplifying children's voices within social, physical, and relational spheres. The methodology transitioned from initial academic discussions to the creation of a comprehensive analytical tool, the "Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework." This framework aims to tackle the complex challenges of child participation, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in both local and global settings. This article unveils new insights at the intersection of children's rights, the SDGs, and local governance, laying the groundwork for a model that prioritizes and enhances children's perspectives, thereby catalyzing social and environmental progress.

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Keywords
child-focused; child participation; children; cities; local governance; SDGs

1. Introduction

Globally, children are considered a distinct yet marginalized social group that offers great hope towards meaningful social and environmental action both in the context of their childhoods and as future caretakers of our planet (Lolichen, 2006). The vital role of children's views in their growth and development was affirmed over 35 years ago with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), hereinafter referred as UNCRC. Children's ability to express their views and participate in societal discussions significantly depends on the mechanisms and opportunities provided to them (Cilliers & Gibbens, 2023), which are frequently governed by adults. This dependency underscores the critical role of adult-designed frameworks in enabling or constraining child participation. Particularly in the realm of public governance, local governments are strategically positioned as the level of governance closest to children's daily lives. This proximity makes local governance a vital conduit for integrating children's contributions into the fabric of urban living (Chawla, 2001). The concept of local governance embodies a bottom-up approach to public administration, distinguishing itself as an apt platform for fostering child participation (Lansdown, 2009). This approach aligns with the principles of "child-friendly cities" and participatory governance, advocating for the inclusion of children's voices in shaping policies, programs, and environments that affect them (UNICEF, 2004). By fostering environments that encourage and value child participation, local governance can significantly contribute to the development of societies that recognize and respect children's rights and as active contributors to social life and urban development (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the local urban agenda, underscoring the critical role of local governance in achieving sustainable development. In a recent declaration, UNICEF (2023, p. 1) underscored the necessity of placing children at the forefront of sustainable development efforts, framing this approach not only as a strategic necessity but as a "human rights imperative." This perspective recognizes that the SDGs are not isolated targets but a network of interconnected and interdependent goals. Successfully achieving these goals paves the way for systemic, structural, and long-term improvements that benefit children from every community. The SDGs act as a beacon for global cities and regions, guiding them towards the discovery and implementation of innovative solutions, policies, and local initiatives (Fambasayi & Katsidzira, 2022, p. 54). This directive encourages a focus on creating safe and clean environments, which will also be beneficial for children in terms of their health, well-being, and future potential. The emphasis on local solutions highlights the importance of tailored approaches that consider the unique needs and challenges of individual communities while aligning with global sustainability objectives (Mistry et al., 2019). Moreover, the integration of children's perspectives into urban planning and policy-making is essential for creating inclusive and equitable cities. Acknowledging children as key stakeholders in sustainable development ensures that urban strategies and solutions are designed with their best interests in mind. This implies a comprehensive understanding of the current challenges that affect children's participation and inclusion in local governance for achieving SDGs. It calls for a better integration of children's perspectives and needs as part of the planning process. This approach aligns with the principles of participatory governance and the rights-based perspective advocated by the UNCRC, which emphasizes the importance of considering children's views in all matters affecting them (UN, 1989).

This article aims to critically evaluate the concept of "child-friendly cities" and the role of children as catalysts for social and environmental sustainability. Initiated at the initiative of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD)—the Local Democracy Academy in 2022—it employs an interdisciplinary approach to develop the "Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework" (CFCAF), enhancing children's participation in urban development aligned with the SDGs. By examining the intersection of children's rights, the SDGs, and local governance, the study seeks to advance a framework that amplifies children's voices, promoting social and environmental progress.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Notion of "Child-Friendly Cities"

The notion of "child-friendly cities" emerges as a pivotal paradigm in urban planning and development, centered around crafting spaces that foreground the welfare, rights, and participatory engagement of children (Cilliers & Gibbens, 2023). This concept challenges the conventional perspective of children as mere bystanders in urban settings, positing them instead as key contributors whose requirements and viewpoints are critical in sculpting the urban milieu. Anchored in the principles of the UNCRC, "child-friendly cities" commit to ensuring children's involvement in decision-making, access to tailored service delivery, and safeguarding against harm, thereby advocating for children's active role in urban and community development. The establishment of child-friendly environments is shown to markedly benefit children's learning, development, and overall growth across physical, social, and cognitive domains. The significance of creating child-centric public spaces, as highlighted by researchers such as Nordström (2010), Moore (1987), and Shackell et al. (2008), lies in their capacity to enhance children's social competencies and personal skills. Inspired by the broader "child-friendly cities" initiative, these spaces are deliberately designed and developed to cater to the distinct needs of children, aiming to enhance their health, developmental skills, and interaction with the natural world (Cilliers & Cornelius, 2019). The concept represents a multifaceted and layered approach to urban planning, advocating for environmental designs and planning strategies that actively involve children and youth in molding their surroundings (Horelli, 2007). Despite the recognized benefits and the intrinsic value of child-friendly spaces in enriching children's experiences and development, their implementation remains sporadic. This gap underscores the critical need for broader adoption and integration of child-centric planning principles, ensuring environments that not only support children's development but also amplify their potential to influence and contribute to their communities.

2.2. The Vulnerability and Marginality of Children in Social and Environmental Contexts

The concept of childhood is fluid, evolving across different cultures and historical periods, influenced by a range of social practices at micro, meso, and macro levels. Dominant views often depict children as passive and dependent, lacking agency or voice, a perspective deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms and global inequalities, including colonial legacies (Bolotta, 2020). Such perspectives are reinforced by laws, policies, and social institutions, leading to a widespread portrayal of children as non-political and passive, which in turn makes them particularly susceptible to social and environmental challenges (James, 2011). Contrary to a universal paradigm of childhood, the dichotomy of children as "being" active participants in their societal roles, or "becoming" viewed in the context of future potential, reflects varying degrees of agency attributed to them (Uprichard, 2008). The SDGs have been criticized for their limited engagement with children, with

only a third explicitly including youth targets, highlighting a need for recognizing children's roles as both present and future change agents (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2019). This shift towards acknowledging children's active participation in societal and environmental discourses (Currie & Deschênes, 2016; Prout & James, 2015) is essential for addressing their vulnerability and marginalization, particularly in the face of climate change.

Children, especially in high-risk environments, face disproportionate impacts from climate-related threats, such as droughts, floods, and natural disasters, leading to dire consequences for their health, security, and well-being (Helldén et al., 2021). Their experiences within urban and rural settings underline the critical need for their inclusion in discussions on climate change and environmental policies. Given their marginal status and the pressing concerns of their lived realities, children represent a significantly marginalized group globally. The emphasis on children's rights to participate and have their voices heard is crucial, as highlighted by a UNICEF review of the SDGs (UNICEF, 2022). Access to information is fundamental, serving as the initial step on Arnstein's ladder of participation, essential for empowering children as agents of change within their communities and beyond (Arnstein, 1969).

2.3. Enhancing Child Participation Through Local Governance

Local governance serves as a crucial link between central government and children, with local governments positioned closest to the young population. This proximity is pivotal for implementing and monitoring children's rights and the SDGs, particularly within municipalities and sub-national entities. The significance of cities in the global development agenda is underscored by SDG 11, which aims for more inclusive, resilient, safe, and sustainable urban areas, highlighting the role of local governance in translating national commitments into local action (Riggio, 2002). Together with the New Urban Agenda and SDG 11, there is evidence of the importance of local governance mechanisms for inclusive policies and practices, ensuring no one is left behind (Mews et al., 2018)

Despite the global commitment to the SDGs and the principle that "no one is left behind," children often remain marginalized in development discussions and local governance processes. The limited focus on children within the SDGs framework calls for a greater emphasis on integrating their perspectives into local governance to foster sustainable communities (Malone, 2015). Advocating for child-focused urban spaces involves collaborative development and resource co-production that prioritizes children's rights, sustainability, and viewpoints.

The right to participate in local governance is grounded in international human rights law, notably Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and Article 7 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990), reinforcing the legal basis for children's inclusion in public governance. Numerous normative guidelines on child participation further stress the importance of child participation at the sub-national level for inclusive decision-making, framing it as a fundamental principle for realizing other rights (Lansdown, 2014). Achieving meaningful participation requires overcoming tokenism, where children's engagement is superficial rather than substantive (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2018). Local authorities must foster genuine child–adult interactions in urban planning and governance to enhance children's well-being, socialization, and engaged citizenship, while also promoting their understanding of rights (Lundy, 2018; Örnekoğlu Selçuk et al., 2023). Yet there are inherent challenges for children to participate in predominantly

adult-centric and adult-driven agendas. Paradigms of childhood are different across context and culture but often position children as either "being" (actively engaged in shaping the construction of childhoods) or "becoming" (not yet adult thus limited capacities; Uprichard, 2008). Such temporal dimensions get tangled up in idealized notions of children such as passivity, innocence, and dependency on benevolent adults which inhibits genuine and active participation. Children's sense of their own agency is shaped socially and spatially, challenging assumptions of agency as inherent, normative, and universal. Developing the dynamic and contextual tensions around children's agency, Bordonaro and Payne (2012, p. 366) highlight "ambiguous" agency which is "in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions about childhood, moral and social ideals about the kind of behavior young people should demonstrate, the activities they should engage in and the spaces and places deemed appropriate for them to inhabit." This is particularly relevant when we consider barriers and opportunities to engage in participatory endeavors with children and youth across contexts and varying social processes which may also stigmatize and marginalize them. Increasing participation cannot be achieved by normative, paternalistic, and universal means but grounded in "situated concepts of agency developed through understanding from the vantage point of local socio-cultural systems rather than externally derived socio-cultural assumptions about childhood and children's agency" (Edmonds, 2019, p. 202). The vision for child-focused cities is centered upon reinterpreting the SDGs through child-centric perspectives foregrounding contextually sensitive understandings that can be realized at local governance levels.

Investing in mechanisms for regular and impactful child participation in decision-making processes reflects a commitment to integrating children's perspectives in legislative, policy, and project interventions related to local SDGs implementation. Addressing barriers to effective child participation requires trained professionals, time-intensive planning, and ethical considerations. By prioritizing genuine engagement, local authorities can harness the demographic dividend of a young population for economic development, resilience, sustainability, and productivity (UN Population Fund, 2013), making child inclusion in governance not only a rights-based imperative but a strategic investment for future prosperity.

Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to have their views heard in collective decision-making processes. Since the UN adopted the Convention in 1989, research concerning the meaning of genuine children's participation in these processes has increased. Different participation models (e.g., Hart, 1997; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001) emerged in response to this quest, many of which rework Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. For instance, Hart's version (1997) identifies eight levels of youth participation, including three non-participation forms—manipulation, decoration, and tokenism. He presents children's participation as growing from "manipulation" to children's protagonism—"child-initiated shared decisions with adults," the ladder's last rung (Hart, 1997). He also defines tokenism as "instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions" (Hart, 1992, p. 9).

While it's true that all these participation models have their limitations, such as oversimplifying participation as a mere box-ticking exercise, they have played a crucial role in sparking conversations about "pseudo" and "genuine" forms of participation. Lundy (2018), for instance, challenges the notion of tokenism as a form of pseudo-participation; the author posits that tokenism can be seen as "a useful and sometimes necessary step on the journey of a more respectful and meaningful engagement with children" (Lundy, 2018, p. 340). Birch et al. (2017) argue that we must move from giving "voice" to children, an idea that evokes one-way

communication, towards dialoguing with children, which, in turn, demands continuous power negotiations between children and adults. Aligned with this perspective, the Lundy model of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence (Lundy, 2007) sheds light on how the dialogue between children and adults might be ensured by pointing out the importance of giving space for children to express their views (space), enabling children's voices (voice), providing an audience for their opinions (audience), and ensuring their views will have influence (influence).

Freire's (2000) approach to education is another perspective that has informed the development of the CFCAF. The philosopher and educator called for pedagogical approaches where people teach and learn from each other through dialogue to enact positive changes in a specific reality—"problem-posing education." For Freire (2000, p. 51), education should entail "praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." The CFCAF, in line with the concept of problem-posing education, involves the development of something valuable for and with municipalities keen to guarantee children's right to participate in decision-making processes towards the achievement of the SDGs. The framework is situated between academy and practice, university and community, theory and practice, teaching and learning, and reflecting and making. Furthermore, it is aimed to impel learning by exposing all parties involved in city planning and governance processes to each other's ideas, experiences, and viewpoints. By bringing all parties together to reflect and act to transform local realities, the framework affords all people involved in processes of city governance to perceive children as competent agents. Its potential to change mindsets counts in the combat of tokenistic practices. From this perspective, the framework can be read as an open, dynamic, dialogic, and collective tool whose learning-promotive capacity stands out.

3. Methodology

This article presents a reflective review of the research activities and outputs generated by the project team from its inception at the ICLD Local Democracy Academy in Visby, Sweden. It compiles and assesses the diverse array of studies, collaborative research efforts, and field visits conducted as part of the development of the CFCAF. The methodological journey, as outlined in Sections 3.1 to 3.4, has encompassed an initial gathering of international scholars (3.1); the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach to reframe the concept of "child-friendly cities" (3.2); the conceptual and practical development of the CFCAF (3.3); and an in-depth collaborative impact study, including fieldwork in partner municipalities (3.4) as explained accordingly.

3.1. The ICLD Local Democracy Academy: A Convergence of Minds

The research initiative originated from the ICLD's Local Democracy Academy held in Visby, Sweden, from 6th to 10th June, 2022. This event convened 64 international scholars from 50 universities across 28 countries, with a significant representation from the Global South. The academy fostered an intensive environment of mutual learning, critical thinking, and collaborative exploration focused on "transformative local governments" (Fallas et al., 2022). Among the varied themes, "child-friendly cities" prompted a group of researchers to critically assess the political and participatory roles of children and youth within local democracies. As part of the Academy, several scholars presented cases that foregrounded concepts of the "child-friendly city" interrogating the rights and needs of children to grow up in safe environments, with access to basic services, learning, independent mobility, and be a part of future spatial planning. Cases presented included co-designing temporary interventions in contested sites as an approach to involve

marginalized children in the process of generating child-friendly cities in Brazil, examining play sufficiency strategies in Wales and Scotland, urban governance perspectives on inclusive cities for children in South Africa, co-producing "social infrastructure of hope" to re-imagine common future with marginalized suburban communities in Serbia, and reflections on participation as protection through listening to "unheard voices" in Scotland.

The initial engagement included scholars from Brazil, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and Austria, and ranged across disciplines of urban design, architecture, urban planning, sociology, law and development, and urban studies. The cases presented crossed geographical contexts and disciplinary boundaries acting as catalysts for discussions of the challenges and opportunities of realization of the "child friendly city." Through these exchanges of empirical evidence, the group of scholars identified together that "friendly is not enough" as it does not go far enough leading to a collective call to action for the global discourse to progress from "child-friendly" to *child-focused*. Through discussions, including reflections on the strengths and limitations of policies and processes across different international systems, it was identified that there was an opportunity to reflect on the SDGs through the frame of child-focused cities and address the current gap to ensure children's rights and needs are foregrounded in these global goals.

3.2. Interdisciplinary Approach: Conceptual Refinement

Adopting an interdisciplinary methodology, an investigation into the "child-friendly city" concept sought to reconceptualize it as child-focused, thereby advocating for a deeper engagement with children's rights and active participation in urban planning and policy-making. This approach integrated insights from urban planning, architecture, social design, law, sociology, and social work, among others, challenging traditional disciplinary limitations and embracing innovative perspectives to better capture children's interactions with their urban environments. The move from "child-friendly" to *child-focused* highlighted a commitment to accountability and meaningful inclusion, addressing gaps in current practices and narratives around urban development and child participation.

3.3. Framework Development: From Ideation to Analytical Tool

Following the academy, the research team engaged in a series of collaborative discussions and online meetings. This phase involved reinterpreting the SDGs through children's perspectives, challenging adult-centric interpretations, and aiming for a context-specific understanding of child participation in local governance. The CFCAF emerged as a dynamic analytical tool designed to facilitate nuanced assessments of children's roles in achieving sustainable urban development, emphasizing their rights and contributions within local and global contexts.

3.4. Collaborative Impact Study: Fieldwork

A collaborative impact study involving ICLD-partner municipalities provided a practical exploration of the CFCAF's utility. Engagements in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, and Livingstone, Zambia, among others, allowed for direct interactions with local stakeholders, contextualizing the framework and identifying barriers to and opportunities for enhancing child participation in local governance. These field activities were critical in gathering insights and refining the CFCAF based on lived experiences and local challenges.

Joint reflection on various research activities (Sections 3.1 to 3.4) informed the synthesis of the findings and recommendations accumulated throughout the project's duration. This article captures the outcome of the reflective review by presenting the process and insights gained from engaging with children and local stakeholders in urban settings, as well as the effectiveness of the CFCAF as a tool for integrating children's perspectives into urban development and governance, in alignment with the SDGs and the UNCRC.

4. Findings

Thematic conclusions were drawn from the reflective review as explained in Section 3. The key themes that emerged are discussed accordingly and hold importance for academic discourse and policy implementation in urban planning and governance.

4.1. Empowering Children as Agents of Urban Transformation

This research highlighted the critical role of fostering agency among children, advocating for their active participation in shaping the cities they inhabit. Echoing Freire's philosophy (Freire, 2000), it suggests that children must engage critically with their environments to perceive themselves as capable agents of change. While not taken for granted, this participatory ethos is essential, requiring urban environments to respect and protect children's rights as outlined in the UNCRC and the SDGs. The research identifies key barriers to children's active participation, including socio-economic disparities, cultural and religious practices, and the limited availability of accessible educational and recreational resources. These barriers underscore the need for child-focused cities that prioritize children's well-being, rights, and needs in urban planning and policy-making. By advocating for the creation of inclusive, safe, and nurturing urban spaces, the study emphasizes the importance of considering children's perspectives in all aspects of urban planning and governance. Such an approach ensures cities are not merely habitable but are places where children can thrive, learn, and actively contribute to their communities' transformation, embodying the principles of sustainable and inclusive urban development.

4.2. Overcoming Barriers to Child-Inclusive Urban Planning

This research underscores the imperative of establishing child-focused cities that embody equity and social justice, ensuring every child, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, or ability, has access to essential opportunities and resources. This approach is in harmony with principles laid out in international instruments such as the UNCRC, which accentuates the rights of children to protection, provision, and active participation in society. The endeavor is to build inclusive and equitable urban environments confronting entrenched social disparities, seeking to forge more unified and fair communities. The journey towards genuine "child-friendliness" encounters obstacles in the ambiguity surrounding its definition, measurement, and monitoring. This challenge arises from varied interpretations of "child-friendliness," shaped by distinct disciplinary perspectives, professional practices, and individual experiences. Effectively navigating these complexities necessitates a refined, adaptable strategy that recognizes the diverse requirements and entitlements of children within varying urban landscapes. Such an approach is crucial for bridging the gap between the aspirational model of child-friendly cities and the practical realities of implementing these ideals in diverse urban settings, moving towards truly inclusive urban development that foregrounds the well-being and rights of children.

Whilst the value of children's participation is widely recognised and enshrined in UNCRC, the mechanisms and meaning that are required to truly prioritize children and youth's contributions to decision-making are complex and precarious. These challenges were illustrated in various ways during collaborative discussions including issues around language, instability of participatory opportunities, and deeper dynamics of participation. Our shared interest and commitment around children and youth participation in the SDG's intertwined in the discussions with stakeholders, yet we observed that the terminology used in practice is different from the language set out by and around the UN "*sustainable developmental goals*" such as in policy and research. This leads us to question the potential incongruence around formal, global, and academic terminology that may become disconnected from the lived realities of those arguably closer to the challenges of the global goals. This is further echoed in the theme of spoken languages that emerged in many of our exchanges and the fundamental importance of respecting and valuing socio-cultural meanings but also intergenerational nuances. An example of this is from the Director of Youth Invest (Victoria Falls) who shared her reflections of working in a context with more than 16 official languages and striving towards participation centered on youth cultural and communication preferences. Our central contention of prioritizing children and youth perspectives requires consideration of "language" in local contexts but also looking beyond "official" discourses to explore child-centric meanings and understandings. Through our discussions, we understand the importance of an active conceptual interpretation within and between multiple stakeholders, actors, and audiences including children and youth.

4.3. Fostering Child-Centric Innovation Through Collaboration

Creating child-focused cities demands an interdisciplinary strategy that merges knowledge and techniques from a range of fields including urban planning, architecture, social design, law, sociology, and social work. This collaborative approach is key to innovating and finding unique solutions that go beyond conventional disciplinary limits, acknowledging the intricacies of urban settings and the varied necessities of its youngest members. It emphasizes the critical role of connecting research with practical application to cultivate impactful and lasting urban spaces conducive to children's well-being. This research confirmed the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach that breaks down the barriers between spatial and social sciences, thereby deepening our engagement with children's urban experiences. Such methodological innovation is essential for gaining deeper insights into children's interactions with their urban environments, ensuring their perspectives are integral to urban planning and developmental initiatives. The initiative to incorporate varied contextual and disciplinary viewpoints underscores the complexity of facilitating children's active participation in urban environments. By exploring the connections between children's personal experiences and their engagement with the physical, relational, and structural facets of urban life, this research reveals the importance of a comprehensive analytical approach. Successfully addressing children's participation and inclusion demands a nuanced understanding that spans multiple knowledge areas and practices, recognizing the dynamic, interconnected nature of urban ecosystems and the pivotal role of collaboration in fostering child-centric innovation.

The UNCRC emphasizes the importance of protection and participation for children. However, social and systemic inequalities can hinder children's inclusion and participation. The concept of "mattering" is crucial to human experience (Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2022), and involving young people in planning and implementing projects can foster a sense of ownership and belonging. Examples of such projects include waste management, recycling, and creative hubs for youth, Junior and Youth Councils create valuable

opportunities to promote a sense of belonging and "mattering." These exchanges emphasize the essential role of participation and inclusion in the lives of children and youth and how it can help them achieve their well-being, safety, and access to social justice. Precarity intersected the various discussions around the broader context of support for projects who foregrounded children and youth participation casting a significant shadow on stability and sustainability. Municipality representatives described funding for their critical projects as resting within a dynamic nexus of financial streams which contributed to an uncertain and fragile landscape. This can impact those working at the interface between funding and service delivery, at times, creating a sense of futility such as when out-of-school youth disengaged from them after short term funded participatory projects ended. In our working paper related to the impact project (Cilliers et al., 2023) we paid tribute to the commitment, endurance, and stamina of the guardians and true heroes of children and youth inclusion who we were so privileged to learn from. Creative strategies were often employed to try to create sustainability within such unstable financial conditions. The inclusion of children and youth in the planning and oversight of projects sought to imbue a greater sense of agency and ownership. The Director of Greenline Africa (Victoria Falls) situated young users of the youth center as "owners, beneficiaries and participants" and Kwatu Trash 4 Cash (Livingstone) illustrated their inspiring youth-led recycling initiatives which prioritized investment and sustainability.

4.4. Advancing Child-Centric Urban Development

This analysis considered the deficiencies inherent in the term "child-friendly" as it applies to urban planning and governance, highlighting its failure to ensure adequate accountability and its potential to uphold a paternalistic perspective on childhood. The traditional view of children as passive recipients of adult-driven agendas is being challenged by a paradigm shift towards recognizing and valuing children as active participants in society. This shift is not just about focusing on children as individuals (child-focused), but also encompasses a broader perspective that considers "childhood" as a distinct phase of life characterized by unique needs, rights, and experiences, inextricably related to the sense of belonging in the world. This recognition aligns with emerging research suggesting perspective shift that children themselves do not necessarily see a dichotomy between their experiences and those of adults as sharply as adults do; instead, they perceive their "childhood" as an integral part of human existence, not separate or marginal. This involvement places children's needs and perspectives at the heart of urban development and governance strategies and the execution of the SDGs. Promoting "child-focused" urban development represents a move toward more deliberate and responsible planning efforts. This approach pledges to design urban spaces with a deep-seated commitment to meeting the unique rights and needs of children. Positioning children's active participation as a key priority in urban planning not only acknowledges their valuable contributions but also aims to establish cities that are truly inclusive, equitable, and sustainable for every child. This strategic shift underscores a dedication to fostering urban environments where children can thrive, and their voices heard and respected in the shaping of their communities.

4.5. Reframing Urban Governance to Amplify Children's Voices

This review underscores the importance of viewing the SDGs through the lens of children, advocating for a significant shift away from a sectorial adult-centric urban governance towards models that prioritize and enhance children's roles in sustainable development. It suggests that current urban governance frameworks often fail to fully capture or value the potential contributions of children, thereby necessitating a

fundamental transformation in policy and practice—one deriving from context-specific, everyday lived experience. This transformation involves not only recognizing but actively incorporating children's unique perspectives and experiences into the planning and implementation of urban development and governance initiatives. The call for this shift is grounded in the understanding that children possess invaluable insights into their living environments, which can greatly contribute to creating more sustainable, inclusive urban futures. The traditional "one-size-fits-all" approaches are challenged by the diverse, lived experiences of child/youthhood, highlighting the need for urban planning and governance models to become more adaptable and responsive to the varied needs of younger populations. By advocating for policies and practices that are more inclusive of children's voices, this finding emphasizes the critical need for urban governance to evolve. Such evolution entails the integration of children's rights, needs, and voices as foundational elements in the conceptualization and realization of the SDGs. This approach not only acknowledges the unique contributions children can make but also ensures that urban governance efforts are more aligned with achieving meaningful outcomes in the immediate everyday life experiences and expand the benefits to more community members.

4.6. Participation as a (Lifelong) Process

The essence of child and youth participation is its ongoing nature, which necessitates a shift towards sustained engagement and long-term strategies. This approach recognizes the significant impact of temporary funding and short-lived projects on the continuity of youth involvement in societal and developmental efforts. Economic challenges often stand as barriers limiting young individuals' ability to actively participate. Highlighting successful initiatives like Kwatu Cash 4 Trash and Olga's the Italian Corner (both Livingstone) and Greenline Africa and Youth Invest (both Victoria Falls), this research highlighted the transformative potential of creating economic opportunities that empower children and youth, fostering their meaningful engagement in community development. A nuanced aspect of participation, often overlooked, is the skepticism surrounding "participation" activities that seem more adult-driven than genuinely inclusive. True participation demands deep commitment and belief in the capabilities of the younger generation, acknowledging that participation spans from impactful involvement in broad societal issues to more localized, personal experiences that affirm their significance. These understandings position participation not just as an event but as a continuum, planting seeds that may flourish throughout an individual's life. Challenges related to funding and stakeholder interests highlight the precarious nature of youth participation projects, stressing the importance of embedding young people in project development, management, and income generation for sustainability. The UNCRC underscores participation, protection, and provision as foundational rights, emphasizing that participation extends beyond a mere obligation; it is a pathway to realizing protective rights and fostering inclusion. This perspective advocates for an inclusive model of governance where children's and youths' contributions are valued, not just for the immediacy of their impact but for their potential to inform and enrich social and environmental initiatives over time. By recognizing participation as a lifelong process, we acknowledge the diverse experiences of children and youth, emphasizing the need for strategies that support their continuous engagement and growth.

4.7. Establishing Child-Focused Cities as a Universal Right

The connection between the UNCRC and the SDGs highlights the essential role of children's rights in achieving sustainable development. Article 12 of the UNCRC which advocates for the right of children to be

heard, is reflected in the SDGs through their commitment to participatory decision-making. Yet, actualizing these rights in the pursuit of sustainable development presents complexities that require a thoughtful approach to engaging children and youth. Experiences from diverse contexts illuminate the importance of understanding the spaces where children and youth spend their time, notably schools, which serve as crucial safe havens. Concerns arise for those disengaged from the education system, particularly young people aged 17–21, who find themselves at a heightened risk of exclusion and vulnerability. The ways in which out-of-school youth seek to create their own spaces of belonging, sometimes engaging in risky behaviors, underscores the need for inclusive strategies that enhance safety while addressing the broader issues that marginalize them. Central to the SDGs is the acknowledgment that the needs and vulnerabilities of children must be at the forefront of urban planning, development and governance efforts. Child-focused cities, therefore, emerge as not just an ideal but a fundamental right, advocating for urban environments designed with the safety, accessibility, and sustainability necessary to support every child's development. Despite widespread agreement on the value of prioritizing children in urban development, significant efforts are required to embed this principle into the operational priorities of local governments worldwide. This research advocates for the CFCAF as a tool to guide local authorities, municipalities, and policymakers in integrating children's perspectives into urban planning. By placing children at the center of spatial decision-making, cities can ensure that their development strategies are truly inclusive, offering safe, accessible, and sustainable environments for all community members. Establishing child-focused urban environments as a universal right is a critical step towards realizing the comprehensive vision of the SDGs and UNCRC, ensuring that children's rights and needs are integral to the fabric of urban life.

5. Recommendations: Towards a Global CFCAF

The rich and varied discussions with stakeholders in the municipalities contributed to a synthesis of reflections that lay the foundations for our conceptual CFCAF (Figure 1). Through interdisciplinary collaboration, we developed a set of strategic recommendations with the aim of developing more child focused urban development and sustainability more broadly. To illustrate our sense making we hope to foreground the reflections of representatives we met during our project that underpin our key recommendations.

Table 1 outlines strategic recommendations drawn from the thematic analysis of this research, focused on advancing child-focused urban development and broader sustainability. By addressing key areas such as participation, protection, empowerment, and interdisciplinary collaboration, these recommendations seek to establish a comprehensive approach that ensures urban environments are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable for all, particularly for the younger generation. These recommendations encapsulate the collective insights derived from extensive research and discussions, marking a pivotal step towards reimagining and reshaping our cities in alignment with the needs and rights of children and youth worldwide.

The recommendations table serves as a blueprint for action, emphasizing the necessity of integrating children's perspectives as both a protective measure and a means to empower them as agents of change. It highlights the importance of intergenerational and lifelong participation, underscoring the role of local governance, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the establishment of child-focused urban environments as a universal right. These strategic directions are not only vital for the realization of the SDGs but also crucial for advancing social justice, equity, and sustainability within urban ecosystems. In parallel to providing strategic orientation for cross-sectoral collaboration in delivering a child-focused agenda through urban planning and

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the CFCAF: Understanding the multi-dimensional and inextricably world-bound experience of child/youthhood at the interplay of all 17 SDGs at once.

Table 1. Recommendations towards a Global CFCAF.

Focus	Recommendation	Description
Prioritizing children and youth perspectives in decision-making approaches	Recognize meaningful participation as both protection and empowerment	Emphasize participation as a means to wellbeing, safety, and social justice, advocating for strategies rooted in local socio-cultural understandings.
	Foster intergenerational and lifelong engagement	Encourage ongoing, intergenerational participation and partnerships that include significant roles for NGOs and community organizations.
Amplifying youth voices in urban development and sustainability	Address the disproportionate impact of global challenges on children	Integrate children's perspectives in addressing SDGs and mitigating violence, recognizing the importance of their contributions.
	Strengthen local government as a conduit for child-focused governance	Utilize local governments as key facilitators for integrating children's voices in urban planning, with a focus on context-specific responses.
	Promote interdisciplinary collaboration	Advocate for interdisciplinary collaboration between research and practice to enrich strategies for children's participation in urban environments.
	Underline the value of participation for sustainable urban futures	Highlight the importance of children's participation and protection as foundational linkages to rights under the UNCRC and critical for sustainable urban development.

local governance, these recommendations open space—rather than close—for an interpretative and mediated dialogue between global aspirations and local challenges while securing and amplifying those traditionally silenced voices in urban development.

The CFCAF presents an unprecedented opportunity to bridge the gap between theoretical aspirations and practical implementations. It calls upon urban planners, policymakers, community leaders, and stakeholders at all levels to embrace this child-centric approach, ensuring that our cities become not only habitable but truly nurturing spaces for the youngest members of society. This framework stands as a testament to the power of collaboration and innovation, setting the stage for an open-end transformative journey towards cities that genuinely prioritize and reflect the needs, aspirations, and rights of children and youth. By placing children at the heart of urban planning and development, we not only safeguard their present but also secure a more inclusive, sustainable, and equitable future for generations to come.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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