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Building Momentum for Youth-Driven Public Space Programmes.
The Role of Creative Communication in S²Cities

Vanishree Herlekar
City Collab, India
vani@citycollab.in

Abstract
The Safe and Sound Cities (S²Cities) Programme is a global initiative aimed at improving the safety and well-being of young people in urban environments. Through collaboration with local governments, institutions, the private sector, community actors, and youth, S²Cities adopts a systems-wide approach to creating safer, more inclusive cities.
Phase I of the programme (2021–2024) was implemented in six cities across Colombia, Ecuador, Indonesia, and the Philippines, catalysing 28 youth-led initiatives, addressing each city's unique challenges and opportunities, and empowering young people to contribute to the transformation of their urban environments.
Communication has been integral to the programme's success, playing a critical role in amplifying its innovative approaches, tangible impact, and transformative potential. Locally, creative communication strategies have engaged young people and mobilized support from decision-makers and communities, facilitating the implementation of on-ground initiatives. Globally, strategic communication has attracted funding, built trust, and forged partnerships, enabling the programme's expansion to new cities and amplifying its impact.

Keywords: communication, young people, global campaign, collaboration, youth leadership, public space, social cohesion, urban transformation

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Background of the S²Cities Programme

The Safe and Sound Cities (S²Cities) Programme is a global initiative designed to improve the safety and well-being of young people in urban environments. Targeting youth aged 15 to 24, the programme empowers them to engage meaningfully in ideating and implementing solutions to address safety and inclusivity challenges.

Phase I of the programme, spanning three years (2021–2024), was implemented in six cities across Colombia, Ecuador, Indonesia, and the Philippines engaging a total of 10,397 young people (GIB Foundation, 2025). Led by the Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation, the programme fosters collaboration among local governments, institutions, the private sector, community actors, and young people, adopting a systems-wide approach that influences key factors such as policy, practice, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models—all aimed at creating safer urban environments for and by young people. Communication has played a pivotal role in advancing these goals by aligning diverse partners with the broader theory of change, amplifying the programme's innovative approaches to systems change, its tangible impact, and its transformative potential to foster safer and more inclusive cities.

The programme's communication strategy focuses on (1) developing a consistent brand and narrative, (2) adopting creative approaches to youth engagement, (3) amplifying authentic youth voices, (4) creating evidence-based communication to support knowledge sharing, fundraising, and policy advocacy, and (5) leveraging youth-led digital storytelling. Through these efforts, the programme has secured both local and global support while building momentum around its vision. Most importantly, it has empowered young people by providing platforms to share their experiences, learn from one another, and engage meaningfully with communities, decision-makers, and global audiences, cultivating a collaborative and inspiring network for youth-driven urban transformation.

How Communication is Organised within S²Cities

Communication has been integral to the programme's design, playing a critical role in building momentum for youth-driven approaches to revitalising public spaces and creating safer, more inclusive urban environments for young people at both local and global levels.

At the local level, communication efforts have been pivotal in engaging young people in creative ways, generating enthusiasm about the programme's potential to improve urban safety. These efforts have also mobilised support from decision-makers and communities, facilitating the implementation of on-ground initiatives that provide platforms for meaningful youth engagement. Additionally, communication has been instrumental in rallying local private sector institutions, think tanks, and NGOs to advance knowledge and drive action on youth safety issues.

At the global level, communication has played a key role in creating recognition and awareness of the S²Cities programme among diverse stakeholders. It has supported the programme's expansion to multiple cities by attracting funding and forging strategic partnerships. The overarching goals of global communications include amplifying youth voices in the discourse on urban safety and planning and showcasing the unique contributions of the S²Cities programme in strengthening the capacities of young people and public actors to drive and sustain change toward just, inclusive, and safe cities.

Lessons from Phase 1: Communication Strategies for Impact and Scale

S²Cities aims to achieve impact at scale by institutionalising and sustaining the momentum of youth-driven initiatives in programme cities beyond the programme's duration, while also extending its influence globally through knowledge sharing and advocacy. In this context, communication is not merely a supporting function but a vital enabler of success. It plays a crucial role in articulating the programme's vision, building trust with local communities, driving action among diverse stakeholders, and inspiring partnerships at a global level. Furthermore, it ensures that the programme's lessons and achievements are disseminated widely, shaping policies and practices in urban development.

The first phase of S²Cities has provided valuable insights into how strategic communication can effectively support these objectives. Five key strategies have emerged as instrumental in driving success:

1. *Developing a Consistent Brand and Narrative for the Programme*
   For a programme of this scale, spanning multiple cities and geographies, consistent branding, visuals, and narratives have been pivotal in building a strong global identity. From its inception, the programme prioritized youth involvement, even in the design of its brand and identity. The programme's name, *Safe and Sound Cities (S²Cities)*, was suggested by Mohamed Abulfadl, a 16-year-old from Egypt, through an international competition for young people. The programme logo and branding were collaboratively developed with feedback from partners to reflect the programme's core values of youthfulness, inclusivity and collaboration. Key messages such as 'co-creation,' 'meaningful youth engagement,' and 'youth-driven action' have been consistently emphasised across platforms and publications. A unified branding guideline was also shared with cities and partners to establish a recognisable identity and ensure consistency in communication across channels. This approach allowed cities to present themselves as part of a larger global initiative while maintaining local relevance. For instance, partners in Colombia creatively adapted the branding by playing on the term "S²City" as "es tu city," meaning "it's your city" in Spanish. This adaptation reinforced the programme's message of inclusivity and connection to local contexts.

Figure 1. The Official Programme Logo and its Adaptable Branding for Partner Cities

2. *Adopting Creative Approaches to Engagement*
   Since young people are the primary stakeholders of the S²Cities programme, the programme adopts creative strategies to enrich communications and convey messages in a creative and understandable way that resonates with young people.

At the local level, partners employed innovative methods to engage youth and build awareness about the programme's potential to improve urban safety. For instance, in Envigado, Fundación Mi Sangre used the "Theatre of Presence", a role-playing activity that encouraged young participants to view social issues through the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. This method, grounded in subjective system observation, enabled youth fellows to empathise with different societal roles, fostering a deeper understanding of the systems influencing urban safety.

Figure 2. Theatre of Presence, a role play exercise used in Envigado, Colombia to inspire young people to understand the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Image credit: Fundación Mi Sangre

Data collection and visualisation also played a significant role in the programme's engagement strategy. In Bandung, participatory mapping was used as a powerful tool to present safety issues visually, creating an engaging and universally understandable medium of communication. Similarly, in Envigado, a "Map of Actors" was developed to identify synergies between the proposals of young people and the interests of other stakeholders, such as government bodies, NGOs, and private sector actors. These visual tools became instrumental in developing a shared understanding among diverse stakeholders and promoting collaboration on urban safety solutions.
Other innovative engagement tools included Huasipichanga's "Reverse Periscope", an approach used in Cuenca and Ambato to encourage stakeholders to view urban challenges from a child's perspective. This unique methodology brought fresh insights and new perspectives to urban planning and design.

Figure 3. Revere Periscope, a creative communication tool to bring attention to urban design challenges from a child's perspective. Image credit: Huasipichanga

At the global level, the programme leveraged Virtual Reality (VR) technology to facilitate a global convening of partners and stakeholders. This immersive digital environment enabled dynamic discussions, cross-regional learning, and multi-sectoral collaboration. Local partners were also given the opportunity to design virtual booths, showcasing their work, youth-led initiatives, and the impact of the programme within their cities. Creative communication has been instrumental in bridging gaps between communities, governments, and organisations, enabling them to collectively address urban challenges. These efforts have strengthened the programme's ability to drive meaningful change in urban environments, making cities safer, more inclusive, and more youth centred.

3. Amplifying Authentic Youth Voices

One of the core principles of the S^2Cities programme's communication strategy has been to centre and amplify authentic youth voices across its knowledge creation and outreach efforts. This approach recognises young people not just as beneficiaries but as active contributors and changemakers, capable of driving meaningful urban transformation.

The programme's website features blogs authored by youth participants, providing them with a platform to share their insights and reflections in their own words. These first-hand accounts bring unique perspectives to urban challenges and inspire other young people to take action. Social media campaigns have also been a powerful tool for spotlighting youth voices, featuring their ideas, initiatives, and successes. These campaigns have extended the reach of youth narratives to diverse audiences, creating awareness and building support for youth-driven urban change.

Figure 4 and 5. S²Cities Global Convening in Virtual Reality

Global events like the World Urban Forum (WUF12) in Cairo, Egypt, have been pivotal in amplifying youth voices on an international stage. Fourteen young leaders from six programme cities took centre stage to share personal stories and insights from their experiences leading initiatives in their communities. These young changemakers engaged directly with global leaders, government officials, experts, and fellow youth, strengthening their networks and garnering support for their vision of safer, more inclusive, and sustainable cities.

Figure 6. Young People from S²Cities take the stage at the WUF 12 in Cairo.

This intentional centring of youth voices empowers young participants and redefines traditional narratives in urban development. It positions youth as indispensable stakeholders in shaping just, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments, demonstrating their potential to lead transformative change.

4. Creating Evidence-Based Communication for Fundraising and Policy Advocacy

The S²Cities programme integrates a robust integrated monitoring, evaluation, and learning (iMEL) component to generate insights and assess its impact. A critical function of strategic communication within the programme has been to translate this wealth of data into compelling materials designed for diverse audiences.

For instance, the Impact Report provides a comprehensive analysis of how the programme has enhanced urban safety and youth engagement from 2021 to 2023. It highlights achievements and lessons learned while showcasing youth initiatives in an accessible and engaging format. Another notable outcome is the Policy Brief: Empowering Young People to Build Alliances with Urban Actors to Create Safer Cities, which offers evidence-based recommendations to empower young people in forming partnerships with urban stakeholders to create safer cities. It presents case studies and

insights that emphasise the significance of youth participation in decision-making, the adoption of contextualised approaches to urban safety, and the importance of strengthening collaborations between young people and other urban actors.
In addition to these key publications, the programme contributed more broadly to policy discourse around youth-focused urban development through 499 learning events and publications during Phase 1(GIB Foundation, 2025).
By translating complex data into actionable insights, these evidence-driven knowledge and communication products effectively showcase the programme's value to stakeholders and decision-makers. They serve as powerful tools to inspire investment, align with policy priorities, and drive progress toward the programme's overarching goal of fostering safer, more inclusive, and youth-centred urban environments.

5. Leveraging Digital Storytelling

Young people, as active users of digital technology, are uniquely positioned to harness digital tools for storytelling. The S^2Cities programme leverages this potential by integrating multimedia elements like videos, graphics, and audio into its storytelling efforts. Through engaging social media content, the programme fosters knowledge-sharing, sparks imagination, and inspires action. Its vibrant online presence—featuring youth voices, knowledge resources, and programme insights—has cultivated an engaged community across platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Figure 7. Digital media training for young people in Envigado. Image credit: Fundación Mi Sangre

Figure 8. The S²Cities social media channels serve as dynamic platforms for sharing programme insights and amplifying youth voices.

Youth participants are actively using social media to build awareness and support for their initiatives, with several youth-led projects like Bibliorío (Cuenca), Kami Ruang Ketiga (Bandung), RenovArte (Ambato), More than Pikes (Envigado), among others, establishing their own independent presence. The programme further utilises multimedia tools, such as videos and podcasts, to demonstrate impact, foster communities of like-minded individuals, and facilitate the exchange of ideas and expressions through virtual networks. The programme had built a strong community of over 1,600 engaged followers across its digital platforms. This dynamic digital engagement continues to amplify the programme's reach and influence.

Conclusion

Communication has played a pivotal role in the S²Cities programme, translating objectives, insights, and learnings into compelling narratives that have elevated the programme's global visibility. It has not only increased awareness but also unlocked new opportunities for partnerships and funding, while successfully amplifying youth voices on local and international platforms.

As the programme evolves, the next phase presents a powerful opportunity to deepen youth engagement—not just as participants, but as co-creators of knowledge, communication, and decision-making processes. Lessons from global youth-centred initiatives demonstrate the transformative potential of digital media in this regard. Programmes like UNICEF's U-Report empower young people to shape policy through real-time feedback tools; Youth Ki Awaaz in India fosters youth-driven storytelling for social change; the NETYOUTH Erasmus Project bridges communication between young Europeans and local authorities using digital platforms.

These examples reflect a growing global movement where young people are not only digital natives but also digital leaders, using media to shape conversations, strengthen

communities, and spark action. Building on this momentum, S²Cities can further position communication as a tool for youth empowerment, collective impact, and inclusive urban transformation.

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