

# Pathways to young people's wellbeing



**Fondation  
Botnar  
Philanthropic  
Strategy**

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# Introduction

In recent years, the philanthropic sector has undergone a profound transformation. Long-held assumptions about the problem-solving potential of linear interventions and about the effectiveness of charitable aid have come to be questioned. Instead, there is today greater awareness of the complex interplay between social, environmental, economic and political challenges, a stronger sense of the importance of reflexivity among philanthropic donors, and a higher demand for philanthropic accountability and legitimacy. As a result, progressive philanthropic actors are increasingly looking to apply a modern approach to their philanthropic engagement, combining flexibility, risk-taking and trust-based funding with a long-term view and, increasingly, participatory approaches.

For Fondation Botnar, five years of operation since 2017 provided an opportunity to take stock of its strategy, management and grantmaking processes, and results to date. Therefore, it commissioned the organisation's first independent evaluation. Its findings and recommendations were to inform future strategy, to further develop its approach to grantmaking and its strategic learning and evaluation (SLE) functions to ultimately increase its impact.

As a result, the revised strategy "Pathways to young people's wellbeing" provides additional focus that will guide our philanthropic engagement over the next six years to contribute to enabling conditions for young people's wellbeing, particularly in low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs).

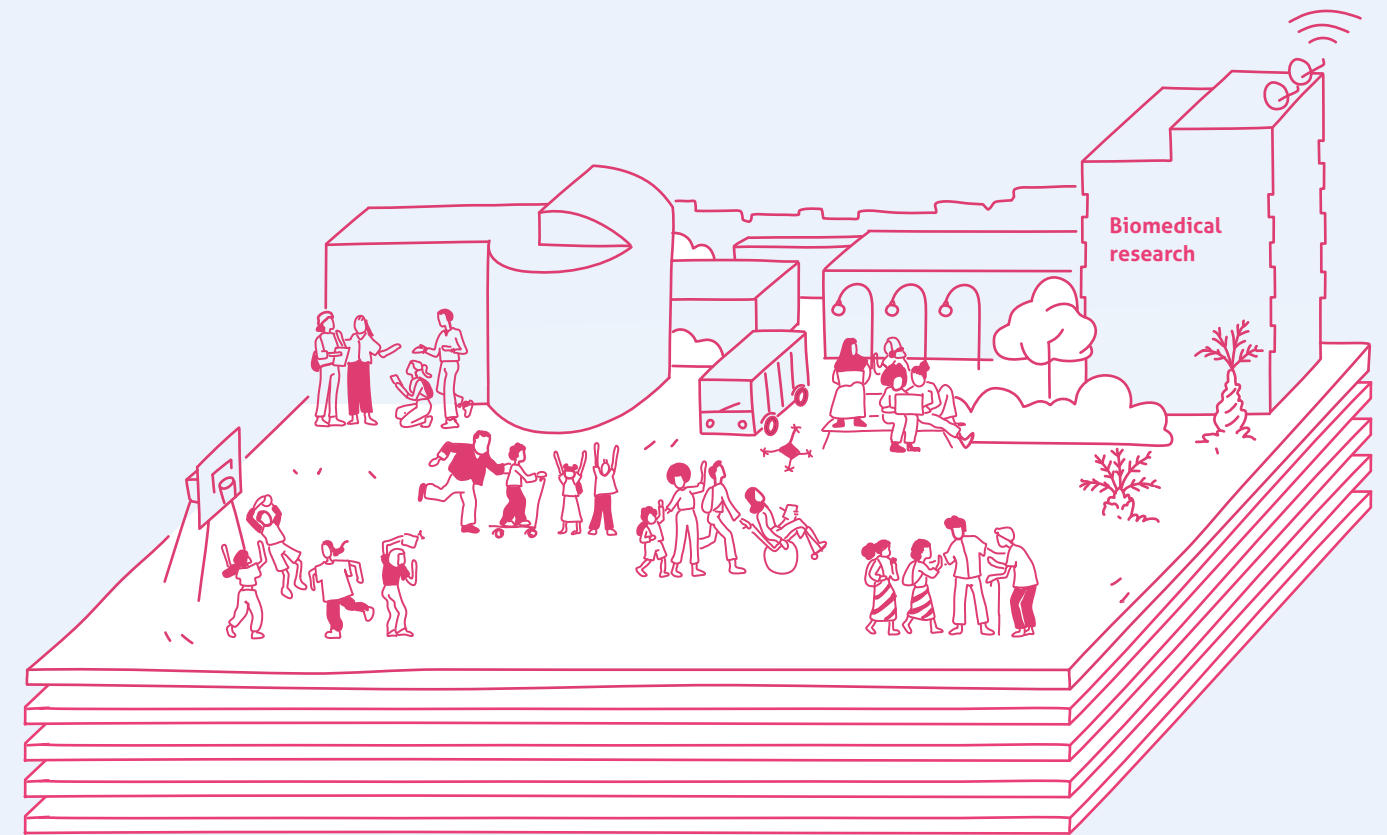
This refinement of the strategy was carried out by Fondation Botnar's Management Office and Board over the course of 2023, including targeted consultations with young people for their input on the thematic actions.

# A world where young people thrive

Fondation Botnar owes its origin to the legacy of Octav and Marcela Botnar. Founded in 2003 by Marcela, the foundation is dedicated to continuing the philanthropic heritage of the Botnar family. It remains true to Octav and Marcela Botnar's entrepreneurial and courageous spirit and their commitment to contribute to the wellbeing of children and young people, in particular those disadvantaged.

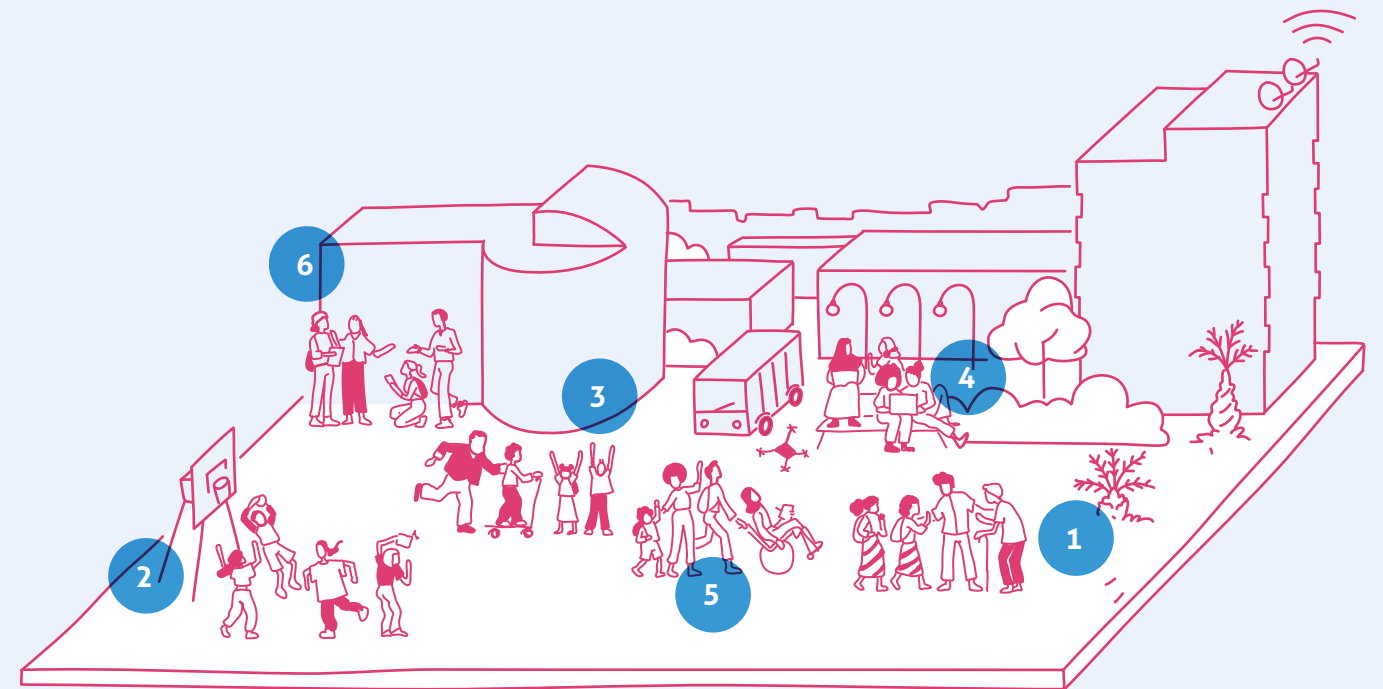
**We work with and for young people of all backgrounds to contribute to a world that is supportive of their wellbeing and respects, protects and fulfils their rights. We do this by focusing on two key areas:**

- 1. Addressing challenges and opportunities in the urban and digital spaces** where young people live, learn, work, connect and play, to help create conditions that are favourable to young people's wellbeing. We focus on eight countries: Romania, Ecuador, Colombia, Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania, Indonesia, and Vietnam.
- 2. Investing in biomedical research for child and adolescent health and wellbeing.** The Botnar family frequently supported biomedical research activities in various fields. The foundation has continued this support with a focus on children and adolescents, as biomedical research is still largely unfocused on their specific needs. Based on this refined Philanthropic Strategy, Fondation Botnar bundles its engagement in this area by investing in independent entities that focus on translational research to translate scientific results into real-world practice for the benefit of child and adolescent health worldwide: Basel Research Centre for Child Health (BRCCH) and the Botnar Institute for Immune Engineering (BIIE).



# Our working principles

Our philanthropic work and partnerships are guided by a set of working principles. They express our approach to how we can best contribute to creating the conditions for young people's wellbeing. The working principles guide our decision-making processes and ensure that our actions are aligned both with our strategic direction as well as our core beliefs and values. They also provide strategic coherence across all themes.



1. Relational wellbeing
2. Systems view and practice
3. Long-term commitment and trusted partnerships
4. Evidence and collective learning
5. Human rights
6. Meaningful youth participation.

## 1 Relational wellbeing



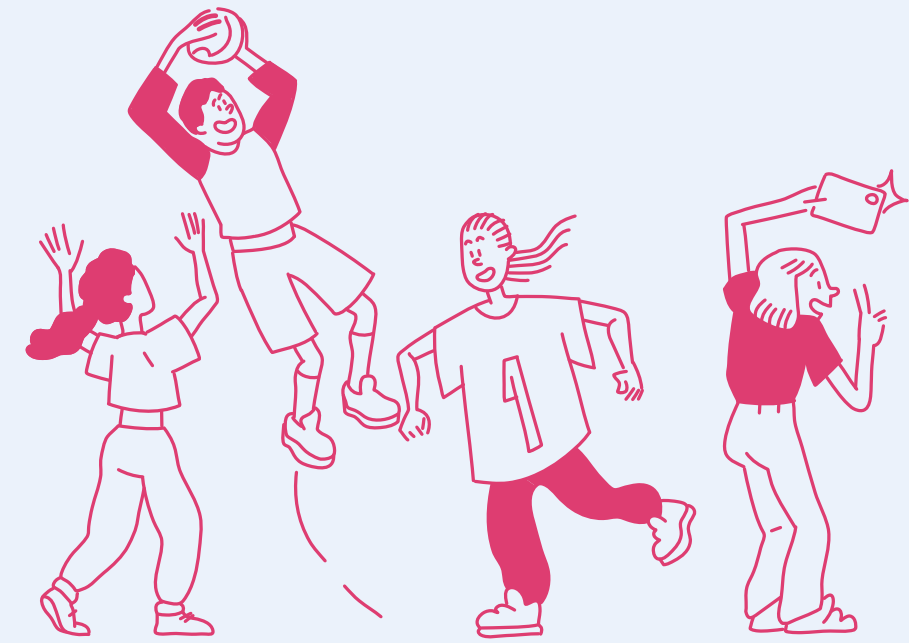
Our work and activities are guided by an approach that emphasises the **relational aspect of young people's wellbeing**. This approach draws on various elements of existing work.<sup>1</sup> It acknowledges that young people's wellbeing is constituted by material, economic, socio-cultural and political as well as environmental conditions and social relations. Promoting wellbeing means, for example:

- \* facilitating equitable access to resources and opportunities in physical and digital spaces;
- \* promoting collaboration and cooperation;
- \* cultivating a culture of care, respect, and mutual support;
- \* advancing young people's civic engagement and right to participation in political processes and decision-making;
- \* nurturing environmental responsibility and action.

A relational approach to wellbeing is holistic and assumes that by fostering strong social connections and meaningful young people's participation, we can contribute to developing the structural conditions necessary for the wellbeing of young people. It is thus an essential feature of our work to help build resilient and thriving communities and to ensure that young people can reach their full potential, while concurrently fostering a sense of responsibility in them to lead purposeful lives.

<sup>1</sup> White SC, Jha S. (2023). Exploring the Relational in Relational Wellbeing. *Social Sciences*. 12:11; del Pulgar, C. P., Anguelovski, I. and Connolly, J.. "Toward a green and playful city: Understanding the social and political production of children's relational wellbeing in Barcelona." *Cities* 96 (2020); Emirbayer, M. (1997). Manifesto for a relational sociology. *American journal of sociology*, 103:2; Atkinson, S., Bagnall, A. M., Corcoran, R., South, J., & Curtis, S. (2020). Being well together: individual subjective and community wellbeing. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 21:5.

## 2 Systems view and practice



Recognising wellbeing as a process and dynamic interplay between personal, societal and environmental relationships leads us to a **systems view and practice**. This implies a shift from linear models of change with the assumption of predictable cause-and-effect relationships toward systemic models of change, which stress structures and processes, interaction between causes, emergent outcomes, and sometimes unexpected consequences. Applying a systems perspective allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the interwoven factors that influence young people's wellbeing. This is key to designing approaches and solutions that are relevant, effective and sustainable.

### 3 Long-term commitment and trusted partnerships



Strongly related to this systemic view is a commitment to flexible, **long-term engagements and trusted partnerships**. Working towards systemic change requires time, sustained efforts, and dedication from all the stakeholders. As societal change is not linear, but often requires learning and dynamic adaptation, a flexible collaboration enables us to support our partners by allowing them to adapt their strategies to new insights and contextual currents while remaining aligned with our mission. While partnership arrangements need to be adjustable to changing conditions, we believe that long-term thematic and geographic commitments are necessary to affect lasting change.

### 4 Evidence and collective learning



Acknowledging the need for adaptations and adjustments, we emphasise the importance of **evidence and collective learning**. We adopt an evidence-informed approach to strategic decision-making and continuous learning at all levels (projects, portfolios, organisational). Such evidence and knowledge can take different forms and be based on data from different sources, such as lived experience, monitoring and evaluation, or qualitative and quantitative research. The need for continuous learning is based on the understanding that we do not have definite answers to the issues we are addressing, and that complex political, economic, environmental, societal dynamics shape the contexts we work in. Learning, therefore, means continuously appreciating and adapting to these dynamic contexts. We also believe that the joint generation and use of diverse forms of evidence builds trust with and between the partners and in the decisions to be taken.



## 5 Human rights



Our dedication to young people’s wellbeing is also underpinned by our **commitment to a rights-based approach** to our work. Human rights, including the rights of the child, are formally recognised rights under international law<sup>2</sup>. They are normatively defined legal and moral claims to which all members of the human family are entitled. They provide an authoritative framework to hold duty-bearers – states and increasingly non-state actors such as private enterprises – accountable. We recognise all young people as holders of universal and inalienable rights – irrespective of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, place of origin, or religious, cultural, ethnic or socioeconomic background – and aim to support their wellbeing by calling for and contributing to societies that respect, protect and fulfil their rights. Human rights interventions supported by the foundation work to overcome barriers that prevent young people from enjoying their rights.

<sup>2</sup> The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified treaty on human rights, is building upon the principles established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The CRC and the UDHR are thus interconnected in terms of their overarching human rights principles, but the CRC has a specific focus on the rights of children. Throughout this text, we use the term “human rights” to refer to the different existing instruments of the international human rights framework.

## 6 Meaningful youth participation



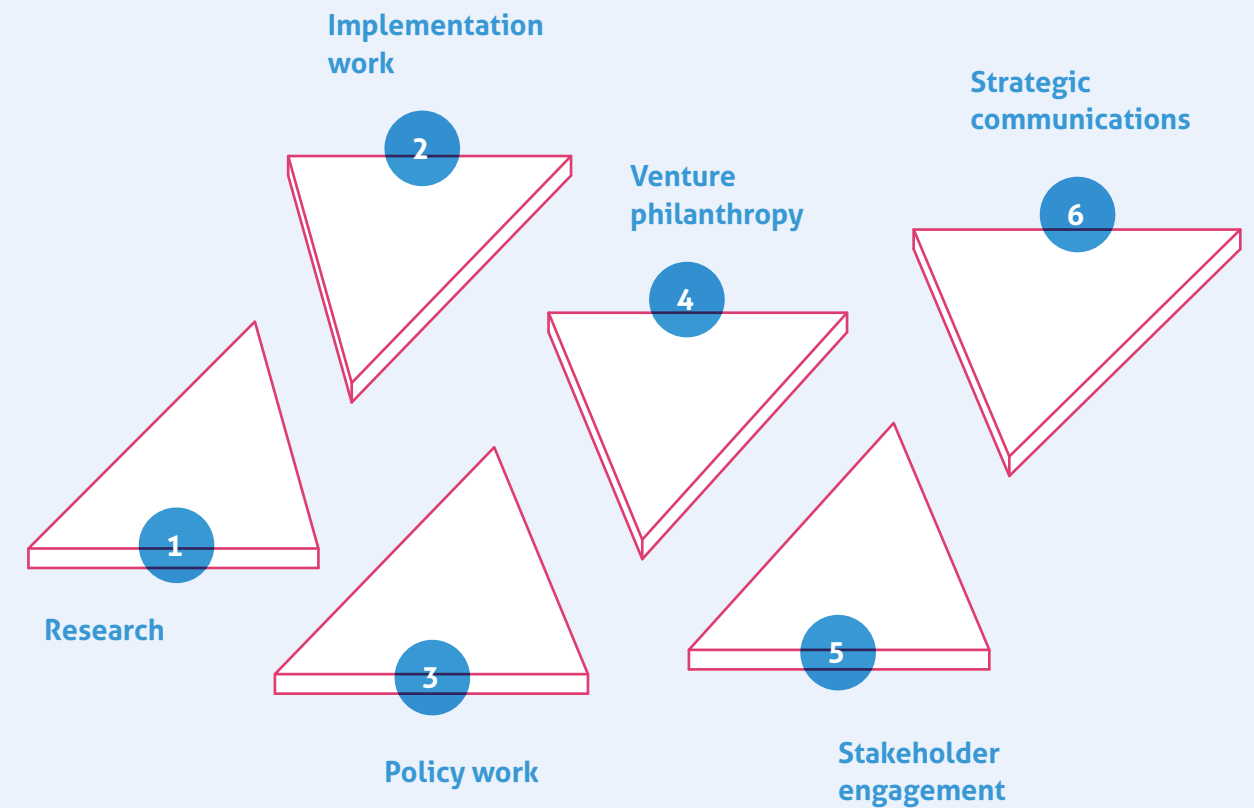
From our commitment to human rights, we also draw a responsibility **to promote and enable the meaningful participation of young people**. Recognising the evolving capacities of adolescents and young people, we seek to create, both in our foundation and externally, opportunities, processes and platforms for young people to participate in decision-making, claim their rights, demand accountability and shape their wellbeing. We commit to exploring how their perspectives and actions can be channelled in partnership to exert the greatest possible influence on the laws, policies, services, budgets, strategic priorities and programmes that affect their lives.



# Our modes of engagement

We engage through different modes that are often combined in one project or within a portfolio of projects and activities that underpin a theme. These modes of engagement are:

1. Research
2. Implementation work
3. Policy work
4. Venture philanthropy
5. Stakeholder engagement
6. Strategic communications



## 1. Research

In our work, we mainly support applied research and, more specifically, implementation science. Applied research strives to identify solutions to specific challenges or find answers to concrete questions. Implementation science seeks answers for how best to validate, apply and scale promising solutions. It offers knowledge that is applicable and implementable. For example, we and our partners use exploratory research or systematic reviews to examine existing evidence, approaches and solutions, and to identify knowledge, research and innovation gaps in a given theme and/or country. Furthermore, it supports participatory action research, i.e., working with those concerned with a specific challenge, such as young people. Longitudinal research focuses on the longer-term impact of stressors such as climate change or urbanisation on the wellbeing of young people over time. Finally, policy research examines, e.g., the effects of current government policies or predicts the potential economic effects of proposed policies (e.g., cost-benefit analysis).

## 2. Implementation work

With implementation work, we denote activities in the following main fields:

- \* Strengthen skills, knowledge and capacities;
- \* Develop and implement governance and financing models;
- \* Develop, establish and provide services;
- \* Produce and supply goods.

For example, Fondation Botnar supports efforts to strengthen the life skills, including digital skills, of young people in the public school system. It also promotes capacity strengthening of health workers and teachers, e.g., for early recognition of mental health issues among young people. Fondation Botnar also promotes the design and implementation of new services or products, such as digital tools that can help improve the quality of teaching. It also promotes governance models that involve young people, for example at city level to design safe, green public spaces.

<sup>3</sup> Social norms are commonly defined as shared formal and informal standards of acceptable and appropriate behaviour within a specific group or community. See also UNICEF: Defining Social Norms and Related Concepts, November 2021, URL: [Social-norms-definitions-2021.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/socialnorms/2021/05/20/1016/S0140-6736(16)00579-1) (unicef.org)

<sup>4</sup> Today, there is an extensive body of literature that underscores the substantial impact of social norms on adolescents, elucidating both the constructive and detrimental influences that norms can wield upon the health and overall wellbeing of this demographic sector. (George Patton et al: Our future: a Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing, The Lancet 2016, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)00579-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00579-1))

## 3. Policy work

Fondation Botnar seeks to improve the structural conditions for young people's wellbeing beyond immediate participants and beneficiaries of individual projects. Addressing the policy environment is, therefore, an important instrument to spur more long-lasting, sustainable and systemic change. Compared to direct service delivery or implementation work that aims at improving the immediate living conditions of individuals, the underlying objective of our policy work is to reduce structural (legal, political, normative, economic or societal) barriers to the wellbeing of young people in view of a longer time horizon.

The policy work that we envision is a deliberate, systematic process to generate, translate and disseminate evidence, raise awareness, and build capacity and will for policy and normative change. This includes, for example, addressing harmful gender norms that condone discrimination or even violence, which contribute significantly to the burden of disease, especially among adolescent girls and members of LGBTQ+ communities, or peer norms that encourage substance abuse or risky behaviours. Our work seeks to influence regulation and legislation, policies, and practices, including resource allocation decisions, within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. In doing so, we amplify the voices of underrepresented and marginalised groups and support independent research to generate new knowledge and evidence to inform debates, shift social norms<sup>3</sup> and develop new policy solutions for young people's wellbeing<sup>4</sup>.

## 4. Venture philanthropy

Venture philanthropy (VP) is a type of impact investment that takes concepts and techniques from venture capital finance and business management and applies them to achieving philanthropic goals. For us, VP forms an important part of our commitment to act innovatively, take risks and use all means necessary to effect lasting change for young people.

Our purpose-related venture capital investments enable the growth of early-stage start-up companies with innovative, impactful business models or products and services that have the potential to positively influence the wellbeing of young people in low- and middle-income countries. To ensure our investments align with this goal, we have established specific criteria for target investee companies.

VP invests in a range of sectors, also contributing to the different themes. The key is to invest at an early stage of a company's life, the period in which a company is growing strongly. At this stage, the availability of investment capital is most often constrained, and the investment is highly risky for investors. When Fondation Botnar invests at that stage, its capital contribution represents meaningful additionality, and together with the contributions of the other co-investors, allows the company to increase sales of its products or services, reach additional beneficiaries and thereby contribute to wellbeing.

## 5. Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a process by which organisations listen to, share with and inform their key stakeholders about issues related to their work, whether these are objectives, priorities or approaches. The process involves identifying, mapping and prioritising stakeholders to determine who to engage with, why and about what.

Stakeholder engagement helps our organisation to proactively consider the needs and demands of those interested in and/or affected by our organisation's work, which can foster connections, trust, confidence and buy-in to the organisation's key initiatives. As such, stakeholder engagement can mitigate potential risks and conflicts with stakeholder groups. Stakeholders also have a wealth of relevant knowledge, experience and connections that can be critical to helping our foundation be more relevant and impactful. Ultimately, an enabling environment cannot be created without credible and long-term engagement with key actors interested in and/or influencing the wellbeing of young people; stakeholder engagement is a direct expression of our systemic view.

For Fondation Botnar, our key stakeholder groups focus on engaging with youth-led organisations and networks, peer foundations, non-government organisations and multilateral organisations that are particularly relevant and active in our focus themes. Further categories with whom we also engage with as an organisation through consortia and networks are city and country-level actors and the private sector.

## 6. Strategic communications

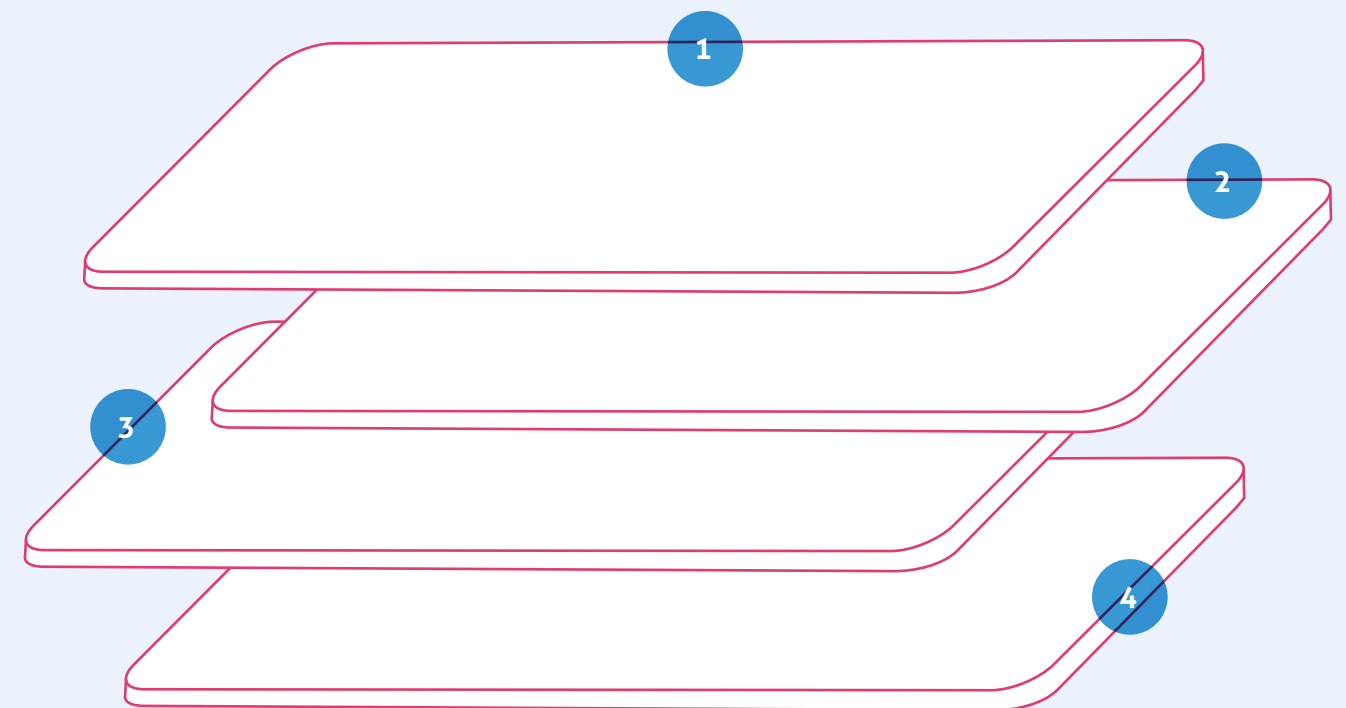
For our organisation, strategic communication is critical to achieving our vision and mission and to preventing our reputation and agenda from being shaped by others. The purpose of strategic communication within Fondation Botnar is to raise awareness of the issues affecting young people in urban environments, to understand how change can happen, and to build trust in Fondation Botnar's ability to be a partner, catalyst and contributor to change, especially in areas that correspond to how we position the organisation.

Fondation Botnar and its partners seek to make strategic communications an integral part of supporting projects, where appropriate, and especially of larger initiatives, to enable the achievement and impact of project and portfolio objectives by ensuring that evidence and learning effectively reach the right audiences and play a critical role in advancing policy and advocacy goals.

# Our focus: young people's wellbeing in the urban and digital space

We want to make a meaningful difference in young people's lives by addressing challenges and opportunities for their wellbeing in the urban and digital spaces.

Space refers to the physical, social, and symbolic environments where social interactions occur. It can include both physical locations and conceptual spaces where social relationships and structures are formed and understood. Our decision to focus on these two spaces reflects the recognition that urbanisation and digitalisation are significant trends of the 21st century, presenting opportunities and threats to young people.



1. Enabling liveable and sustainable city systems
2. Enabling a human rights-based digital transformation
3. Promoting mental health
4. Strengthening quality public education

**Both urban and digital spaces facilitate social interaction and connectivity, albeit in different ways.** In both urban and digital environments, one can observe that individuals and communities actively seek to create or transform a space into meaningful places with significance, identity, and a sense of belonging for the people who use them. We also see that the boundaries between urban and digital spaces become blurred as digital technologies permeate physical spaces and online experiences affect offline realities. Furthermore, both spaces serve as platforms for self-expression, identity exploration and construction, and provide opportunities to mobilise and align. At the same time, power dynamics, inequalities, discrimination and abuse can be seen in both spaces, strongly shaping how young people experience, access and make use of their spaces.

Considering these trends, there are opportunities and challenges for young people. Urbanisation and digitalisation provide increased access to education, quality health services, economic opportunities and connectivity. However, there are risks, such as the digital divide, online harassment and urban inequalities as well as unhealthy lifestyles that can hinder young people's wellbeing and especially their mental health.

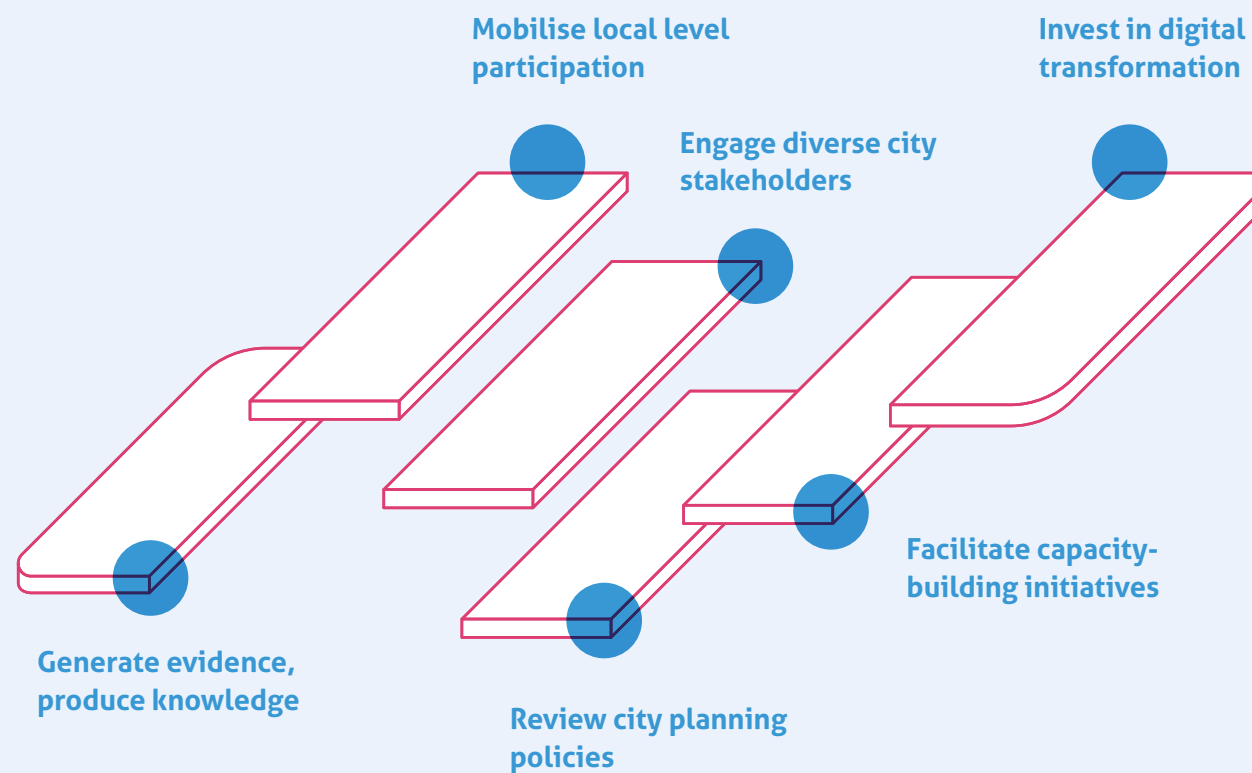
To address challenges and opportunities in these two spaces, we focus on four thematic areas:

- 1. Liveable and sustainable city systems**
- 2. Human rights-based digital transformation**
- 3. Mental health**
- 4. Quality public education**

For each of our four themes, we are seeking to develop a portfolio<sup>5</sup> of projects and activities that leverage the opportunities and mitigate challenges of both trends, including digital literacy programmes, equitable access to technology, and policies to address urban inequalities, safety and the mental wellbeing of young people. Our philanthropic work shall be based on the assumption that balancing the opportunities and challenges of these trends is crucial for young people to thrive in the urban and digital spaces of the 21st century.

<sup>5</sup> By portfolio, we mean a strategic, systematic and intentional compilation of multiple, diverse and complementary projects and other activities designed to address societal challenges and to create positive and lasting change towards young people's wellbeing.

## 1 Enabling liveable and sustainable city systems



### Challenges and opportunities for the wellbeing of young people

The world is rapidly urbanising, with over two-thirds of the global population projected to live in urban areas by 2050. This trend significantly impacts various dimensions of sustainable development, including the social, economic and environmental spheres. Urban growth has been linked to increased inequalities, physical and mental health issues, inadequate food systems and nutrition and environmental degradation.

Urban areas are also becoming increasingly youthful, with UN-Habitat estimating that 60% of the urban population will be under the age of 18 by 2030. Moreover, the global youth population aged 15 to 24 years is projected to rise to 1.3 billion by 2030. In light of these trends, creating healthy, sustainable, and liveable urban environments is critical for the wellbeing of young people living in intermediary cities. This involves engaging young people as key stakeholders and decision-makers in urban development processes, enabling them to contribute to creating cities that meet their needs and aspirations. If young people are heard and respected as equal partners, they can serve as critical catalysts for sustainable development, as they exhibit a higher inclination towards embracing new technologies, innovations and “glocalised” perspectives.

Young people living in cities face limitations imposed by socio-cultural norms and inadequate infrastructure and services. Moreover, the voices and aspirations of youth are often ignored by urban policymakers and practitioners due to a lack of data that accurately reflects their lives and only minimal opportunities for meaningful engagement. The top-down technocratic approach used to design, plan and manage cities can negatively impact the mobility and wellbeing of young people, limit their access to education, balanced nutrition and employment opportunities, hinder their leisure experiences, and ultimately curtail their right to the city.

### Strategic intent – to which changes do we want to contribute?

We aim to contribute to well-functioning city systems through processes led by local communities, and by fostering city partnerships spearheaded by young people.

Specifically we aim for the following positive changes in city systems:

1. More liveable and safe public urban spaces by bringing young people to the forefront of urban planning, collaboratively with municipal authorities, and by enabling them to claim their right to the city.
2. Improved urban food and nutrition with a collaborative and multistakeholder, city-driven approach, and by responsibly using digital technologies to effectively tackle issues in a comprehensive and interconnected manner.
3. Re-imagined cities through youth-centred partnerships and co-created social innovation by bringing together stakeholders and driving policy change to provide opportunities for young people to engage and thrive.

The model of all programmes emphasises local ownership, community engagement, contextual adaptation, care and trust with and between our partners. The theme recognises the need to engage with digital platforms, which have the potential to attract the attention of young people better than traditional urban space activities. Research also supports the critical assessment of the role of technologies in empowering young people's participation and decision-making in urban governance.

### Strategic actions – how do we want to contribute towards these changes?

Each programme under the theme is taking the following strategic actions to achieve its goals:

#### Generate evidence and produce knowledge.

The strategic action aims to gather data and document and disseminate knowledge to advocate for justice, equity and the rights of young people, thereby shaping a global inclusion agenda. This requires establishing systematic learning processes to assess how evidence (including from lived experience) has been generated and analysed. It also requires mapping the opportunities and barriers to act on this gathered evidence within specific institutional and political contexts.

#### Mobilise local-level participation.

The strategic action aims to ensure that projects are co-led with empowered local communities, especially young people, and that locally-generated solutions are used to inform programme design.

#### Engage with diverse city stakeholders.

The strategic action aims to build equitable partnerships and collaboration between diverse stakeholders, including young people and marginalised groups, and form citywide networks that can unite around shared goals to enhance wellbeing.

#### Review city planning processes, systems and policies.

The strategic action aims to generate evidence and advocate for policy change to ensure more responsive, equitable, inclusive and accountable governance processes for all residents.

#### Invest in digital transformation.

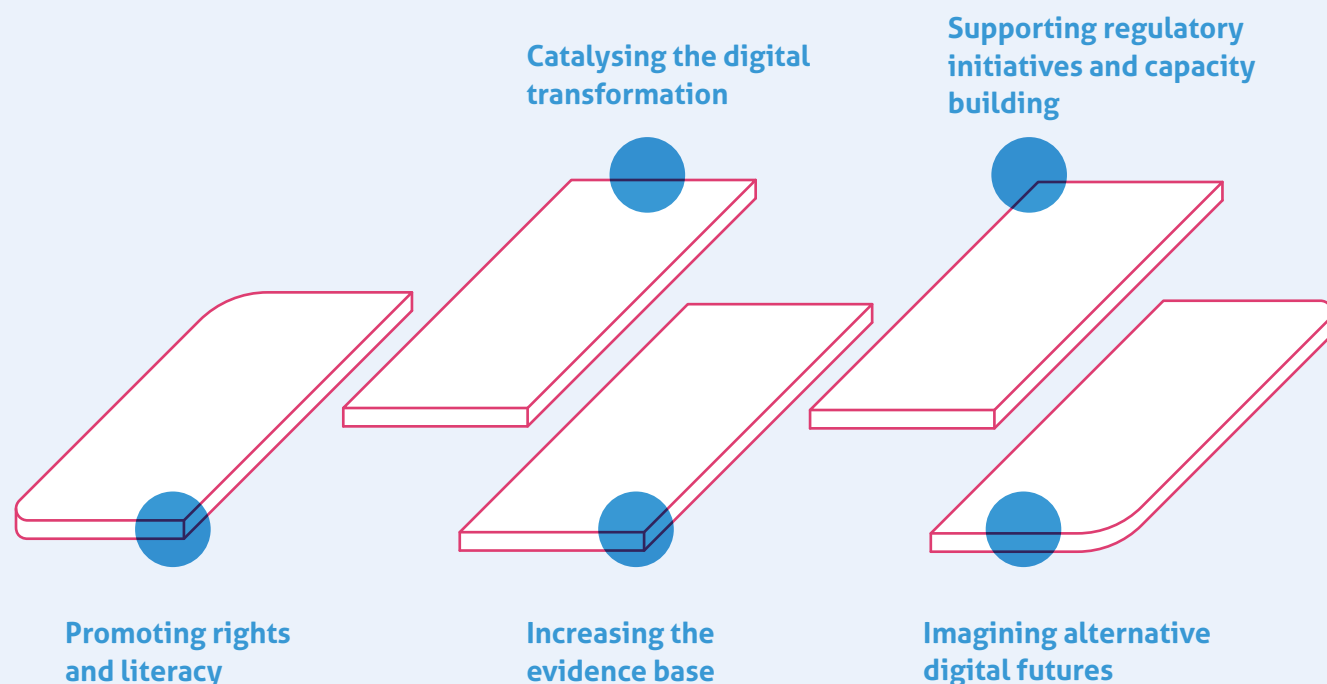
The strategic action aims to invest in strategies that democratise technology and ensure equitable and human rights-based access to technology. Facilitate capacity-building initiatives.

#### Facilitate capacity-building initiatives.

The strategic action aims to support young people, decision-makers and knowledge partners to act collaboratively as catalysts for change and to share learning locally and globally.



## 2 Enabling a human rights-based digital transformation



### Challenges and opportunities for the wellbeing of young people

Today's young people are the first generation born and socialised in the digital age. AI and digital technologies are already here and will grow to be part and parcel of their education, learning and entertainment, professional careers, health and healthcare routines, economic interactions and social relations. Recent developments in artificial intelligence (e.g., GPT4 and beyond) will reinforce and magnify this trend at a scale and pace that is hardly predictable today. This offers a multitude of opportunities to connect, participate and access information, but also creates significant challenges and concerns that are particularly grave for young people's health and wellbeing—e.g., privacy and safety, biased and discriminating datasets, targeted marketing, and lack of transparency and accountability. Hence, young people's wellbeing is constituted to a large part by their involvement and the quality of their participation (or lack thereof) in the digital space.

At the same time, unequal access threatens to deepen social and economic disparities within communities and globally, especially disadvantaging adolescent girls and women: as the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, an unacceptable digital divide exists, even in high-income countries, between those with access to the internet and those without. As technology and innovation spreads and the dependency on digital access and AI-based applications continues to unfold, unfair and uneven distribution of educational and socioeconomic benefits will lead to significant political, socioeconomic and cultural challenges for future generations. It is thus the combination of discrimination and poverty that drives the divide between, but also within, high-, low- and middle-income countries and causes it to be reconstructed in the virtual world. In sum, our work is based on the assumption that digital technology and AI can enhance young people's wellbeing by providing access to valuable resources and opportunities, be it in health, education or social life. Additionally, these technologies can empower young individuals by offering connectedness and relatedness. However, governance – understood as the multitude of formal and informal rules, principles, guidelines and regulations – is essential to leverage the positive aspects of digital technology and AI for all segments of the population and to ensure the responsible and ethical development and use of these technologies, protecting young people from potential harm or exploitation.

### Strategic intent – to which changes do we want to contribute?

We aim to contribute to an inclusive and equitable digital future for young people with robust, effective, human rights-based governance of digital technology, data and AI, balancing protection, promotion, participation and access to data, digital goods and infrastructure.

Specifically, we aim to contribute towards the following changes:

1. Increased collaborative efforts towards strengthened human rights-based digital governance frameworks;
2. Expanded equitable access to services and empowerment of young people through Digital Public Goods and venture philanthropy;
3. Stronger agency of young people of all backgrounds in shaping their digital futures through strengthened skills, awareness and participation;
4. Collective efforts by relevant stakeholders for joint learning, knowledge exchange and strategic alignment.

### Strategic actions – how do we want to contribute towards these changes?

Working towards this strategic intent, we focus on the following strategic actions:

#### Promote digital rights and literacy.

Evidence shows that today young people face multiple challenges to their human rights from digital technologies and AI. Promoting young people's digital rights and literacy is, therefore, an essential part of our work and sits squarely at the intersection of our commitment to human rights, digital governance, and education.

#### Catalyse the digital transformation of health and education: the role of digital public goods and infrastructures, and venture philanthropy.

We aim to catalyse and support inclusive digital public goods (DPGs) and infrastructures (DPIs) in domains that contribute directly to the wellbeing of young people, especially in health and education, and in areas where there is market failure. By nature of being open-source, free of charge, independent from tech companies, and potentially interoperable with other platforms, DPGs (Wikipedia being one of the best-known examples) promote sharing and collaboration. This leads to lower implementation costs and facilitates relatively easy and low-cost customisation to local needs. Investments in digital public goods thus serve those who are underserved because they don't have the purchasing power. Moreover, with the current success of AI models, it is critical to support digital and data-based public goods that enable positive futures and allow access to these technologies for all. This will also ensure that the value of the digital revolution is accessible to all (young) people and not just those with the necessary purchasing power. Innovative examples that tackle challenges and address the needs of young people in LMICs using DPGs can create direct benefits for health, wellbeing, and education in the geographies where they are funded with a focus on equity.

At the same time, there are also promising opportunities for venture philanthropy (VP) to invest in startups with innovative business models to contribute to the digital transformation of health and education. DPGs can be complemented with digital technologies developed by private for-profit companies (e.g., commercial solutions for better health through quality medications, new therapies, and improved access to healthcare services, or for improved learning outcomes through better quality education).

### Increase the evidence base to foster awareness, knowledge and learning for evidence-based policies.

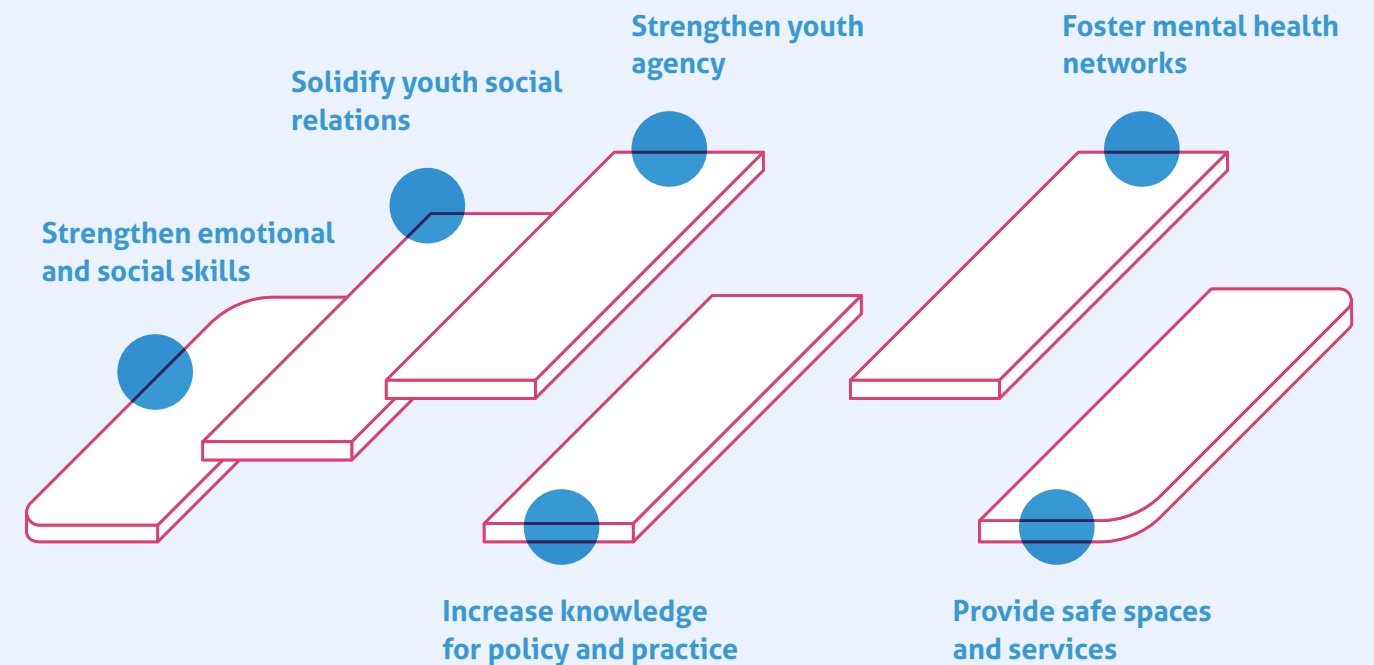
The evidence base around the implications of digital technology and AI across geographies and social groups is still very uneven, with limited evidence available, especially from LMICs and with regard to marginalised groups. We seek to promote research that improves the knowledge base so that we better understand how digital technologies and AI impact young people in our focus countries. Our intent is to create awareness of the problem, demand accountability, identify and elevate evidence-based policy and normative solutions, and support sustained implementation and uptake of those solutions in policymaking. This includes, for example, working with international organisations recognised as normative and standard-setting actors by high and low- and middle-income countries to assess the available evidence, develop guidelines and standards, and inform governments' policymaking.

### Support legal and regulatory initiatives for inclusive, equitable, human rights-based governance of digital technology, data and AI.

We seek to ensure that digital technologies and AI tools are designed in a way that protects human rights. To achieve this, we will continue to promote initiatives that go beyond self-regulation and instead seek to establish more comprehensive and enforceable rules, standards, guidelines and policies by governments or regulatory bodies to address various aspects of the digital realm, such as data privacy, cybersecurity, content moderation and platform accountability. In LMICs, this is particularly urgent since many states need improved national legislation and capacities.

### Facilitate the imagination of alternative digital futures.

Today, digital technological developments are often presented in a deterministic way as being both unavoidable and irresistible. As governments tend to be slow in their response to regulatory challenges around new technologies, and the public is often ill-prepared to hold decision-makers or companies accountable, wide-reaching decisions about our digital futures are often taken without broad-based debate. We want to amplify the voice and imagination of today's youth, support their agency in developing visions and ideas for positive digital futures, and partner with them in debates and societal discourses about preventing adverse impacts of technology upon future generations.



### Challenges and opportunities for the wellbeing of young people

During adolescence, young people develop the physical, cognitive, emotional, social and other resources necessary for leading healthy lives. However, these physical, cognitive and emotional developments, as well as changes in the environment of young people, not only have an impact on their mental health<sup>6</sup> when they are young, but also determine future distress in their adulthood. Mental health is a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, to realise their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities. Mental health is an integral component of health and wellbeing and is more than the absence of mental disorder. Around 10% of the world's children and adolescents experience mental health challenges. These differ by context: in urban areas, young people increasingly suffer from stress and anxiety due to noise pollution, lack of recreative spaces, or interpersonal violence. Stress and anxiety are also caused by high-performance competition in schools or at the workplace. In the digital space, social media are the arena for peer pressure, cyberbullying and discrimination, which leads to anxiety, depression and even suicidal ideation. Globally, 75% of all mental health challenges begin before the age of 24. Our funded research in cities in Vietnam and Tanzania has underlined the importance of the above-mentioned mental health stressors.

Neglecting young people's mental health not only limits their potential to experience productive and fulfilling lives, but also causes long-term social and economic costs for societies. Despite the tremendous needs, only 2% of national health budgets are spent on mental health, and often less than 1% in LMICs. However, some of our focus countries have put mental health on their policy agenda, e.g., Ghana, Tanzania and Colombia. The scarce investments mainly go into clinical mental health care, not promotion and prevention. Hence, they do not reflect the financial gaps in other sectors that primarily address the structural conditions that shape young people's mental health.

### Strategic intent – to which changes do we want to contribute?

**We aim to contribute to favourable conditions that promote young people's mental health and wellbeing today and have a positive influence on their later lives.**

Specifically, we aim for the following changes that result in these favourable conditions:

1. Stronger agency of young people of all backgrounds through strengthened skills, awareness and participation;
2. Increased connectedness of young people with their social surroundings that have a stronger ability to respond adequately to young people's issues;
3. Reduced stigma and discrimination;
4. Increased access to and use of context-adapted promotive and preventive services;
5. Collective action by relevant stakeholders based on joint learning, knowledge exchange and strategic alignment.

### Strategic actions – how do we want to contribute towards these changes?

We have defined the following strategic actions to promote mental health and prevent mental health conditions from developing or becoming more serious:

#### Strengthen emotional, social and other relevant skills.

We engage in strengthening young people's emotional, social and other skills they need to build resilience in the face of adverse contexts that may impact their mental health. In the urban context, this may be interpersonal violence in their families or among peers, online bullying, or violation of privacy rights in the digital space. Such skills are also being strengthened through our theme of quality public education.

#### Solidify relations between young people and their social surroundings.

We also need to strengthen young people's relations with their peers, families, teachers, health workers and communities – taking a relational approach. Not only young people themselves but also their social surroundings need to have better capacities, i.e., what influences young people's mental health (e.g. parental, peer and academic pressure, intra-family violence bullying), how one can detect signs of mental health issues and best connect with the affected person, and how to seek appropriate support. This is key to vulnerable young people, e.g., affected by chronic illness (HIV, cancer) or by loss of parents.

#### Promote voice and meaningful participation of young people.

For mental health policy and practice to be relevant and responsive to young people, it also needs their participation and agency so that they can voice their challenges, concerns, expectations and ideas. We adopt and engage in creating effective mechanisms through which young people participate, e.g., in the analysis of challenges and opportunities for their mental health, designing and evaluating solutions and approaches in community engagement for mental health and in policy and programme-related decision-making. We assume that this strategic action also leads to an increased recognition of young people's transformative power. However, for young people to participate meaningfully, their capacity strengthening is also key so that they are able to innovate and drive actions.

#### Foster national and global networks between mental health stakeholders.

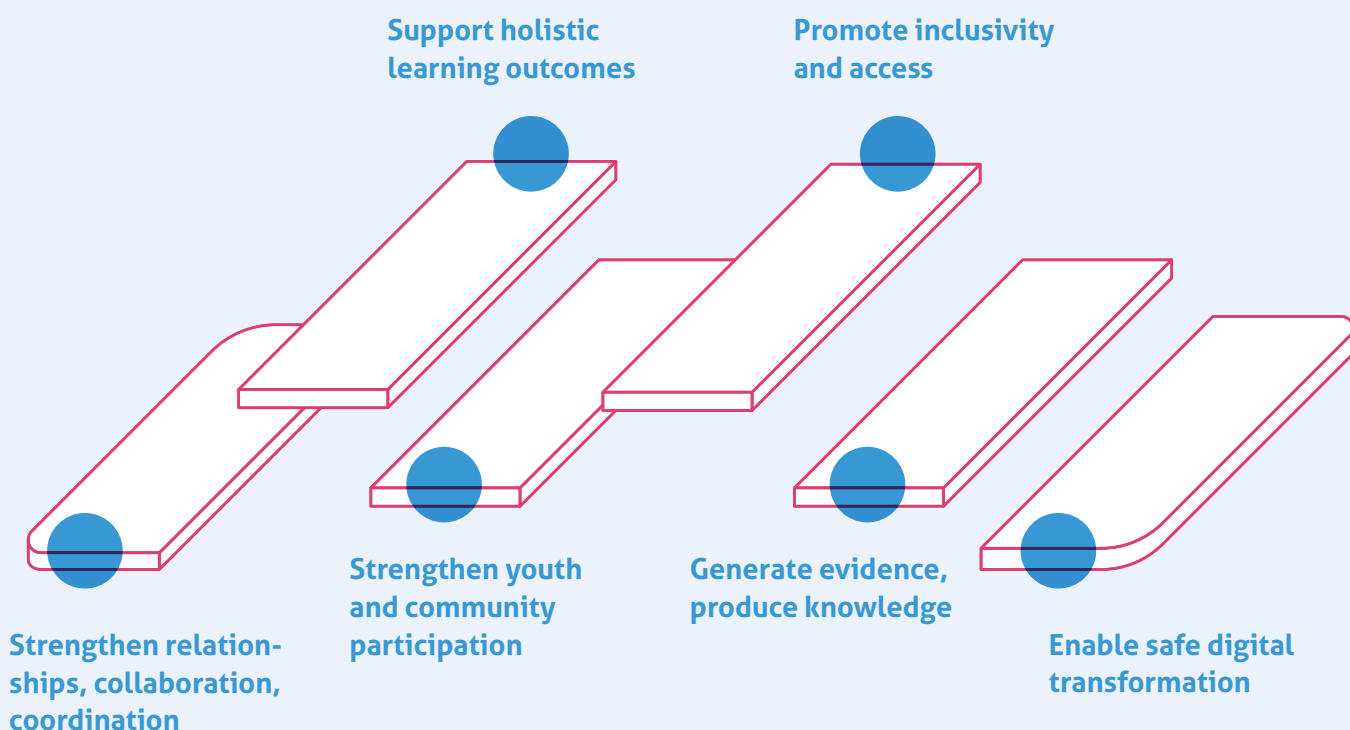
Active national and global networks that assemble mental health-relevant stakeholders from different sectors or countries are key to creating favourable conditions. Stakeholders may be authorities from different sectors, young people, researchers, policymakers, funders and implementers. Through stakeholder engagement, we want to foster networks that can develop and drive research, policy and programmatic agendas, providing a space for joint learning, knowledge exchanges and strategic alignment on priorities, including between funders. Such networks are also instrumental for ensuring better alignment of programmes with policies. We also strive to promote exchange between global and national networks so that they inform each other's agendas, e.g., global frameworks that are informed by country experience.

#### Increase the knowledge base for context-adapted policy and practice.

Conditions for promoting mental health should be based on context-specific evidence that ideally can be compared across countries. The lived experiences of people with mental health challenges or clinically diagnosed disorders are as important as applied research. We want to support the generation of relevant context-specific evidence to a) increase the understanding of drivers and resulting patterns of mental health in the urban and digital space (e.g. nutrition), and b) to inform policy, funding and programmatic decisions across sectors. The evidence needs to be translated into formats that are relevant and understandable for policymakers, funders and practitioners (through, e.g., communities of practice). Here we will apply policy and research.

#### Provide safe context-adapted spaces and services.

We want to contribute to providing safe digital and physical spaces and services e.g., where young people can meet, interact and do things together and feel safe (sports, recreation centres, digital fora). These are particularly important for young people from marginalised urban neighbourhoods where criminality and loose social tissues often co-exist. We also want to support their connection to nature and the environment through access to green and blue spaces, leveraging our work in the "enabling liveable and sustainable city systems" theme. We also invest in context-adapted, more flexible and integrated basic mental health services (e.g., early detection and management of cases in schools) that are especially used and trusted by those in hard-to-reach (urban) areas and confronted with socio-cultural barriers (e.g., stigma). In this context, where appropriate, we will leverage the potential of digital technology, AI, and VP.



### Challenges and opportunities for the wellbeing of young people

Education systems today need to prepare to equip young people for the world they are graduating into, a world defined by uncertainty and rapid changes. The growing number of pupils from different backgrounds with different needs puts pressure on education systems, which lack resources and opportunities to prepare, innovate, improve teaching methodologies, and invest the time needed in the children’s learning journey. Young people with special needs and marginalised groups are often excluded from mainstream education due to the limited ability of the system to cope with their needs. Differences in access to digital infrastructure and literacy can further limit disadvantaged pupils’ educational opportunities, deepening existing inequalities and creating risks for young people.

To address these shortcomings, our work under this theme is based on the assumption that education is a public good that should be accessible to all children equitably. We therefore focus on school-aged young people and public education systems, as opposed to extracurricular activities, which are often more accessible to young people from wealthier socio-economic backgrounds. This approach is supported by the recent UNESCO report and call for action: “Reimagining Our Futures Together – A New Social Contract For Education”.

Gaining life skills through the public education system, where young people spend a vast amount of their time, would enable their adaptability and resilience, empower them, sustain their sense of meaning and purposeful activity, help them with their employability, and encourage more active citizens. To efficiently do so, education systems need to have the capacity to integrate successful solutions and generate evidence on these solutions as well as evidence that can inform decision-making areas.

Technology has a meaningful role in our desired transformation process if the system uses it responsibly – keeping privacy, data protection and inclusivity as key priorities while serving as an asset for the teachers and pupils, not as a burden. By adopting a community-based approach, where communities and relationships within them are strengthened, and the community has an important role in the ownership of technology integration into its education system, young people will be supported and gain agency on their learning journey in rapidly changing urban contexts.



### Strategic intent – to which changes do we want to contribute?

We aim to strengthen public education to improve learning outcomes, preparing young people from all backgrounds for the world they are citizens of and will graduate into while having a safe, nurturing and enjoyable learning journey.

Specifically, we aim to contribute to the following changes:

1. Growing collaborative culture among actors in the education system, including community and parents, giving more voice to young people;
2. Positive and inclusive learning environments, providing safe spaces to young people and teachers;
3. School curriculums that reflect holistic learning;
4. Technology and evidence-driven teaching methodologies adopted in and out of school;
5. Improved access, trust, care and inclusion within the school environment;
6. Education actors generate and use evidence and learn together.

### Strategic actions – how do we want to contribute towards these changes?

Working towards this strategic intent, we focus on the following strategic actions:

#### Strengthen relationships and foster collaboration and coordination.

Strengthening the relationships between students, teachers, auxiliary staff, parents and education administrators to foster a culture of trust, respect and belonging in schools will contribute to safe school spaces and can further life skills such as empathy outside curriculums.

Focusing on the relations within the school community is not enough. By bringing together funders, policymakers and implementing partners, and enabling space for the community voices to be heard, we can act as a catalyst, foster coordination and collaboration within the different partners, keeping evidence and purpose at the centre of education interventions and, hopefully, limit fragmentation and silos within the education system.

#### Support enabling conditions for improved holistic learning outcomes for young people.

Holistic learning seeks to activate all aspects of the learner's personality fully. We strive to strengthen public education systems by integrating life skills<sup>7</sup> prioritised by young people into their learning journey, not at the cost of basic literacy and numeracy, but in a way that reinforces capacities in both. For this, the curriculum should be interrogated and adapted to the needs of young people.

#### Foster meaningful participation of young people and surrounding school communities.

Fostering young people's and their educational community's agency on their learning journey is key. For interventions to be tailored to the needs and aspirations of young people, the community's voice in general, and young people's voice in particular, needs to be uplifted, and their agency needs to be fostered. Policymakers, funders and implementing partners have an important role in shifting the power dynamics to enable young people and educational communities to take ownership of their learning journey.

<sup>7</sup> Life skills are understood by us as skills in the following areas: relational skills (teamwork and collaboration); empathy; learning skills; resilience skills, critical thinking; social entrepreneurship skills; human rights, digital literacy; financial literacy; nutrition and health literacy; ecological literacy; adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) and relationships.



**Promote inclusivity in and access to schools.**

Where access to school is possible, ensuring an inclusive, safe environment for young people to enjoy their learning journey is critical. This includes addressing risks such as violence (including social and physical) and providing basic learning environment conditions (water and sanitation, tables, chairs, etc.) with the support of other partners. Inclusivity as an overall goal in the portfolio is not enough; solutions need to be developed for education to become inclusive. We can take this opportunity to learn from young people of varying abilities and educational needs, as well as organisations that are already active. We can approach the theme of inclusivity alongside bettering mainstream education instead of treating the two separately, providing comparative evidence on learning outcomes for young people in mainstream education and those in special education who have gone through the same processes. Where access to school is not possible, we need to improve access to a safe learning space for children from all backgrounds (socio-economic or with different learning needs).

**Generate evidence and produce knowledge.**

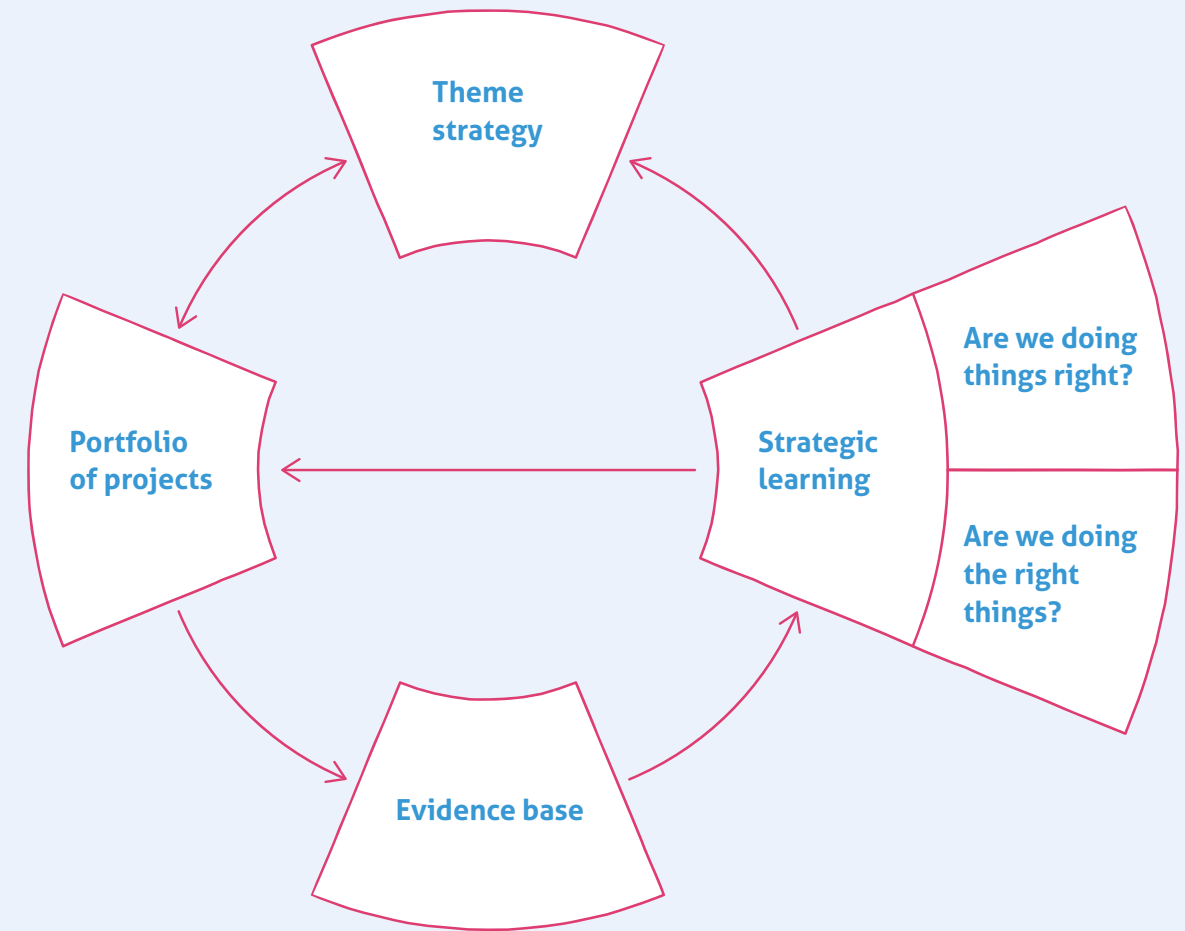
This strategic action is strongly linked to the research mode of engagement. One of the challenges of scaling up successful solutions is the need for more evidence concerning their implementation and effectiveness. Creating an evidence base for successful solutions would enable them to become a part of more young people's learning journeys, and for them to be adopted at a higher level, and potentially allowing them to contribute to policies. Additionally, generating evidence and producing knowledge can complement decision-making at different levels of the education system, ensuring that governments, as well as school communities, can make evidence-informed decisions.

**Enable digital transformation of education to be safe and inclusive.**

Digital transformation, as well as innovation, has a meaningful role to play in our desired impact on education systems. However, we want to ensure that the surrounding digital and innovation space in education is an enabling, safe and inclusive environment within the system. We see our role as bridging relations between successful digital service providers, startups and the public education system to advance the use of digital technologies and innovation in education.

# Our approach to strategic learning and evaluation

Strategic learning and evaluation (SLE) aims to help us understand what difference we make, to whom we make this difference, how we make this difference, and how we can improve. Our strategy for SLE is based on the same working principles that guide our philanthropic efforts.



## How we make sense of evidence and learn

To understand the difference we make, we first look at the effects of our thematic portfolios to see if they align with the changes we aim to contribute to. We also capture, if additional changes occur through venture philanthropy investments beyond the themes and through our philanthropic enabler activities, such as cross-cutting research, policy work or stakeholder engagement. Second, we analyse the effects of applying our working principles to improve the way we work. Third, we also aim to better understand the changes in young people's overall wellbeing in the contexts we work in.

## How we collect and use evidence

Together with our partners, we collect and use evidence on three main levels, applying a mix of methods:

### 1. On the level of the projects and activities we fund and the companies we invest in.

This level is where evidence is effectively generated through the activities of project partners and companies. Using evidence on this level tells us and our partners whether the individual projects and investments are reaching the intended outcomes. It will also help our partners to course-correct if the activity is not having the intended effects. This evidence will be collected by our partners as part of their regular monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) activities as well as occasionally by independent evaluations. We are not prescribing specific approaches and methods, but insist on a certain level of reliability and data quality.

### 2. On the level of portfolios.

Evidence on this level tells us whether the theme and venture philanthropy portfolios are strategically managed in terms of the composition of funded projects and investments, respectively, and whether they effectively contribute to the changes we are aiming for. Looking at evidence on this level allows us, for example, to decide whether some projects are missing or if some are not contributing to the success of the overall portfolio. While most of these considerations are based on evidence collected by grant partners and investees, additional data is collected by our learning partners as well as, occasionally, through independent portfolio-level evaluations. To collect portfolio-level evidence, we prefer designs that are specifically adapted to portfolio approaches and methods that are participatory and mix qualitative and quantitative instruments.

### 3. On the level of young people's wellbeing.

This level goes beyond individual themes and allows us to understand whether, as a foundation, we are seeing changes in young people's wellbeing, and to what extent our funding has contributed to them. While we are not only aspiring to prove the attribution of the observed change to the projects and investments we support, we are interested to see if there is a change in young people's overall wellbeing. On this level, we use a combination of evidence collected by grant partners and investees, evidence collected through independent evaluations, and evidence directly collected from young people. This assessment is strongly based on listening to young people's own lived experiences. In addition to these levels, we also collect evidence on the contribution of our policy work, cross-cutting research, strategic communication, or stakeholder engagement to young people's overall wellbeing.

## Creating continuous feedback loops

SLE provides continuous feedback loops across different levels that are central to effectively managing the thematic portfolios. Together with our grant partners, we define specific actions and objectives for each project, which are aligned with the theme's strategy. On the project level, actions and objectives are more specifically formulated for the respective project context, and the objectives are accompanied by a monitoring and evaluation plan. MEL on the project level is primarily used to course-correct project activities and approaches. At the same time, the projects report on the changes that they have made and how these changes came about. We gather all changes reported by projects against the changes we want to contribute to and, in addition, we also commission studies to strengthen the evidence base on the changes the projects reported. The aggregated changes across all projects in one portfolio are then fed into strategic learning activities, confirming or disconfirming our hypotheses and providing responses to our learning questions. These considerations, in turn, provide information for the composition of the theme portfolio and, in the longer term, the theme strategies.

**We thank all those who have contributed to the development of our strategy. We look forward to working together towards a world where young people thrive.**

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