S²CITIES GLOBAL CONVENING REPORT
Urban Innovation and Learning Exchange
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The Safe and Sound Cities programme (S²Cities) is an initiative proudly led by Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation (GIB), in partnership with ICLEI, hosted by Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, with the support of Fondation Botnar. The programme is committed to improving young people’s urban safety and wellbeing.

The programme’s first Global Convening event took place from 25 – 28 October 2023 and brought together young people, city governments, and other key stakeholders for a multi-day learning exchange.

At the time of the event, the S²Cities programme was active in six cities: Envigado, Colombia; Cuenca and Ambato, Ecuador; Naga (Camarines Sur) and Baguio, Philippines; and Bandung, Indonesia. This report outlines the 2023 Convening’s purpose, modalities, key facts, figures, impressions and highlights.

Lastly, this report shares opportunities for improvement for future convenings and is meant as a resource for others working in youth engagement and inclusive learning experiences.

The 2023 Convening was delivered through an innovative and carbon friendly mix of Virtual Reality (VR) and local in-person activities.
2. EVENT DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

A. Convene all S²Cities partners for knowledge exchange

The S²Cities programme consists of **20+ partners** specialised in topics ranging from local capacity strengthening and youth engagement to placemaking, research, communications and MEL (monitoring, evaluation and learning).

Bringing together these partners, the 2023 Global Convening programme offered an engaging mix of activities where attendees from various sectors could share experiences and learn from each other on topics of urban innovation and youth urban safety (see section 3 for details).

B. Showcase the programme impacts and outcomes

The Global Convening provided the perfect platform for showcasing the impacts of the S²Cities programme. During the event, global partners shared how the programme has impacted them and their communities through various forms of media and personal testimonials (see section 6 B for more details).

In addition, the S²Cities MEL team presented qualitative and quantitative data that demonstrated the measured effectiveness and impact of the programme in South America and Southeast Asia.

C. Launch the Global Learning Network

The Global Convening formalised the programme’s global connections by launching the S²Cities Global Learning Network.

The Network is comprised of the programme’s 20+ partner organisations, cities, and local young people. At the time of the 2023 Convening, the Network consisted of 22 cities which have demonstrated interest in, and/or participated in, the programme.
3. EVENT MODALITIES: VIDEO CONFERENCING, IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL REALITY

GIB, in consultation with local partners, selected three modalities for the event, each with complementary benefits.

Traditional video conferencing was used for short sessions on Wednesday and Thursday, 25 and 26 October, to build momentum for the full-day activities of Friday and Saturday, 27 and 28 October.

Availability by sector was considered in the design of the Global Convening and led to the conscious decision to include both a working day and weekend day (see section 5 for details).

The full-day activities took place in-person and in VR, with sessions live-streamed and recorded for those unable to attend real-time. More information about the in-person and VR activities and the value they brought to the event is found below.

A. Summary of In-person activities

No matter how advanced technology becomes, it is difficult to fully replace the opportunities for knowledge-sharing and connection-building that in-person activities offer. Additionally, when examining urban safety challenges, the ability to be physically present in the contexts discussed offers far greater learning opportunities than any alternative.

Therefore, the Global Convening included in-person activities in all programme cities led by local implementing partners. In-person activities included workshops, round-table discussions, mentoring sessions for youth innovators, city and youth hub tours, and networking opportunities between young people, government officials and the private sector.

B. Summary of Virtual Reality activities

VR was the main modality for the full-day activities on Friday and Saturday 27 and 28 October. GIB in collaboration with the VR platform provider MootUp created a customised virtual 3D environment, consisting of a reception area, auditorium, and exhibition hall populated with programme content. All S²Cities local implementing partners and key global partners procured VR headsets with financial support of GIB and were trained in their use before the event.

Participants designed avatars to represent themselves and interacted with one another virtually through gestures, emojis, chat boxes and verbal conversations. The VR component of the event included a Global Opening and Global Closing held at a time of day that accommodated both South American and Southeast Asian time zones, and everyone in between.
4. WHY VIRTUAL REALITY (VR)?

A. Greener option

VR provides several benefits compared to traditional in-person conferencing. The first, and not insignificant benefit, is the minimal carbon footprint since participants did not need to travel to a central location to convene. Round-trip flights to and from Switzerland have a carbon footprint of 2-4 tons per person, depending on which city participants travel from.

If the event was hosted in Switzerland, GIB estimates that the flights alone would have had a carbon footprint of close to 900 metric tons. Without flying to one central location, stakeholders in VR were still able to enjoy the experience of an in-person convening and “visiting” all six programme cities with life-like 360-degree video tours. Filmed on the ground by S²Cities partners, the videos give the audience the feeling of being in the city and a personal understanding of the cities’ qualities and challenges.

B. Fun and educational

GIB also wanted participants to have fun and enjoy the novel experience of being in VR while learning about the important work of S²Cities. Within the different VR environments, participants had the chance to explore interactive exposition booths, play games, network in private audio areas, and even show off their dance moves!

VR also allowed for participants to enjoy a wide range of youth-created content and videos, giving deeper insight into youth perspectives on urban safety.

Participants reported high levels of engagement and enjoyment with the VR gamification and interactive options.

C. Enhanced accessibility

GIB did not want to limit the event to only those who had access to VR headsets. Therefore, GIB chose a VR provider that was compatible with every device (cell phone, laptop, tablet, and headset), and had a high resilience to unstable Wi-Fi (which is a particularly common challenge in the programme cities). GIB also helped equip physical youth hubs in the programme cities with strong Wi-Fi where local stakeholders could gather to use the VR headsets and where the VR stream could be cast on large screens. This approach allowed global partners to include far more attendees and enabled attendees to stay on the platform for longer periods of time than would have been possible on other VR platforms and without local youth hubs.

More importantly, VR allowed young people, who may not have the resources or independence to travel, to attend the event front and centre, and have their voices prioritised in front of a global audience.

Another factor GIB considered to ensure accessibility was language capabilities and translation services. The chosen VR provider was compatible to be paired with an AI live translation service that offered simultaneous two-way translation and captioning in the languages of programme countries (Bahasa, Spanish, and English). This meant that panelists could deliver presentations in their native languages, and audience members could select which language they would hear. VR therefore provided an event that participants could attend from anywhere, on any device, in any language, maximising accessibility, inclusive participation, and learning outcomes.

Additionally, VR allowed participants to join the event wherever they felt most comfortable or convenient. They could join select sessions of the event while easily juggling other commitments due to the locational flexibility of VR.
5. ATTENDEES IN NUMBERS

The Global Convening engaged an impressive 575 attendees in the VR and in-person sessions. The attendees demonstrated the diversity of the S²Cities global network and highlighted young people as key stakeholders. Approximately half of all attendees were young people, while the other half were comprised of government officials, private sector, NGO and civil society actors, academics, and others. A further breakdown of the participants by sector and city is found below.

![Graph 1: Global Convening attendees](image1)

- Young People: 48.7%
- Government: 14.4%
- Private Sector: 16.3%
- Academia: 4.5%
- Civil Society: 7.3%
- Others: 8.7%

By region, programme cities in Southeast Asia brought the most attendees, with Bandung and Naga both hosting well over 100 participants between the in person and VR activities.

While Envigado and Ambato's numbers are lower in comparison, it is important to note that both municipalities were undergoing significant political and administrative changes at the same time as the Global Convening. Many of the programme's key stakeholders are deeply involved in local politics, meaning that between these competing priorities, understandably, some of the South American stakeholders were not able to attend the Global Convening.

![Graph 2: Participation by sector](image2)

- Bandung: 103
- Naga: 74
- Baguio: 20
- Envigado: 49.4%
- Ambato: 44%
- Cuenca: 6.6%

Cumulatively, the event saw slightly higher attendance of women (49 percent) than men (44 percent). Nearly, seven percent of attendees were non-binary.

![Graph 3: Participation by city](image3)

- Bandung: 143
- Naga: 121
- Baguio: 97
- Envigado: 97
- Ambato: 59
- Cuenca: 58

Graph 4: Attendance by gender

- Men: 49.4%
- Women: 44%
- Non-binary: 6.6%

6. KEY IMPRESSIONS AND HIGHLIGHTS

A. Knowledge sharing and learning platform

Providing a platform to share knowledge and exchange lessons learned was a key goal of the Global Convening. The feedback from participants indicates that the event met this goal and emphasised the long-reaching effects of providing such a platform for youth and the government.

i. Providing a platform for youth empowerment and collaboration

Insights shared after the event highlighted the importance of creating a platform which enabled youth to share their lived experiences. Feedback from young people indicates that by providing dedicated opportunities for learning and exchange which prioritise youth availabilities, ensure accessibility and inclusion through translation services and Wi-Fi connection points, and enable immersive experiences such as 360-degree city tours, youth are empowered to share their urban realities and contribute their creativity and energy towards solving community problems. One young person from Bandung expressed feeling a ‘snowball’ effect taking place when there is space for dialogue and sharing ideas.

Young people expressed a feeling of unity across all programme regions

Although each city faces different safety realities, young people are united by their shared passion for addressing these issues and learning strategies from one another. Building off the connections made at the Global Convening, some young people expressed open invitations to visit their cities in person and continue collaboration outside of the event.

One of the major lessons I learned during the Global Convening is the importance of youth participation in place-making. Having heard the presentations of other youth groups in the Philippines, truly, the youth have the power to influence and create social change by engaging with activities that create space for the youth.

- Baguio young person

The connectivity that exists with the presentations of the different exhibitors from around the world over virtual reality, allows us to learn about realities and solutions to existing problems since in other parts of the world they are making giant strides in technology.

- Civil society stakeholder in Ambato
ii. Shifting perspectives and inclusive public sector engagement

According to participants, the S²Cities Global Convening provided opportunities for young people and decision makers to engage and develop new understandings of each other. One public official from South America reported that this changing perception has helped the local government as a public institution. Not only did government officials report finding great value in hearing the perspectives of their local youth, they also found value in listening to the experiences of young people and the government of other cities.

The Global Convening provided additional opportunities for reinforcing the S²Cities programme goal of changing perceptions of young people as agents of positive change. Overall, feedback collected after the event shows that most participants found the event was meaningful, engaging, and fostered learning exchange.

Global Convening: The event was engaging and meaningful

- Baguio government representative

Learning and hearing from other youth in the other cities showed that young people experience similar safety and security issues. As a part of the programme, we also look at these cities and learn from their best practices.

- Baguio government representative

B. Showcase the programme impacts and outcomes

The event successfully showcased programme impacts and outcomes through powerful testimonials during the panel discussions.

Young people highlighted how the establishment of physical youth hubs in each programme city to support youth innovation have created active, physical collaboration with government officials, and sparked ideas for change. A local implementation partner in Naga also noted that employing the concepts of relational well-being and placemaking has been helpful and memorable when making connections with the local government. Additionally, young people have noted that the programme has given them the power to engage with their government in a meaningful way.

I have felt left behind by the adults in the city but thanks to the programme I feel involved and connected to my city. We share the initiatives from young people from other cities and what changes are we willing to make.

- Envigado young person

Fostering a future of collaboration and understanding is possible by bridging the generations through inclusive governance with local youth at the forefront.

- Baguio government representative

Government officials similarly highlighted the programme’s impact on inclusive governance and youth-oriented public policy and engagement.
C. Successfully utilising innovative technology

As noted above, the use of VR for this event was carefully considered, and most participants were positive about the choice.

The VR component reflected GIB’s commitment to innovate to meet the needs of partners and bridge the gaps between members of the Global Learning Network.

I believe the virtual reality component of the Global Convening was a step in the right direction towards making events more inclusive and open to more people, versus flying a select few to some location. I am personally excited to see how else the S²Cities programme can innovate on the use of VR for activities within and even outside the Global Convening.

-Envigado young person

I found it to be a very important experience because it allowed me to explore other narratives and new ways of communicating.

-Baguio government representative

The use of VR opened up new and creative opportunities to generate international ties in a different and fun manner.

-Private sector stakeholder in Cuenca

I found it to be a very important experience because it allowed me to explore other narratives and new ways of communicating.

-Baguio government representative

The exchange of ideas and projects opens new opportunities and urban strategies for implementation and community participation.

-Private sector stakeholder in Cuenca

GIB cannot wait to see how these sentiments will manifest on the local and global levels!

-Envigado young person

For the youth’s initiatives to be aligned with the city’s development plans, they need to be meaningfully involved in the creation of said plans and they should ultimately know the targets as well so their initiatives can be data-driven and have smart objectives.

-Naga City government representative

7. LOOKING FORWARD

A. Inspiration for future programme implementation.

Participants expressed excitement about applying the ideas and strategies shared at the Global Convening.

Participants also noted that the event contributed to ongoing inspiration for policies and greater youth-government relationship-building.

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B. Opportunities for improvement

While the 2023 Global Convening met and exceeded its goals, GIB did identify areas to improve and expand upon for future events.

i. Expand and improve VR

The use of VR was certainly a key element of the event, but this novel technology also posed some challenges. Despite local gathering points which offered Wi-Fi, participants had access to varied levels of internet connectivity, meaning that media and audio were sometimes delayed for some and not for others. To ensure that the VR software was not overwhelmed by the number of participants, some avatars were made invisible to each other. These participants could still hear and see the presenters, and ask questions, but not all participants could be seen. GIB understands this to be a standard practice amongst VR providers to manage bandwidth constraints, but this practice created some confusion, particularly in the networking sessions. There were also limitations with the AI translation, as it was not able to consistently pick up accents and speech nuances, creating inaccurate translation at times. These challenges reflect the technology’s limitations, and GIB is confident that the rapidly growing field of VR event technology will continue to improve its services.

ii. More opportunities to connect informally

Other useful feedback was that participants would have liked to have more unstructured opportunities to engage informally with presenters and young people. Along these lines, feedback was given that future events could leverage the innovative features of VR to offer more interactive sessions. In the traditional auditorium setting, participants, particularly youth, may have been more hesitant to speak up or initiate conversations with presenters. To overcome these challenges and integrate participants’ feedback, GIB will consider utilising VR breakout rooms, integrating themes per session, and creating icebreakers to encourage more participation and build confidence for people to engage with one another in future convenings. With the expanding VR capabilities, GIB is confident that it will be able to provide new opportunities to connect in an innovative way in the next Global Convening.

Visit the Global Convening website for media extracted from the 2023 Convening, including a video tour of the VR world, pictures, testimonials and updates on upcoming events. Please also visit the S²Cities YouTube channel for video recordings of each VR session from the 2023 Convening.

Have questions about the 2023 S²Cities Global Convening? Want to learn more about how the event was organised? Interested in collaborating? Get in touch with us at info@s2cities.org!
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