



## LEARNING AND LEADING: THE CHILD-FRIENDLY SURAT CITY APPROACH TO CHILD EDUCATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Urban poor children face unique vulnerabilities that impact their rights to survival, development, safety, and participation. Despite challenges like poverty, migration and limited access to essential services, these children possess inherent capabilities that can significantly contribute to local governance when properly nurtured. The urban context necessitates tailored approaches to children's education and participation, considering the complexities of city life and emerging challenges like climate change and pandemics. In response, the Child-Friendly Smart City Knowledge Centre (CFSCCK) was launched in 2017 in Surat, India, as a collaborative effort between the Surat Municipal Corporation and UNICEF. This pioneering project, operated by the Urban Health and Climate Resilience Centre of Excellence, aimed to address the unique challenges urban poor children face in Surat, an economic hub with a diverse socio-cultural landscape with heavy in-migration. Over eight years, CFSCCK implemented various practice-based initiatives to enhance children's education and foster their participation in urban governance. The centre's approach was rooted in a multi-stakeholder framework of 40 partners, bringing municipal departments, academic institutions, NGOs, and schools together. Innovative initiatives included urban partnerships, shared-learning dialogues, India's First Children's Charter of Demands, life skills education programs, inclusive Bal Melas (children's festivals), peer education activities, intergenerational dialogues, participatory mapping exercises, art-based activities and experiential learning visits. Activities constantly addressed central themes like environmental awareness, child rights, mental health, inclusive education, disaster preparedness, healthcare access, safety, and nutrition. A key strength of CFSCCK's approach was its ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice in urban development, creating synergy between "learners" (those who study urban issues) and "doers" (those who implement solutions). This model demonstrated the power of sustained, collaborative efforts in creating child-friendly urban spaces, empowering children to become active contributors to their urban environment and offering valuable insights for creating more inclusive, child-centred urban communities worldwide.

**Keywords:** *Child-Friendly City, Education, Multistakeholder collaborations, Surat City, Urban Poor*

#### Introduction

The rapid urbanization of global populations has created unprecedented challenges for children living in urban areas, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to recent estimates, approximately one billion people reside in urban slums, with a significant proportion being children under 18 years of age UNICEF. (2020). While cities concentrate resources and opportunities, they simultaneously amplify inequalities, creating a complex landscape where urban poor children face multiple threats to their fundamental rights of survival, development, safety, and participation. Global challenges like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated these vulnerabilities. Climate-related disasters disproportionately affect urban poor communities, disrupting children's education and well-being Bartlett & Satterthwaite (2017). The pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities, particularly in accessing remote learning and essential services UNESCO. (2021); UNICEF & Save the Children (2020). However, within these challenges lie opportunities for transformative change through localized solutions. Urban environments, with their concentrated resources and institutions, offer unique possibilities for innovative interventions. Research shows that children from disadvantaged urban backgrounds often develop remarkable resilience and problem-solving abilities that can be harnessed for positive change.

In this context, the present case of Surat City in India exemplifies this approach of contextualizing global issues with local remedies. The present implementation research highlights various interventions designed to enhance children's participation in

community affairs, ensuring that their rights are respected, and their needs are prioritized. Supported by India's constitutional provisions and national policies, including the National Policy on Children, the city has implemented various interventions that actively involve children in community affairs and decision-making processes like other relevant studies Kumar & Singh (2022). This approach endorses a shift from traditional, one-size-fits-all models to more flexible, context-specific interventions that account for the unique characteristics of urban poor children. Successful initiatives have demonstrated the importance of community-based approaches that actively involve children in decision-making processes and leverage their local knowledge and experiences Hart & Sharma (2018).

The significance of such localized approaches lies in their potential to serve as models for other urban areas striving to become more inclusive. By viewing children as active stakeholders in city governance, these initiatives contribute to more equitable and resilient urban communities. It must be acknowledged that every cityscape is different, necessitating local focal planning based on general guidelines. The global frameworks provide a foundation upon which local innovations can be built and contextualized.

## **Methods**

### **The Implementation Research Project**

The concept of a child-friendly city (CFC) has evolved significantly since the early 2000s, with a growing emphasis on rights-based approaches and child-centric initiatives. According to UNICEF, a CFC is defined as "A city, town, community or any system of local governance committed to improving the lives of children within their jurisdiction by realizing their rights as articulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child" UNICEF. (2018).

While the concept of child-friendly cities is still in its nascent stage in India, there is a growing recognition of the need for multi-sectoral partnerships and action. Aligning with the CFC approach, the collaboration between the Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) and UNICEF culminated in the launch of the Child-Friendly Smart City Knowledge Centre (CFSCCKC), a pioneering initiative in India in September 2017. The CFSCCKC project is operationalized by the Urban Health and Climate Resilience Center of Excellence (UHCRCCE) - a public-private partnership trust established under the Health Department of SMC. The primary objective of the CFSCCKC was to demonstrate a feasible model of children's participation and education specific to the urban slum context through implementation research.

### **Research Setting**

Surat, the fourth fastest-growing city in the world, presents a unique and compelling setting for the implementation of the CFSCCKC initiative. The city's rapid urbanization, diverse socio-economic landscape, constant inflow of migrant population and distinct challenges make it an ideal location for pioneering child-centric urban development strategies. As of the 2011 census, Surat boasted a population of 4,461,026, with a remarkable decadal growth rate of 55.29% and a population density of 13,680 persons per square kilometer. Approximately 37% of Surat's residents live in slums or slum-like areas. The rapid industrialization in Surat has attracted a diverse influx of migrants, making Surat a melting pot of traditions and cultures. However, this growth has also brought socio-cultural stresses, including changes in social cohesion, widening socio-economic disparities, and emerging shifts in attitudes and behaviours. The coastal city's vulnerability to climate change and health stressors, rising crime rates, and the relative scarcity of community research and service organizations further underscore the importance of initiatives like CFSCCKC in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Surat's children.

### **Research Question and Objectives**

The present paper posed a central question: How can cities integrate urban poor children's voices into local governance processes by simultaneously enhancing their education? The exploratory nature of this research allows for a flexible and adaptive approach to understanding how child-friendly policies can be effectively implemented in a rapidly growing urban centre like Surat. It aims to identify context-specific interventions that can harness the inherent capabilities and resilience of urban poor children while addressing the multifaceted challenges they face. The key objectives for this paper included.

1. To explore innovative methods to facilitate meaningful dialogue and participation of children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in civic matters.
2. To showcase the integrated educational interventions that target multiple dimensions of child well-being, including education, health, and social protection.

### **The Research Process**

For this paper, the experience of implementing the program was systematically documented. The researchers serving as the nodal agency for implementing the program activities were uniquely positioned to gather data through participant observation. Field observations of activities offered first-hand perspectives on the implementation process. The research team also conducted program reviews and feedback meetings with stakeholders, which provided valuable insights into the initiative's progress and challenges. This immersive approach enabled the researchers to gain insider perspectives and experiential knowledge that would have been difficult to obtain through other means. The meticulous field notes of program activities were organized into data themes. The findings were then presented using illustrative descriptions of field activities and lessons learnt, providing a vivid and contextual understanding of the Child-Friendly Surat City approach.

## Findings

The insights from the present implementation research can be categorised into the emergence of six innovative approaches to engaging and educating children, fostering their participation in urban governance and community development.

### Holistic Competency Development

The program implemented a comprehensive Life Skills Education program that transformed traditional educational approaches by integrating practical skills with real-world challenges. This innovative program, executed through a network of 30 master trainers and 170 teacher trainers, successfully reached 5,000+ children.

The program's strength was in its contextual relevance, connecting abstract life skills with tangible urban challenges. For example, children learned decision-making through pre-monsoon flood preparedness and developed critical thinking skills through waste management activities. The curriculum ingeniously combined life skills with contemporary issues like climate change adaptation, combating infectious diseases, managing peer pressures, substance misuse prevention, and gender-based violence awareness. A distinctive feature was integrating livelihood skills such as entrepreneurship, communication, and financial management with life skills education. This was exemplified through innovative combinations such as beautician training paired with self-awareness, spoken English with communication skills, and computer education with problem-solving abilities. An exposure visit to the city's leading vocational training institute was also carried out as a part of program for out of school adolescents and their parents. The program's sustainability was ensured through its incorporation into the school curriculum and the engagement of various stakeholders, including public health system counsellors, doctors, teachers, and ICDS Anganwadi workers.

The initiative's inclusive approach targeted both in-school and out of school adolescents. By aligning with the World Health Organization's definition of life skills and incorporating internationally recognized competencies such as problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking, creative thinking, empathy, and emotional understanding, the program ensured a comprehensive approach to children's development.

### Dialogic Learning Platforms

The program implemented a series of innovative and inclusive "Child Rights Fairs" across the city. This approach started with the two-day fair organized to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and highlight World Children's Day. A total of eight festivals attracted city-wide participation. Each festival was uniquely hosted by different partner schools or organizations throughout Surat, ensuring widespread community involvement. Notably, the initiative demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusivity by dedicating three of these festivals specifically to children with special needs. These specialized events ensured the meaningful participation of children with various disabilities, including those with physical disabilities, intellectual challenges, visual impairments, and hearing and speech impairments. The events exemplified the power of interactive and participatory learning. The fairs were usually structured around the four pillars of child rights: survival, protection, development, and participation. The fairs featured a diverse array of interactive exhibits and hands-on activities. For instance,

- **Right to Survival**  
Stalls focused on physical and mental health, vector-borne disease control, nutrition, and menstrual hygiene practices.
- **Right to Development**  
Exhibits highlighted the right to education, play and leisure, environmental education, and gender equity.
- **Right to Protection**  
Activities addressed personal protection, road safety, child sexual abuse prevention, housing safety, cyber safety, personal hygiene, and protection from climate change and disasters.
- **Right to Participate**  
Student volunteers played a crucial role in leading activities, empowering them as educators and advocates. Suggestion boxes provided channels for children to voice their concerns.

Artistic Expression was widely used with activities such as Child Rights Wall Paintings, claiming a bustling street of the city for play activities and drawing, photography, street plays to raise sensitive concerns like bullying and gender-based violence, expression of mental health through art, craft and drawing etc.

### Engaging Children as Co-Researchers in Community-Based Inquiries

This approach empowered children to identify issues, collect data, and propose solutions, fostering a sense of ownership and civic responsibility. The children, including those from vulnerable groups, were active co-researchers in community-based inquiries.

One of the key strategies employed was the implementation of pilot assessments and audits across various urban settings. These included evaluations of schools and Anganwadis (early childhood centers for urban poor and migrant children), climate audits of schools, vector-borne disease surveillance in educational institutions, and assessments of dropout children in neighborhoods. These small-scale studies were designed to foster a culture of evidence-based decision-making in city governance, utilizing both survey methods and Participatory Urban Appraisal techniques.

A noteworthy example of this approach was the inclusion of children with special needs in the research process. In 2019, the initiative engaged 55 students from Mukh Badir Vikas Trust Sanchalit School for Deaf and Mute Children in environmental

monitoring activities. These students were trained to use Environment Monitoring Kits, allowing them to participate in weather monitoring, toolkit assembly, and data collection related to air pollution and heat stress. The entire workshop was conducted in sign language with the assistance of interpreters.

The research also extended to other vulnerable groups, such as out of school adolescents. In collaboration with local NGOs, the initiative organized an exposure research visit to the nearby urban primary health center for 45 adolescents. This visit included orientation to health services, medical check-ups, and sharing-learning discussions. This engagement generated insights into the specific needs and concerns of these adolescents.

The outcomes of these participatory research efforts were significant. Children with hearing and speech impairments raised concerns about air pollution, noise pollution, and road safety issues that directly impact their daily lives but are often overlooked in traditional urban planning processes. Out of school adolescents discussed various health issues and expressed demands for improved health services, demonstrating the potential of such engagements to inform policy and service delivery. This approach generated rich, context-specific data that can inform more effective and inclusive urban policies and interventions.

### **Peer-Driven Knowledge Exchange**

This approach leveraged the power of peer-to-peer learning, allowing children to share experiences and knowledge with one another. It recognized that children often learn best from their peers and can develop leadership skills through teaching others. The peer-driven model created interest and fostered meaningful dialogue among recipient peers. When children receive information from their peers, they were often more receptive and engaged, leading to better retention and application of knowledge. This approach was implemented across various schools in Surat, ensuring a mix of public and private school interactions, which further enhanced the diversity of perspectives and experiences shared. In one of the models, in-school students acted as peer educators, imparting knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to disaster resilience and climate action to their out of school counterparts. This approach proved particularly effective in bridging the gap between formal education systems and marginalized youth who did not have access to traditional schooling.

The peer education program covered a wide range of critical topics relevant to urban resilience and sustainability. These include heat stress management, flood resilience, vector-borne disease prevention, pandemic response (e.g., actions against swine flu and COVID-19), sustainable transportation (promoting motorbike pooling), food safety, healthy diet practices, cyber safety, road safety, urban greening initiatives, and energy conservation.

Peer educators were encouraged to use innovative methods to convey information, moving beyond traditional posters and pamphlets to engage their audience more effectively. This approach aligned with the emerging Social Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) strategies.

### **Cross-Generational Discourse**

This approach was implemented by leveraging opportunities for joint meetings or capacity-building sessions between children and adult caregivers like parents, teachers and community health workers. Such sessions were part of broader activities of life skills training or child rights fairs. This approach moved beyond conventional educational methods to create meaningful dialogues between different age groups, particularly highlighting the disconnect between children's consciousness and parental attitudes. For example, while children demonstrated a clear understanding of environmental conservation practices, they often faced resistance from adults in implementing these practices at home. During interactive sessions, students readily identified practical environmental conservation measures such as natural lighting usage, vehicle pooling, and water conservation. However, they reported that their attempts to implement these practices were often met with adult skepticism, exemplified by the parental response that "one person cannot bring the change". This revelation highlighted the need for more comprehensive cross-generational engagement strategies that could help bridge the gap between children's enthusiasm and adult pragmatism, ultimately working toward creating more sustainable urban communities through shared understanding and collaborative action.

### **Integrating Children's Perspectives into City Development Processes**

The approach provided opportunities for children to contribute their unique insights and needs to urban development decisions. For instance, the program pioneered an innovative approach to urban governance by systematically generating children's perspectives through the development of the "Children's Charter of Demands". Released on World Children's Day 2018, this document represented the first charter created 'by the children, for the children' in Surat.

The charter was developed through a comprehensive participatory mixed-method research approach, involving 30 empirical participatory interactions with 450 children from 43 city institutions. The participation involved children from diverse backgrounds including in-school and out of school children, those with special needs, and children from various socio-economic classes, genders, and geographical zones within the city.

For instance, the fundamental right to protection emerged as a crucial aspect of urban child development. The demands encompassed comprehensive safety measures in educational settings, beginning with the need for safe public transportation to schools. Children emphasized the importance of implementing anti-bullying measures within school environments to ensure their psychological and emotional well-being. They also highlighted the necessity of ensuring safety in public spaces, particularly in gardens and meeting areas where children frequently gathered. Security infrastructure featured prominently in their demands, with calls for strategic placement of CCTV cameras in vulnerable areas and the establishment of easily accessible police chowkis (outposts) and helplines. The children recognized the importance of being equipped with personal safety skills and requested training in self-defense, cyber safety, and disaster management to better protect themselves in various situations. The structural

aspects of safety were also addressed, with demands for disaster-proof construction in both housing and educational facilities. This reflected their awareness of the need for resilient infrastructure in an increasingly vulnerable urban environment. The children also advocated for the integration of skill centers, demonstrating their understanding of the connection between skill development and personal security.

Apart from safety, such a set of demands across other sectors such as health, nutrition, education, neighborhood amenities reflected a sophisticated understanding of urban safety needs and highlighted the children's capacity to contribute meaningfully to urban governance discussions.

### **Discussion**

The multi-stakeholder partnerships were the backbone of the implementation and emergence of the above approaches. These partnerships, involving government departments, educational institutions, NGOs, civil society organizations, and community groups, proved instrumental in translating child-friendly policies into actionable interventions. The initiative's networking approach leveraged Surat's traditional cultural heritage of collaborative relationships among stakeholders, enabling the project to transcend institutional silos and become a truly city-wide agenda. However, these partnerships also faced significant challenges, including limited inter-sectoral coordination among government departments and varying levels of expertise in child-focused programming. The initiative addressed these challenges through innovative "cross-learning" workshops that helped stakeholders develop a shared understanding of child-friendly approaches. The existing literature supports how the success of such partnerships ultimately depends on the establishment of clear communication channels, shared objectives, and mutual respect among participating organizations Vliet & Karsten (2015).

The synergy between learners (research institutions, academic bodies, and think tanks) and doers (local government bodies, implementing agencies) has emerged as a crucial factor in the success of child-friendly urban initiatives in Surat. This partnership model leveraged the analytical and research capabilities of learning institutions while benefiting from the practical implementation experience and administrative authority of local government bodies. The establishment of Urban Observatories as learning institutions has particularly demonstrated how systematic evidence generation can inform policy decisions and implementation strategies Cabannes & Marocchino (2018). However, this collaboration faced challenges such as differing institutional priorities, bureaucratic procedures, and the need for continuous alignment of research objectives with practical implementation needs. Despite these challenges, there is ample established evidence on how such partnerships can effectively bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation, ultimately leading to more sustainable and inclusive urban development outcomes.

Further, creative communication emerged as a vital component in fostering meaningful engagement with children in urban development initiatives, moving beyond traditional methods of information dissemination through posters and pamphlets. The implementation research initiative demonstrated how innovative communication approaches, such as fancy dress shows for environmental education, intergenerational dialogues, and participatory art projects, can effectively bridge the gap between policy intentions and children's understanding and engagement. The children's development literature supports the importance of communication in civic engagement Percy-Smith & Thomas (2019).

Finally, the sustainability of child-friendly urban initiatives critically depends on their integration into existing policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms. The present initiative attempted to demonstrate how programs can move beyond one-time events to create lasting impact through systematic policy integration and institutional embedding. Such integration relied on establishing strong "connecting links" between municipal systems and children as citizens, ensuring that children's voices are heard and incorporated into policy decisions through evidence-based advocacy and creative presentation. Similar other initiatives endorsed this idea Chatterjee & Nijholt (2021). The experience of Surat shows how existing national policies and schemes, from the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram to the Integrated Child Development Services, can be effectively leveraged to institutionalize child-friendly approaches, though this requires careful attention to policy alignment and stakeholder engagement Skelton & Aitken (2019).

### **Conclusion**

The present implementation research demonstrated how global challenges in urban child development can be effectively addressed through locally contextualized solutions. This exploratory implementation research has revealed that while urban children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face universal challenges such as limited access to essential services, safety concerns, and barriers to participation, the solutions must be rooted in local contexts and capabilities. The initiative of engaging children as active participants in urban governance, through innovative approaches like peer education, creative communication, and multi-stakeholder partnerships, offered valuable insights for other cities grappling with similar challenges. As cities worldwide continue to grow and evolve, the lessons learned from Surat's experience underscored the importance of adaptive and responsive approaches to creating child-friendly urban environments. The initiative's emphasis on continuous learning, stakeholder engagement, and policy integration provided a framework that can be customized to different urban contexts while addressing universal challenges. This balance between global principles and local implementation strategies is crucial for sustainable urban development that truly serves the needs of children. Moving forward, the insights gained from this exploratory work can inform more comprehensive studies and policy interventions, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of creating inclusive, resilient, and child-friendly cities worldwide.

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