With nearly half of the world’s children now living in towns and cities, urban planners and policymakers need to pay special attention to the rights and interests of children. The Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) – launched by UNICEF and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) in 1996 – is the first multi-stakeholder partnership to put children at the centre of the urban agenda.

City administrations have had to face significant challenges in addressing the needs of a growing urban population. Coinciding with increasing decentralization and as part of efforts to strengthen governance, CFCI taps into the wider acceptance of community participation in decision-making to promote local accountability for children’s rights.

The International Secretariat of CFCI has identified nine principal building blocks for local administrations aiming to become ‘child-friendly’:

1. Child participation at all stages of planning and implementation
2. Child-friendly legislation
3. A child rights strategy
4. A coordinating mechanism or agency for children
5. Assessment of policy and programme impact on children
6. A budget and resources for children
7. A regular report on the state of children in the city
8. Awareness-raising and capacity building on child rights

While these are necessary components of child-friendly programming and advocacy, true ‘child-friendliness’ can only be achieved through a long-term commitment to the implementation of child rights.

The Child-Friendly Cities approach can be adapted to diverse contexts. In high-income countries, the focus has been largely on urban planning, safe and green environments and child participation. Low-income countries have tended to prioritize service delivery in health, nutrition, education and child protection. Child-Friendly Cities initiatives range from single-city endeavours (as in Amman, Jordan) to national-level networks (as in France). The potential to promote child-centred governance at the local level is leading to the spread of child-friendly approaches beyond large cities and even to rural settings, for instance in Morocco and the Sudan.

Integrated, multi-level approaches are an important feature of the Child-Friendly Cities movement. In Brazil, the Platforms for Urban Centres promote synergy among municipal and state authorities and other stakeholders in order to reduce socio-economic inequalities affecting children in the biggest cities. Children and other community members assess children’s living conditions and develop a plan of action that includes performance indicators for communities and municipalities.

In the Philippines, the Child-Friendly Movement has established an accreditation mechanism for urban communities and municipalities, measuring improvements in 24 priority indicators of child well-being in the fields of protection, health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and participation.

In the absence of a formal evaluation mechanism, the benefits of CFCI can be demonstrated by example. In 2005, local authorities in Brazil that had earned the Municipal Seal of Approval were found to have cut infant mortality by 16.4 per cent (against 12.1 per cent elsewhere) and neonatal mortality by 8.5 per cent (against 1.6 per cent), while increasing access to early childhood education from 56 per 100 children to 63.5 per 100.

Underpinning child-friendly urban planning and programming is a human rights-based governance model that embodies the principles of non-discrimination, survival and development, and participation enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children are recognized as rights holders who should be involved in both planning and implementation of measures that affect them. By making neglected groups more visible and granting all children a platform to secure their needs and rights, the Child-Friendly Cities approach contributes to achieving development goals with equity.