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Developing a Global Programme for Safer Cities, from Design to Implementation

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Abstract
This viewpoint reflects on the development and evolution of the Safe and Sound Cities (S²Cities) programme, a global programme initiated and funded by Fondation Botnar and implemented in partnership with diverse stakeholders to foster safer, youth-centred urban environments. Initiated in 2020, the programme emerged from the recognition that youth, safety, and cities are intricately linked, yet often addressed through fragmented or traditional paradigms. This paper traces the early conceptualization process—beginning with a two-day learning workshop that integrated insights from academia and field practice—and describes how this informed a system-thinking approach to urban youth safety and wellbeing, based on a Theory of Change.
Central to the programme is the integration of Relational Wellbeing (RWB), a framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal, social, and environmental drivers of youth's health and well-being, and the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) approach, which links urban form to social cohesion and safety. The fusion of these perspectives revealed the importance of placemaking as a process that empowers youth to shape public spaces and build civic trust.
Pilots in 6 cities highlight how youth-led initiatives - supported through digital and physical tools - can drive innovation, build local capacity, and foster inclusive urban governance. The paper argues that safety in cities must be redefined through the lived experiences of young people, advocating for a shift from reactive, enforcement-led approaches to proactive, participatory strategies rooted in placemaking and relational wellbeing. Ultimately, the S²Cities programme is positioned as a model for youth-driven systemic change, aiming to scale and adapt solutions across diverse urban contexts. It concludes by underscoring the role of youth as co-creators of safer cities and the importance of nurturing environments where their agency, creativity, and resilience can thrive.

Keywords: youth engagement, urban safety, relational wellbeing, placemaking, systemic change

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In 2020, Fondation Botnar engaged me to support in the development of a new global programme focusing on youth, safety and cities. The programme was to have a long-term horizon, reimagining underlying systems of fast-changing urban spaces where young people live and possibly thrive. What a great challenge, to unpack these three words – youth, safety and cities - and to develop a unique vision, strategy and roadmap for cities to thrive and to be a safe place for young people.

The Foundation wanted to build upon its newly established vision to develop long-term initiatives that aim for system change at the city-level, focusing on youth and digital solutions in low and middle-income countries.[1] These new initiatives were to function as testbeds for approaches and frameworks promoted by the Foundation, whereas learnings from initiatives would inform the Foundation to adjust existing and create new programmes. One such initiative, the Healthy Cities for Adolescents initiative had already started in 2018, operating in six countries and functioning as a testbed for the Foundations' 'Evidence to Action' framework.[2] This iteration of framing, testing and learning is key for several philanthropies that seek youth-led, innovative, fast-tracked approaches for system change.

To build a new programme, it was critical to learn and assess existing concepts, approaches and practices related to youth, safety and cities. Therefore, together with the Foundation a two-day learning workshop was organized in November 2020, bringing together organizations, scholars and experts to share their knowledge and insights related to the three topics.[3] The workshop also aimed to nurture exchange, leaving traces for collaboration in the future. Therefore, all participants received a workshop report, with reading material, workshop results, list of attendance and survey results. Since the workshop took place amidst the Covid-19 crisis, it was an opportunity, and a necessity, to experiment with, at the time, new collaborative tools like Miro and Mentimeter.

Since safety, youth and cities cover a very broad and thick-layered landscape of narratives, concepts and practices, time was provided to support better understanding and for identifying what focus would be relevant from a learning, scaling, and innovation perspective. As preparation for the workshop, relevant reading material was collected and interviews conducted. During the workshop, time was taken for deep dives with scholars on two topics: the well-being of young people and safety in cities. Regarding the well-being of young people, professor Dr Shreya Jha from the Relational Wellbeing Collaborative elaborated the concept of Relational Wellbeing (RWB).[4] Based on their twenty years of research in the Global South, well-being is defined in three dimensions: a relational one that highlights the importance of connection, a subjective one that relates to thinking and feeling, a material one that highlights what people can be and do

[1] For more information on Fondation Botnar, see the website https://www.fondationbotnar.org/who-we-are/ (Accessed 18 August 2025)
[2] For more information on the Healthy Cities for Adolescents initiative, see the web-site https://healthy-cities.org/ (Accessed 18 August 2025)
[3] Non-exhaustive list of participants from the following organizations: Relational Wellbeing Collaborative, University of Geneva, Fondation Botnar, FIA Foundation, Kota Kita Foundation, ISOCARP, AMEND, STIPO, GIZ, Cities Alliance, UN-Habitat, Clean Air Fund, Handicap International, World Resource Institute, Placemaking X, What Design Can Do.
[4] For more information on Relational Wellbeing, see the website https://www.rwb-collab.co/relational-wellbeing/ (Accessed 18 August 2025)

which is also based on what we have. These three interconnected dimensions challenge our traditional, clinical, patronizing and often polarized way of looking at health and well-being. Traditionally adults and professionals in the sector of health and childcare promote external support to children and young people, from a medical, behavioural or child-protection point of view. They see a young person as a patient, they aim to isolate an issue, they prescribe a sort of treatment. Health refers to basic health in the global south, whereas the global north focuses on well-being, mental health and happiness. RWB opposes this view and recognizes differences between individuals, groups and places. RWB brings clarity in what drives the wellbeing of young people: personal drivers, societal drivers and environmental drivers that highlight the interdependence between living beings and the earth. To achieve systemic change, all three drivers need to be recognised and addressed. In particular, the last driver resonates with how cities are lived and perceived. For example, children are more exposed to health risks in houses and neighbourhoods that are cramped or that lack greenspaces and places for play.[5] This requires cities to plan better and shape environments where young people can develop strong connections, amongst them, with society and with the city as a whole.

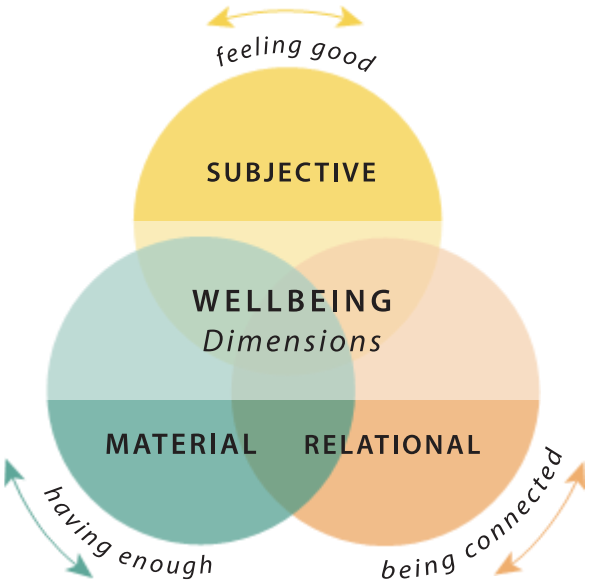

Figure 1. The Relational Wellbeing Dimensions (RWB Collaborative)

Regarding safety, Fondation Botnar had already developed road safety related programmes, linked to the legacy of the Botnar family's personal experience, having lost their daughter in a traffic car accident at the age of 20. Since road traffic accidents are the major cause of death amongst young people globally, the Botnar Child Road Safety Challenge (BCRSC) has been focusing on reducing road traffic deaths and accidents in

[5] Aerts, J. (2018) Shaping Urbanization for Children: A handbook on Child-Responsive Urban Planning. New York: UNICEF.

multiple countries across the globe.[6] Many other initiatives have been focusing on safer streets, safer drivers, safer vehicles and road safety policies in the last decade, such as the Child Health Initiative, the Global Designing Streets Initiative and the Initiative for Global Road Safety. Building on the experiences and learnings gained over the past years through various projects, and discussing with diverse stakeholders and partners, Fondation Botnar saw the need to move away from a 'classical' road safety lens towards a more holistic vision of safe cities for young people.

Urban safety is a broad and multifaceted concept that cuts across a wide spectrum of expert fields and policies, that all build further on the literature and practices in their field: social unrest, street violence, policing, security physical interventions, building and infrastructure codes, environmental disasters, climate change related risks. Hence it was very insightful to have Dr Jonas Hagmann, at the time working as Senior Researcher at the University of Geneva, in the learning workshop and conceptualization of the programme. He helped us to unravel the different tenets of urban safety, connecting dots in the fields of security, urban geography and public policy. He reminded us that urban safety has been on the urban agenda for a while and that attention will only increase, because of the concentration of wealth, people, investments and public and private interest in the city as a contained area that is well connected globally. At the same time, cities remain the primary sites where homicide, political violence and international terrorist acts are most likely to occur.[7] Although the risk of physical violence remains more pronounced in urban environments, cities are also places where various constituents potentially interact, co-habitate and dialogue with each other.[8]

In contexts where responses at the national level are not effective due to various limitations, city halls and mayors have actively started to develop local investments in district-level social services – schools, community centres, youth hubs, libraries, sport centres - and to foster dialogue and inclusion through participatory actions. In the 1990ies, the multi-disciplinary crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) approach gained attention, as it introduces the built environment as a key determinant that can be designed in a pro-active, preventive way. The CPTED approach originally has been inspired by the writings from Jane Jacobs that highlighted that the physical environment can be designed in order to reduce crime.[9] CPTED further developed as a movement, gaining significant traction in Latin-America, where cities had become the epicentres of extreme inequity in slums, suffering from nation-wide challenges related to drugs, homicides and gun trafficking. Several cities like Medellin saw the urgent need to invest in safety, but also in civic trust, community building and inclusion. Often dubbed as 'social urbanism', cities started prioritizing investments in public services and the built environment. Medellin demonstrated that investments at the neighbourhood, the building and the street level contributed to the reduction of violence, within merely a

[6] For more information on the Botnar Child Road Safety Challenge, see the website https://www.fondationbotnar.org/project/the-botnar-child-road-safety-challenge/ (Accessed 18 August 2025)

[7] Chenoweth E and Clarke S (2009) All terrorism is local: Resources, nested institutions, and governance for urban homeland security in the American federal system. Political Research Quarterly 63(3): 495-507

[8] Barber, Benjamin (2014). If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities. London: Yale University Press.

[9] Newman, O. (1972) Defensible Space; Crime Prevention through Urban Design. New York: Macmillan. Newman, O. (1980) Community of Interest. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

decade. The city administration demonstrated concern for all its residents, including those living in deprived and remote barrios. Residents, especially youth, got access to high-quality services, providing them with alternative options to gang involvement and petty crimes. Medellin and other investments programmes that used the CPTED approach have demonstrated positive results. Investments were often targeting a multitude of small-scale interventions that were well interconnected. For example, before 1990 Medellin had virtually no public space. By 2014, Medellín had opened up 4 square metres of public space per resident, with a goal of reaching 15 square metres per person by 2030.[10] Medellin also demonstrated that achieving sustainability and scale was only possible thanks to community involvement and targeted, youth-relevant investments.

This analysis of practices related to safety and security in cities was important to determine a focus for the future programme that would support and give guidance to cities and youth organizations.

Many cities, driven by public opinion and amplified by click-bait news focused on fear and violence, find themselves at an imaginary crossroad: to invest more in policing and technology, or focus more on prevention and community building; to focus on boundaries and regulations, or to invest in connections and relations; to focus on remediation or on prevention? Of course, a mix of both approaches is justified, but it is not clear whether cities have explicit strategies to make their cities safe in a sustainable and holistic way, drawing from established concepts such as CPTED. Building on the learnings and dialogues during the workshop, it was agreed to place at the centre of the programme's vision the principle that safety issues and solutions in cities should be defined and articulated by youth. From a RWB perspective, youth would be well-placed to define the challenges of cities related to safety and to define solutions that are sustainable and impactful. Additionally, it became obvious that the programme would have a placemaking component. The RWB approach, much like the CPTED approach, has an explicit (built) environment component. Since placemaking is 'a participatory process for shaping public space that harnesses the ideas and assets of the people who use it', the process of shaping safer spaces and making places, appeared as a valuable strategy to offer to cities and youth organisation.[11]

Furthermore, placemaking led by tech-savvy youth in the 21st century can take innovative, hybrid forms, bridging the physical and digital space, while supporting place-based research and prototyping.

[10] Read the story of change about Medellin here: https://rapidtransition.org/stories/the-medellin-miracle/ (Accessed 18 August 2025)

[11] Definition and examples of placemaking are well-documented by Project for Public Spaces, see https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking, accessed on 18 August 2025.

Figure 2. Youth representatives of the Safe and Sound Cities Programme at the World Urban Forum 12 in Cairo, Egypt (Source: Author)

Building on this set of concepts and principles, we sought for a consortium capable of designing, piloting and implementing a robust, global programme, powered by cities where youth organisations are trained to lead processes towards system change, enhancing their own safety and the wellbeing of their communities and the city as a whole. The Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation (GIB) was selected to implement the programme globally. In 2021, the Safe and Sound Cities programme was launched, led by GIB, hosted by Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, supported by Fondation Botnar, along with the expert advice of a number of global partners including ICLEI -Local Governments for Sustainability, RWB, BUUR, EAFIT University and City Collab. The programme was first piloted in Envigado (Colombia) and Bandung (Indonesia), two secondary cities in middle-income countries where young people and their wellbeing feature prominently in the national and local agenda. Having concluded a Phase I of the programme (2021-2024) and moved on to a Phase II (2024-2029, we now continue to document the ongoing implementation in six cities overall, including Cuenca and Ambato in Ecuador, Naga and Baguio in the Philippines, and Envigado and Cartagena in Colombia. As per the programme's Theory of Change, each of these cities go through a cycle of systems understanding, capacity building, co-design and innovation, and implementation and scaling of youth-led initiatives.

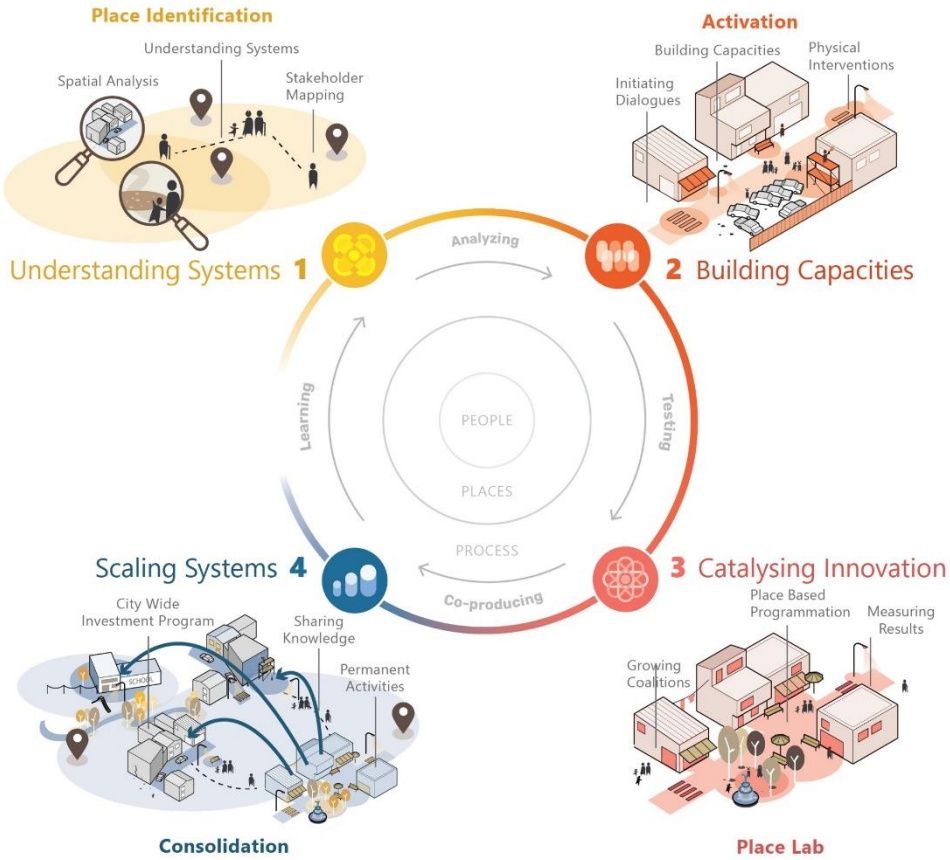

Figure 3. The placemaking dimension of the Theory of Change for the S²Cities programme (Source: Author)

In each of these cities, local organisations have been empowering young people to analyse, map, design and plan for scale. Throughout this process I have witnessed that youth and city leaders learn from one another, building mutual trust and strengthening collaboration towards a safe and sound city. In this process, placemaking has emerged as a central component to build and express civic trust, revealing a broad spectrum of practical, symbolic, emotional and relational challenges that must be addressed to create a city for all, one that can run by the next generation.