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From Local Voices to Global Impact.
Crafting MEL for Youth-Led Placemaking in Cross-Country Programmes

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Abstract
Urban youth-led placemaking programmes present unique challenges in Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) due to the diverse socio-political and cultural contexts in which they operate. Standardised evaluation frameworks often struggle to accommodate these variations, making it even more complex when working across multiple countries with distinct youth realities. This article advocates an adaptive MEL framework, drawing on the S^2Cities programme—a cross-country initiative integrating participatory methods with robust evaluation strategies. Key lessons underscore the necessity of real-time adaptation to local youth experiences and the importance of balancing standardised evaluation with localised indicators, and the critical role of young people as co-creators in MEL processes. These insights underscore the importance of a flexible yet rigorous framework that captures the evolving nature of urban dynamics. Embedding adaptability into MEL enables policymakers and practitioners to enhance the impact, relevance, and responsiveness of placemaking initiatives tailored to youth engagement.

Keywords: adaptive MEL, youth participation, placemaking, cross-country programmes, participatory evaluation, urban safety, community-driven change

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Introduction

Placemaking is a dynamic, participatory approach to urban development that seeks to create inclusive, safe, and engaging public spaces. It is a multifaceted strategy for planning, designing, and managing public spaces that leverages local resources, inspiration, and community potential to foster urban vitality and well-being. Placemaking focuses on transforming underutilised spaces into vibrant, functional places that encourage social interaction and improve quality of life—emphasising "creating a place, not just a design" (AUGÉ, 1995; Houghton, 2015). The term "placemaking" emerged in the 1970s among landscape architects, urban planners, and designers to describe the process of shaping plazas, parks, and streets into attractive, engaging spaces (Pierce, 2010).

Public spaces play a crucial role in urban development, and their absence can hinder community life (Low, 2005). More broadly, placemaking is an economic development strategy focused on "creating high-quality places where people want to live, work, play, and learn" (Wyckoff, 2014). However, measuring the success of placemaking initiatives is inherently challenging, as urban environments are shaped by evolving social, economic, and political factors. Traditional Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) frameworks, often rigid and standardised, fail to capture the nuances of diverse localities. This is particularly evident in cross-country programmes, where a one-size-fits-all evaluation model does not account for regional variations.

Safe and Sound Cities (S^2Cities) is a global initiative led by the Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation, with support from Fondation Botnar. This initiative focuses on enhancing urban safety and well-being for young people in secondary cities in the Global South. Grounded in placemaking principles, S^2Cities aims to transform urban spaces into vibrant, inclusive, and secure environments that encourage community engagement and social cohesion among youth. The programme empowers young people as key stakeholders in urban development through participatory engagement and evidence-based policymaking. S^2Cities promotes inclusive, youth-led interventions that tackle the root causes of insecurity in public spaces. Additionally, it serves as a platform for knowledge exchange, promoting cross-city learning and adapting best practices to various urban contexts.

The S^2Cities programme has faced several challenges in systematically collecting evidence on change from both local and global perspectives. The significant heterogeneity among different geographies and innovative solutions for placemaking has made the standard MEL framework inadequate for transitioning from local evidence to global impact. To address this issue, S^2Cities developed, together with Universidad EAFIT, an adaptive Integrated Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (iMEL) framework that emphasises flexibility, participatory engagement, and evidence-based learning, which is being implemented in various cities across Colombia, Indonesia, Ecuador, and the Philippines. This article highlights the main challenges and lessons learned from the development of this MEL framework that is recognised for its effectiveness.

The article is structured as follows: First, we discuss the necessity of adaptive MEL in youth-led placemaking. Next, we introduce S^2Cities and explore how it addresses the challenges and opportunities of implementing MEL frameworks in cross-country settings, highlighting the importance of context-sensitive indicators and participatory approaches. Finally, we conclude with reflections on the future of adaptive MEL in placemaking and provide policy recommendations for broader implementation.

The Need for an Adaptive MEL Framework in a cross-country Youth-led Placemaking Initiative

Cross-country programmes that involve youth-led placemaking initiatives encounter several recurring challenges when developing effective MEL frameworks. One fundamental challenge is navigating diverse socio-political landscapes, where governance structures, regulatory environments, and levels of youth participation vary significantly across different countries and cities. Placemaking itself is inherently complex, shaped by dynamic interactions among multiple stakeholders, evolving urban conditions, and deeply localised socio-political influences, making the development of universal evaluation tools inherently difficult (Healey, 2007). Standard MEL approaches often struggle to fully capture these processes' fluidity and contextual nature, especially when they privilege pre-defined indicators over emergent, locally driven outcomes (Jacobs, 1961; Talen, 1999). As Uffer (2019) notes, evaluation frameworks applied across diverse cities risk oversimplifying the nuanced interplay between formal governance systems, informal youth networks, and spatial justice claims, which are central to understanding placemaking outcomes in varying contexts.

Another persistent challenge is balancing the need for standardised evaluation methods—essential for cross-country comparability—with the importance of localised indicators that capture distinct cultural, social, and spatial realities. Overly rigid indicators risk misrepresenting local dynamics, marginalising critical social processes, and inadvertently disempowering youth and community voices in the evaluation process (Bamberger, Rao & Woolcock, 2010). Effective cross-country MEL requires frameworks that can generate comparative insights while remaining adaptable enough to reflect site-specific transformations (Guijt, 2014). In addition, ensuring meaningful and sustained youth engagement in MEL processes poses a consistent challenge. Youth capacity varies widely across contexts, influenced by education systems, institutional supports, and cultural norms around youth agency. In many cases, youth are still framed as passive beneficiaries rather than co-creators of knowledge, limiting their ability to meaningfully shape both interventions and evaluation processes (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Conventional MEL approaches often employ top-down data collection, excluding the lived experiences and evolving aspirations of young participants (Chambers, 1997).

While adaptive MEL frameworks are often developed in response to operational needs, they also carry profound political and epistemic implications. In cross-country placemaking initiatives, where youth engagement intersects with governance asymmetries and socio-spatial exclusion, MEL is not just a measurement tool but a potential enabler of spatial justice (Soja, 2010). Through participatory methods, adaptive MEL can redistribute whose voices count in knowledge production about cities, challenging extractive or top-down evaluation models that often reinforce dominant planning narratives.

Traditional MEL frameworks tend to prioritise easily quantifiable outputs, such as participant counts or completed activities, while overlooking more subtle yet essential transformations in social cohesion, youth agency, and spatial relationships (Patton, 2011). They frequently lack mechanisms to distil localised learnings into cohesive global narratives, missing the opportunity to capture how grounded, community-led innovations contribute to broader urban change across geographies (Pettit et al., 2019). In this sense, adaptive MEL approaches grounded in participatory design and youth leadership function as mechanisms of urban epistemic justice, surfacing plural understandings of space and

change, particularly when youth and other marginalised groups co-define what is measured, how, and why (Sandercock, 2003; Simone, 2004).

By integrating storytelling, digital documentation, and co-created indicators, participatory MEL fosters inclusivity, enhances the legitimacy of findings, and supports youth capacity development in ways that move beyond instrumental evaluation. As Cousins and Whitmore (1998) and Torre and Fine (2006) show, this model of MEL becomes a political and pedagogical tool, enhancing relevance and ownership. Feminist urbanism adds another critical layer. Kern (2020) and Sánchez de Madariaga (2013) emphasise that public spaces are experienced differently across gender, age, and care responsibilities. An adaptive MEL system that incorporates tools such as participatory mapping, affective indicators, or visual storytelling can reveal differentiated experiences of space, especially when informed by the perspectives of girls, young women, and LGBTQ+ youth.

Understanding MEL through these theoretical lenses not only helps improve programmes but also contributes to democratising the urban development process itself. Grounding MEL in critical youth studies (Cahill, 2007) repositions young people as co-producers of urban knowledge and policy, thereby repositioning them as co-producers of urban knowledge and policy. The co-creative nature of the S^{2}Cities iMEL framework, where youth participate in designing indicators, interpreting results, and generating feedback, reflects a broader turn toward participatory governance and transformative urbanism.

S^{2}Cities Adaptive iMEL Framework

The S^{2}Cities adaptive iMEL framework integrates research-based, action-oriented, and youth-participatory approaches into a cohesive system designed to assess programme impacts and guide adaptive action. This framework draws from established theories of change and evaluation literature, blending conventional intervention evaluation techniques—such as counterfactual analysis and theory-based evaluation—with Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods, which centre local and youth voices in both data collection and interpretation (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Grounded in systems thinking and adaptive learning principles, the S^{2}Cities framework recognises the dynamic interaction between young people, socio-political structures and evolving urban conditions (Patton, 2011; Guijt, 2014). It is therefore designed to respond to diverse contexts and types of projects in different contexts.

The framework's adaptability is crucial for comparing interventions while respecting local specificities. In Ecuador and Indonesia, interventions have focused more on redefining public spaces through physical interventions led by young people with the support of public actors, while in Naga (Philippines), interventions have been more technological and related to the use of AI to prevent illegal parking in public areas and emergency posts for security. In Colombia, interventions have been very varied, ranging from the re-signification of public spaces to the consolidation of inter-institutional and inter-sectoral thematic working groups on human rights. These diverse approaches required iMEL to adapt to both infrastructure-oriented and governance-oriented interventions, ensuring that the framework could compare results across cities while respecting local specificities.

By combining structured impact assessments with community-driven inquiry, the framework captures both measurable programme outcomes and emergent social, spatial, and governance transformations that youth placemaking efforts generate (Torre & Fine, 2006). This hybrid approach enhances the rigour of impact measurement and fosters youth ownership of MEL activities, strengthens local capacity, and promotes the continuous co-creation of knowledge between youth, communities, and programme implementers (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). The following figure illustrates the framework's core components and adaptive cycle, highlighting the integration of participatory processes, contextual adaptability, and causal inference strategies into a unified MEL system.

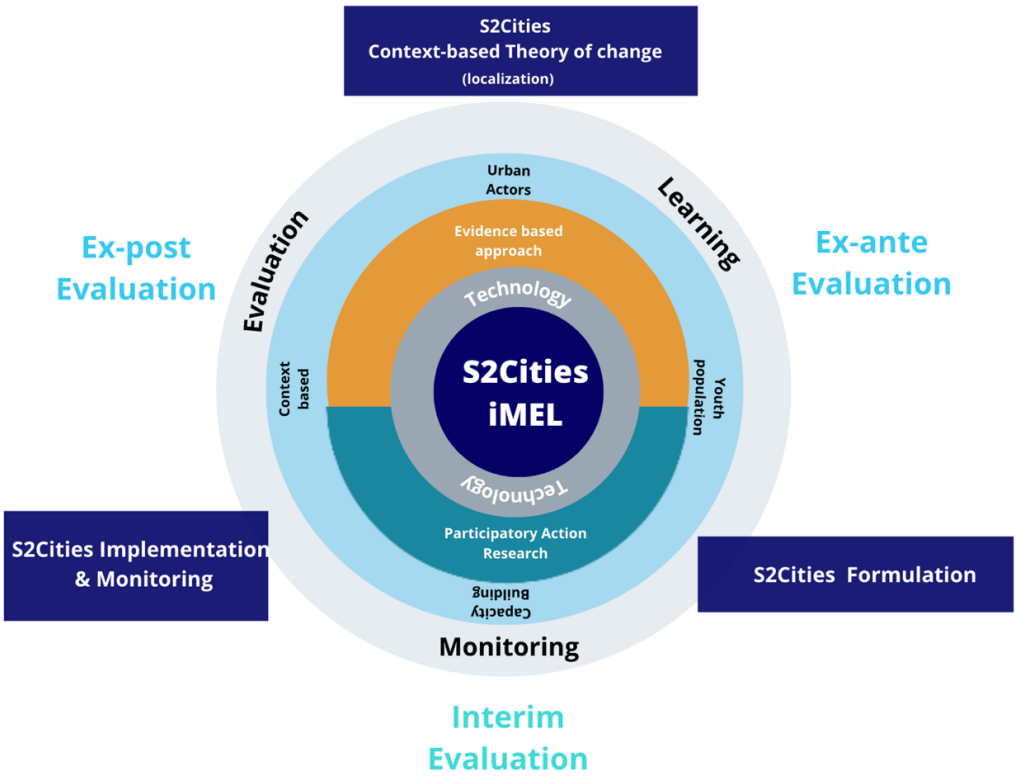

Figure 1: S²Cities iMEL Framework (2023).
Source: Authors own elaboration.

Built on systems thinking, the S²Cities iMEL Framework consists of three interconnected components that collectively guide the MEL process throughout the programme lifecycle with participatory action research, context-based indicators, and youth engagement at the core. The concentric layers represent the integration of youth and local urban actors' voices in the MEL process, evidence-based approaches, and technology-enabled tools.

The first component, monitoring, systematically tracks programme progress based on each city's local theory of change (ToC) aligned with the programme's global theory of

change. This ToC is developed in collaboration with local stakeholders and local implementers, ensuring that the logic model reflects local priorities, contextual complexities, and visions for change driven by young people and city actors. This monitoring component provides real-time information on implementation to identify emerging challenges and make timely adjustments to improve the programme's responsiveness and effectiveness (Aquilino et al., 2019). This monitoring approach takes urban complexity into account by incorporating three key principles: real-time learning, through regular feedback loops that support continuous adaptation to evolving urban conditions (Patton, 2011); context-sensitive evaluation, through the development of customised indicators that capture local social, spatial and cultural realities, rather than relying solely on standardised metrics (Sandercock, 2003); and iterative strategy adjustments, which ensure that evaluation results are directly reflected in adaptive programming, allowing for mid-course corrections and incorporating community knowledge into the design of ongoing programmes (Bryson, 2018).

In the S^2Cities model, the joint design of the adaptive MEL framework has been based on participatory processes in all S^2Cities cities. For example, in Envigado (Colombia), young participants jointly created indicators to assess the safety of urban environments through a series of workshops combining storytelling, mapping and collective sense-making, where local government actors and community leaders joined these sessions to validate the relevance of the measures and discuss how the data could serve as a basis for decision-making at the municipal level. In Bandung (Indonesia), the process incorporated video diaries made by young people as the main source of data, which were then analysed jointly with municipal planners to interpret the results and integrate them into the redesign of an abandoned park within the city.

The second component, learning, is the adaptive core of S^2Cities' iMEL framework, ensuring that monitoring and evaluation are not static reporting exercises, but dynamic processes of reflection and change. This component emphasises the creation of structured opportunities for young people, local actors and programme partners to collectively reflect on the results achieved and lessons learned, and to create solutions that respond to constantly evolving urban realities.

In practice, learning moments are integrated into all phases of the project. For example, global learning workshops are held annually where programme actors collectively reflect on the challenges faced, the solutions that worked, what we learned and how we can turn those learnings into improvement actions. In addition to these spaces at the local level, implementing partners also develop spaces for reflection and learning. For example, in Naga (Philippines), iterative learning sessions were held between innovation cycles to integrate feedback from young people and academics on AI-based security solutions and refine their design before scaling them up. Similarly, the S^2Cities Global Learning Network has enabled horizontal exchange between partner cities. This peer-to-peer learning approach allows knowledge generated in one context—such as youth-led governance approaches in Envigado or participatory mapping tools in Bandung—to serve as a basis for practices in other cities in the network, thereby strengthening the collective empirical base and trust in the evaluation process (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

The final component, impact evaluation, serves as an ex-post process, focusing on measuring and explaining the causal pathways between programme interventions and observed outcomes, with particular attention to understanding both intended and

unintended effects (White, 2010). Impact Evaluation supports evidence-informed policymaking by comparing actual results against the programme's initial objectives. It ensures that lessons learned are actively translated into future programme and policy design, reinforcing accountability and continuous learning loops (Stern et al., 2012). The impact is not a static outcome, but a long-term process shaped by the evolving contributions of youth and local communities. In S^{2}Cities, we have actively explored innovative methods to ensure youth are placed at the centre of this impact pathway. We recognise that building youth leadership capacity and embedding youth agency into every stage of the MEL process helps sustain long-term change. Through this experience, we have learned that thinking beyond conventional evaluation approaches and actively listening to youth voices is the most effective way to identify and nurture the seeds of impact.

Each component within the S^{2}Cities iMEL Framework places significant demands on the processes of data collection, analysis, and synthesis. Effective MEL requires the capacity to gather diverse forms of data, process them efficiently, and analyse them meaningfully to generate actionable insights. In the context of a participatory approach, the types of data collected are as varied and complex as the social, cultural, and spatial dynamics they aim to capture — ranging from youth-generated content and community narratives to quantitative indicators and thematic evaluations. As part of its adaptive MEL model, S^{2}Cities developed EMMA, a technology-based solution designed to enhance the programme's learning cycle by enabling real-time data integration, cross-country knowledge exchange, and responsive decision-making. EMMA functions as a Generative AI-powered knowledge management system, built to process, analyse, and disseminate both quantitative and qualitative data collected across diverse urban and social contexts where S^{2}Cities operates. By combining machine learning capabilities with semantic search and natural language processing, EMMA facilitates on-demand access to localised evidence, supports comparative analysis across programme sites, and fosters adaptive learning processes that are essential for navigating the complex, evolving environments of youth-led placemaking initiatives.

In addition to serving as an interactive chatbot, EMMA's infrastructure incorporates real-time data analytics, customizable query functions, and language translation tools, ensuring wider accessibility for both local and global stakeholders. EMMA enhances the creative and adaptive dimensions of MEL by integrating participatory data collection (e.g., youth-generated content) with innovative features such as generative artificial intelligence and augmented reality tools, which help visualise both programme impacts and youth-led solutions in urban spaces. However, the risks and ethical issues involved in using AI to process sensitive data such as videos and personal testimonies are recognised. To address this, the iMEL framework includes an Ethical Youth Participation Policy that prioritises data security and privacy through methods such as manual data cleaning, anonymisation and the removal of sensitive identifiers for subsequent analysis with EMMA. These safeguards ensure that the voices of young people and local communities are preserved in the knowledge base, promoting transparency throughout the data collection, processing, and analysis cycle.

Conclusions

The iMEL S^{2}Cities framework has been a continuous learning journey, evolving through hands-on experience, trial and error, and ongoing reflection. As with any innovative process, we encountered challenges and made mistakes, but each misstep became an opportunity for deeper learning and refinement. If we were to launch a new Youth-Led Placemaking in Cross-Country Programmes initiative today, several key lessons would guide its development and shape its MEL approach:

- There is no one-size-fits-all solution — Understanding the unique capacities, needs, and contextual realities of each community, stakeholder group, and youth population is essential. Co-designing MEL processes in partnership with local actors, especially young people, ensures that evaluation frameworks are not only culturally and contextually relevant, but also foster local trust in the process.
- Youth populations think and act beyond conventional boundaries — Youth-led innovation often emerges from creative, informal, and non-linear processes that do not fit neatly into traditional evaluation frameworks. To capture the full spectrum of youth-driven approaches, MEL tools, and theoretical frameworks must evolve, becoming more adaptive, flexible, and responsive to the fluid and creative nature of youth placemaking efforts.
- Technology is a key enabler — Generative AI, augmented reality, and participatory digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities to bridge the gap between localized, youth-led innovation and the need for cross-country comparability and global learning. These tools can enhance data collection, facilitate real-time learning, and support comparative analysis, ensuring local insights contribute to a broader, globally connected knowledge base on youth-led placemaking.

While the adaptive MEL framework presented here offers multiple advantages for meaningful MEL at the local and global levels, several risks and limitations should be considered. Participatory MEL processes are not immune to power asymmetries, especially when conducted remotely, and ensuring that all youth voices are valued equally requires continuous reflexivity and facilitation to adjust, when necessary, as well as consolidated work with local links. Additionally, the use of digital tools and AI-based elements also raises ethical questions and highlights the persistence of digital divides that can limit inclusivity, for example, in rural contexts or those with unstable connectivity. To address these challenges, programmes must ensure minimum capacities that enable young people and relevant stakeholders to participate in the design of indicators and instruments, as well as in data collection and processing, supported by clear ethical guidelines and the use of hybrid approaches that combine low- and high-tech solutions to minimise barriers to participation.

Effective programmes must embed mechanisms for continuous reflection, real-time adaptation, and open dialogue at every stage, allowing MEL processes to evolve organically alongside shifting social, political, and spatial dynamics. In cross-country initiatives, the value of peer learning and horizontal exchange cannot be overstated—creating structured opportunities for youth participants, city partners, and practitioners to share experiences, co-analyse challenges, and co-create innovative solutions enriches both local learning processes and the broader programmatic knowledge base. These

collaborative, cross-context learning pathways enhance not only the quality and relevance of evaluation data but also contribute to a growing global body of knowledge on youth-led placemaking, helping future programmes draw on real-world lessons to better navigate the complex realities of urban transformation driven by young people.

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