

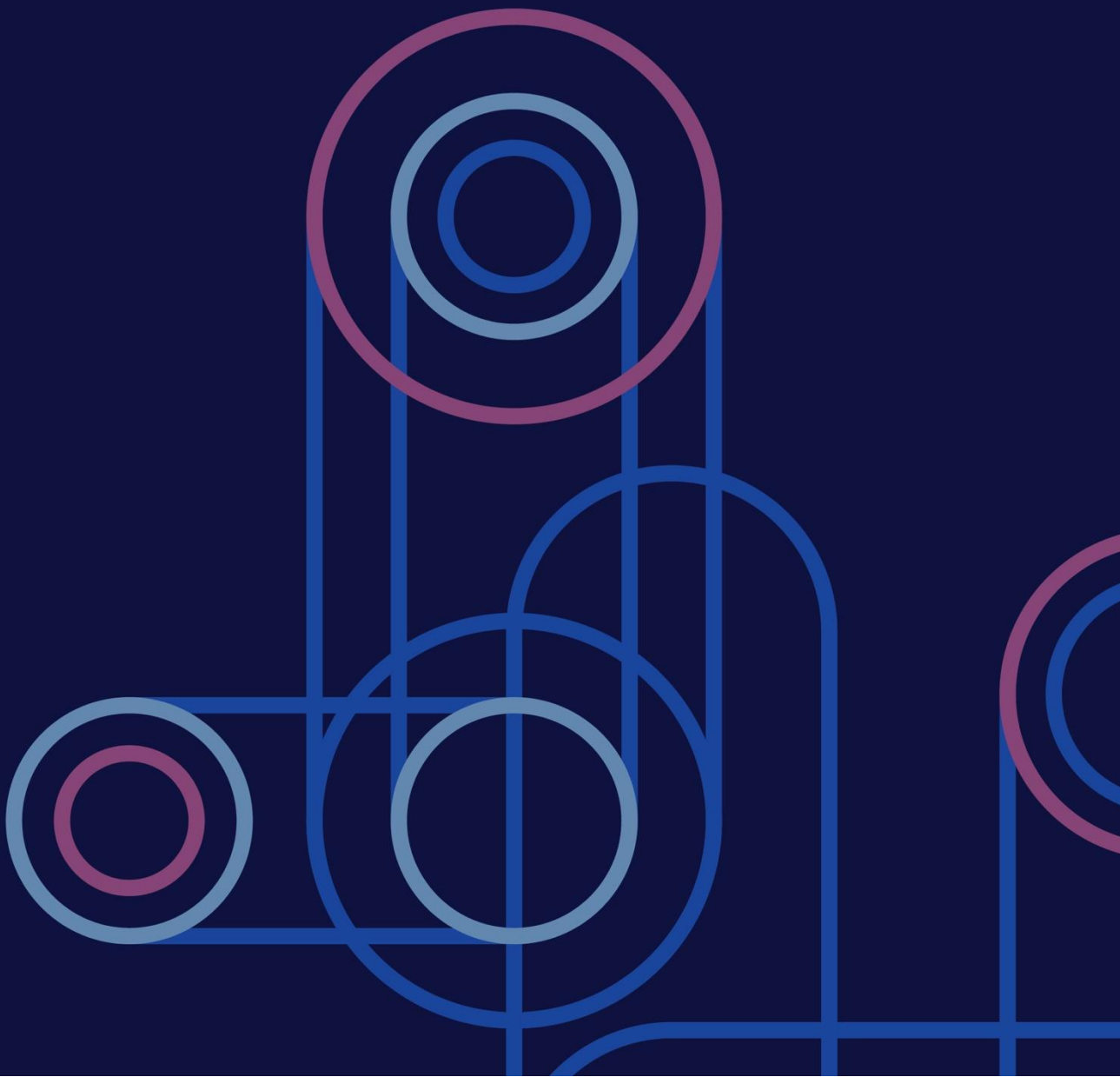


World Health
Organization

CASE STUDY

Innovation for Urban Health and Wellbeing: Young Gamechangers Initiative

2026



Basic information

WHO Region	AFRO; AMRO; SEARO
City or Country	Bargny, Senegal; Armenia, Colombia; Jatni, India
Timeline	2022-2025
Type of intervention	Innovation; governance
Primary level of implementation	City
Primary sectors involved	Urban planning; public space; digital technology; health
Primary health outcomes or challenges	Health of young people; mental health; health behaviours; health equity; wellbeing

Case description

Rapid urbanization, demographic change, and uneven access to safe and inclusive public spaces have created significant challenges for youth health and wellbeing. Young people often experience limited opportunities to influence urban decision-making, despite being disproportionately affected by environmental conditions, mobility systems, and access to high-quality public spaces. With these challenges in mind, the Young Gamechangers Initiative (YGI) was launched in 2022 to strengthen youth participation in urban governance and to link public space planning more explicitly to urban health and wellbeing outcomes – particularly for young people.

YGI is implemented by UN-Habitat in partnership with Fondation Botnar, with technical engagement from WHO and other partners. The initiative operates across three intermediary city contexts – Jatni in India, Armenia in Colombia, and Bargny in Senegal. Each faces distinct challenges related to urban growth, environmental stressors, and youth inclusion; at the same time, intermediary or secondary cities are typically underrepresented in global innovation, financing, and research initiatives compared with capital cities. While institutional arrangements and governance frameworks differ across these settings, municipal authorities are primarily responsible for urban planning and budgeting, with engagement from state, regional, or national authorities where relevant.

The initiative combines governance-oriented approaches, capacity development, and innovation processes to enable young people to participate meaningfully in urban planning and decision-making. Co-design and co-production of public spaces—bringing



Young Gamechangers at work. Bargny, Senegal: 2024.

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youth into direct collaboration with municipal officials, planners, and technical experts—are central to YGI’s approach. Participatory methods are supported by digital tools, including online platforms and interactive design environments such as Minecraft, which allow young people to visualize public space proposals, explore design trade-offs, and communicate priorities to inform planning discussions. These processes also generate qualitative and experiential data on how young people perceive and use urban environments, supporting monitoring of health- and wellbeing-relevant conditions.

Early phases of YGI focused on situational analyses of local conditions and governance arrangements shaping youth health and wellbeing in each city, including assessments of public space quality and accessibility. Findings from this analysis informed the selection of pilot sites and the design of locally tailored engagement processes. Capacity-building activities strengthened the skills of youth participants and municipal staff in participatory planning, digital tool use, and integrated approaches to urban health. Policy-relevant analysis and dialogue accompanied implementation, linking local

experimentation around public spaces to existing planning, budgeting, and governance frameworks.

Initial results indicate strengthened youth capacity to engage with municipal institutions, improved channels for participation in public space planning, and increased awareness among local authorities of the links between public space, governance, and youth health and wellbeing. The initiative has also contributed to the development of urban health-relevant indicators and monitoring approaches that reflect youth priorities and experiences. A developmental evaluation approach allows for iterative learning, adjustment, and refinement of methods across contexts.

Key enabling factors include strong municipal engagement, cross-sector partnerships, and the use of innovation processes that reduce barriers to youth participation. Challenges include navigating institutional constraints, aligning participatory timelines with formal planning cycles, and ensuring that locally generated innovations can be sustained beyond the project period. The initiative was designed to run through 2025, with later phases intended to consolidate governance gains, embed participatory processes in municipal practice, and support the sharing of transferable lessons across cities and regions.

Strategic Highlight

Innovation plays a critical role in strategic action for urban health, particularly in settings characterized by institutional and physical complexity and rapid change. Moreover, where access to decision-making is unequal, innovation can support alternative governance pathways through which excluded groups can generate knowledge, shape priorities, and influence outcomes. YGI demonstrates how innovation processes can reshape how urban health priorities are identified, negotiated, and acted upon to improve health and health equity.

In cities implementing the YGI, innovation serves as an enabler of integration, participation, and learning. Structured experimentation spaces – such as co-design workshops supported by digital design tools – enable young people, municipal authorities, and technical partners to jointly explore how public space decisions may affect health and wellbeing. These processes make complex relationships visible, link lived experience with planning and governance systems, and support informed decision-making under uncertainty. Rather than seeking one-size-fits-all solutions, the initiative embraces iterative adaptation, consistent with complexity-informed strategic practice.

The initiative also illustrates how innovation can strengthen governance for urban health. By embedding participatory co-design within municipal planning, budgeting, and policy dialogue, the initiative helps align informal engagement with formal institutional processes. This reduces fragmentation between sectors and actors, enhances

accountability, and increases the likelihood that health-relevant considerations are reflected in urban investments. These governance-oriented innovations are not dependent on specific technologies and can be adapted to diverse institutional and resource contexts.

A further strategic contribution lies in the initiative's emphasis on continuous improvement. Developmental evaluation and ongoing monitoring and support, along with policy analysis, facilitated learning across cities and over time, enabling approaches to be refined as the initiative evolved. The YGI learning reinforces efficiency and resilience for youth while creating opportunities to scale practices that are relevant and feasible. By operating across multiple intermediary cities, the initiative also highlights how innovation processes can be transferred globally, while remaining locally relevant.

Further Information

- [Fondation Botnar: Young Gamechangers Initiative](#)
- [Young Gamechangers Initiative](#)
- [Three cities selected to pilot the Young Gamechangers Initiative](#)
- [Young Gamechangers Initiative Data Hub](#)
- [YGI Participatory Budgeting](#)
- [Young Gamechangers: Amplifying Youth Voices for Healthier Public Spaces \[special issue of Journal of Public Space\]](#)