LOCAL CARE SYSTEMS AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN UNITED CITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (UCLG)

MASTER GOVERNING THE LARGE METROPOLIS

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PREFACE

This report is the result of an inspiring collaboration between United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Sciences Po, and a group of engaged students who have dedicated their Capstone project to exploring the intersection of local care systems and youth participation. This work responds to one of the core missions of UCLG: to advance democratic local self-government, social inclusion, equality, and care through the empowerment of local and regional governments and their communities worldwide.

At a time when local and regional governments are confronted with overlapping global crises — from climate change and inequality to democratic backsliding — care has emerged not only as a core function of public service, but as a lens through which we must reimagine governance itself. Care-centered governance calls for inclusive policies, shared responsibility, and deeper social cohesion. Meaningfully engaging youth in these processes is not optional — it is essential. Their energy, ideas, and lived experiences are vital to shaping local care systems that are equitable, resilient, and forward-looking.

Making this a reality requires a mindshift. Local governments must go beyond viewing young people as future leaders, and embrace the principle that *youth are needed now*. This requires investing in intergenerational governance and embedding youth participation structurally across local institutions and public policies. It also requires ensuring that participation is not episodic, but continuous and empowering for the youth — rooted in collective memory, adaptive systems, and sustained political will.

This Capstone project provides a powerful contribution to that goal. Drawing from desk research, tailored case studies, and direct consultation with youth from across world regions, the report combines academic insight with practical policy relevance. It enriches the ongoing GOLD VII research and reinforces our shared commitment to co-creating economies of care and equality. It is also a call to adapt — to remain dynamic in the face of change and responsive to the evolving needs of our communities.

This work builds on the momentum of the UCLG Youth Caucus and the growing network of mayors, governors, activists, and partners co-producing a Local Social Covenant ahead of the Second World Summit for Social Development in 2025.

We thank Alice, Davide, Kashish, and Théo for their dedication and vision. Their work embodies the intergenerational dialogue and continuity of action we need to truly transform local governance.

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METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to conduct the capstone project combined desk research, fieldwork, and qualitative interviews. The methodology adopted served to explore the intersection of youth participation and local care systems. The framework adopted to invest youth participation in local caring systems was based on core aspirations taken from the literature: care is intentional, redistributive, institutionalized, resilient, relational, and flexible. The work followed three key phases. The focus was put onto care as labour, the redistribution of care, and the dynamic nature of care.

1. <u>Literature review:</u> there was a review of academic and policy literature on care and youth participation to define the concepts, the way they are commonly understood and how they can be intertwined.
2. <u>Case studies analysis:</u> desk-research was made for the five case studies, Auckland (New Zealand), Braga (Portugal), Envigado (Colombia), Manila (the Philippines), and Paris (France), by studying the urban plans, considering the policies enacted, and exploring the policy tools and strategies that had succeeded or failed.
3. <u>Field research and interviews:</u> For three of the five case studies, Envigado, Manila, and Paris, we could lead fieldwork research that included semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and on-sites visits. Regarding the other case studies, Auckland and Braga, remote interviews were conducted. The interview subjects include governmental officials, civilian young people, other non-governmental actors and organisations relevant within the given case studies.

The case study analysis, the on-site fieldworks, and the remote investigation aim to identify the infrastructures of care, the significance of care for youth and the participation of youth in caring systems.

FIELDS STUDIED

The capstone project investigated five distinct urban areas in five different urban and geographical contexts to enhance a multi-scalar analysis. The five case studies explore the distinct ways for local governments to design care systems with and for young people. These five different fields reflect varied political systems, geographical regions, and socio-cultural settings, offering a rich comparative lens on youth participation in local governance and caring practices. The results and conclusions obtained for each case enable to draw a broader global analysis and enable a multi-scalar and cross-scalar comprehension of the main challenges regarding care and youth participation globally.

Image from the *Thriving Rangatahi Plan*
Source: Auckland Council, 2025

Auckland, New Zealand: The 2025 *Thriving Rangatahi Plan* promotes care through intersectional youth strategies with a specific attention given on Māori.

Logo of Braga Youth European Capital in 2012
Source: Diaro digital Castelo Branco / Lusa, 2012

Braga, Portugal: The 2012 European Youth Capital has become a compelling example of institutionalization of youth participation and international collaboration on youth topics.

Envigado, Colombia: The municipality has positioned youth development and youth empowerment as the cornerstone of the municipal agenda.

Mural in Envigado with "act, care, love"
Source: Capstone field research, 2025

Logo for the *Sangguniang Kabataan* (SK)
Source: Wikimedia, 2018

Metro Manila, the Philippines: The *Sangguniang Katabaan* (SK), a nationwide structure of youth councils institutionalized within local governments units, appears to be one of the world's longest-standing examples of youth participation in local governance.

Paris, France: The *Quartier Jeunes* (youth centre) has been solely focused as an example of care and youth. This case study serves as a pilot-test for the research questions to develop an understanding of youth and care.

Building of the *Quartier Jeunes*
Source: Capstone field research, 2025

ISSUES

UCLG is currently elaborating their GOLD VII report, which stands for Global Observatory for Local Democracy and Decentralization process. Indeed, UCLG is recognising the growing importance of engaging youth into policymaking processes and is willing to place local governments as pioneers in building participatory systems that consider care as a priority, mainly with and for young people. UCLG sought to deepen understanding the extent of how cities and local governments can design care policies and care systems that engage young people not only as beneficiaries from them, but as co-creators of these policies. UCLG perceives care and youth participation as a tool to reach more equitable and inclusive societies, where young people are not despised or overlooked by local governments, but whose leadership within local governance is fostered and facilitated.

The capstone project responds to a growing demand for locally grounded care systems and for meaningful youth participation in public life. The research started from the research question brought by UCLG "how can youth be integrated into care systems?". From that starting point, the investigation has been reframed to "what does a caring system look like from a youth perspective, and can local governments support its co-creation and its management?". Indeed, by transposing the focus directly on and from young people, the research aims more to shift directly to consider young people as the heart of the investigation process, understanding young people as the main contributors to this broad reflection. Indeed, to get relevant and useful results to draw meaningful and effective policy recommendations following the results obtained, it is necessary to already place young people at the centre of the research.

The investigation details care's significance for the youth and the significance of youth for caring policies. Indeed, it is important to not only consider the need for young people to access caring systems and caring environments, but also that to reach more sustainable and inclusive local communities, caring systems and caring policies must integrate young people. Given that youth are stakeholders and potential or current actors in their local and regional care policy development and implementation, this report responds to the question of how young people relate to care and caring systems to answer the question: What strategies can help facilitate greater youth participation in the co-production of care policies?

The academic literature on care, that the authors were able to consult, does not develop specific links between the notion or practices of care with young people nor an understanding of care from a youth perspective. The case studies and analysis that follow address these gaps in the literature by understanding how we can relate the framework of care and its definitions to young people and its formulations within local governance. Our evaluation of the literature of youth participation highlights the potential avenues for youth participation in caring systems and in this way, informs our recommendations.

1. **Limited recognition of care as a political framework**

Cities and municipalities are the main providers of key public services since they can meet the direct need of citizens: they are the most direct link from the governments with the citizens.

Indeed, they provide health, housing, education, and transport. However, these are often managed separately, by local subdivisions, which limits the emergence of an integrated caring environment. Framing all these services under a care perspective allows cities to implement and to respond to social vulnerability and to promote community social wellbeing, considering caring as continued and not as independent and isolated sectors. Yet, few policies articulate care as a governance model, especially from a youth perspective.

2. Limited structural youth participation

There is a consistent tension between formal youth participation and real decision-making power. Even though some local governments have been implementing innovative and new participatory mechanisms such as youth councils or participatory budgeting, young people are mostly taking part as consultants. They are not necessarily fully involved in the implementation phase or even during the evaluation phases. Youth people do encounter power asymmetries when it comes to political participation with a lack of financial autonomy and adult-dominated structures that reduce the impact of youth input. Moreover, youth participation in caring actions is commonly considered within a formal infrastructure framework which is implemented by the local governments, without examining informal participation in other caring environments, which are not managed by the local authorities.

2025 Youth Advisory Panel, 2025 Te Rōpū Kaitohutohu Take Taiohi
Source: Auckland Council, 2025

3. Emergence of new models, but remaining uneven

Some cities are experimenting through co-creation and intersectional approach intergenerational planning. Moving beyond consultations, some of these innovative practices are being implemented. Nevertheless, they do require intentional institutional design, adequate

funding, and long-term political commitment. These models remain uneven and are emerging in some specific cities: they are not the norm and require a particular political attention.

4. Undervaluation of informal forms of care

Youth engagement within caring systems is not restricted to formal and structural. However, traditionally, these informal practices are under evaluated and under considered by local and regional governments. However, these participations within caring systems include community activities, cultural networks, mutual aid in everyday practices. These expressions of care are harder to measure and to assess. Nevertheless, these forms of care are essential to civic life and community wellbeing, even though they are beyond governmental infrastructure. Furthermore, these forms of participation are sometimes directed to the most marginalized and vulnerable groups that are not included within caring policies and caring systems. Current policy frameworks struggle to recognize and support these practices effectively to integrate them within a broader caring environment.

Photo of first day of the Youth Festival 2024
Source: Instagram account @*Envigadojovenoficial, 2024*

This capstone project also reflects the challenges considered as urban priorities by the Urban School of Sciences Po. Indeed, youth participation within caring systems and caring practices. Indeed, caring encompasses a broad range of local sectors that strategies that go beyond a restricted conceptualization of care. Fostering caring systems in local urban areas goes through many political strategies that include resilience, adaptation, and inclusivity. Nature and the environment can be considered as a form of non-human care: caring for the environment is a key cornerstone to frame a caring environment and a caring system. A caring system encompasses resilience of policies and infrastructure: care is perceived and conceptualized as flexible, accessible, adaptive which makes cities more sustainable in the long-term. Thus, a caring framework is a main point for urban governance as it tends to reach social inclusion, ecological considerations, and political resilience, key matters that the Urban School defines as urban priorities.

MAIN RESULTS

Across the five case studies, the investigation examines how local governments engage young people in building and sustaining caring urban systems. The research explores care as relational, dynamic, resilient, and locally adapted through the co-creation of public policies with young people and community wellbeing.

1. Co-creation

The involvement of young people within care networks pertains to their roles as both providers and recipients of care. When speaking of practices of care at a governmental level, the involvement of youth within local governments for the creation and delivery of caring outcomes becomes a key avenue of intersection between youth participation and care frameworks.

When brought in as merely external consultants, young constituents are often denied the right to continued involvement and a strategic role in shaping their communities and environments. In Manila, this emerges as a discrepancy between projects planned by SK Councils and those desired by the youth in their Barangay. Meanwhile, for municipal youth councils across Portugal, including Braga, their legal status and competences are currently limited to being advisory, although campaigners within the National Youth Council are lobbying for a structural change.

Katipunan ng Kabataan (KK) assembly in 2024 in Calapan City, the Philippines
Source: Calapan City Official Website, 2024

Moreover, the choice of consultation over collaboration has even broader political implications in Auckland, wherein, despite a targeted approach by the city's youth plan to empower Māori youth, the outcomes themselves are not to be defined by the relevant communities, as explained to us by Manurewa Board Chairman Matt Winiata. Moreover, as explained by our

interviewee and Co-chair of the Auckland Youth Advisory Panel, governments currently do not possess the political capital or social reach to enact efficient grassroots-level changes within the most vulnerable communities. The suggestions from both Auckland interviewees advised that both the formulation and implementation of projects rely upon collaboration with Iwis to ensure that the provision of care is both effective and culturally competent. When local governments do not possess adequate reach, social legitimacy, or the required cultural competency to reach communities, unilateral interventions run the risk of disempowering communities, running inefficient projects, and perhaps even failing to deliver the desired outcome overall.

2. Care as relational

The strength of caring systems is founded on the relations between actors. When in Envigado, we learned about connections between unexpected actors such as the skatepark and the local government. In addition, as in Braga, many people working on a range of topics knew each other by name. Care is ultimately delivered between people, be they designers, policymakers, carers, neighbours, meaning that it is relational. The health and flexibility of relationships between actors of all age groups facilitates learning and expands care networks. Importantly, we can observe that both in-person communication and social media exchanges contribute to these relations, however, in-person events such as festivals, workshops and encounters play a particularly powerful role in enabling both greater connection and greater access to care. Indeed, these events are also opportunities to connect young people to care services they may have been unaware of, and to encourage collaboration between different youth organizations, local government bodies, NGOs and more. Quite so, it is important to note that there are no limits necessarily on who can care or who can learn to care, inviting openness in how we interact with others and care for all.

Informative posters in the *Quartier Santé* (health corner) of *Quartier Jeunes* in Paris
Source: Capstone field research, 2025

3. Care as dynamic and resilient

One of the main takeaways of our research is that care should not be considered as a static intervention but rather as a dynamic process, one that must adapt to the evolving identities, needs and aspirations of youth. Ensuring the sustainability of youth participation means designing institutions that can foster collaboration across generations and maintain institutional memory despite short political cycles and shifting priorities. In Manila, the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) system of youth councils demonstrates the tension between opportunity and fragility in youth-led governance. While SK councils offer young people budgetary autonomy and political visibility, projects risk disappearing when leadership changes due to term limits in the absence of a structured handover. This highlights the need for staggered transitions and mechanisms for intergenerational learning. Continuity here is not just logistical, but also a political and ethical commitment to care for young people's contributions beyond the electoral mandate.

Resilience also requires inclusion. In many contexts, the youngest participants, especially teenagers, face barriers to meaningful participation, such as age-based hierarchies that can limit the leadership potential of younger members. As noted by interviewees in Manila and Envigado, when younger youth are offered mentorship and access to training, they feel empowered to contribute more efficiently. Co-leadership models and advisory roles for outgoing leaders can help embed care practices that stretch across time and age. Moreover, opportunities for recognition and inspiration, including awards, festivals, or youth conferences, emerged as platforms for sharing best practices and thus key catalysts for sustained engagement. In both Envigado and Braga, visible platforms to showcase youth initiatives, such as *La Galerie de Pie* and *En Jaque con la M* enhanced motivation to develop projects and forged stronger networks. These occasions did not simply reward excellence; they created legacies and built momentum for future participation. Ultimately, care as a resilient infrastructure means building systems that adapt, include, and persist over time. It is not just about initiating projects but about sustaining youth ecosystems where participation becomes a continuous and evolving force within democratic governance.

Logo of "*Tu Decides*" participatory budgeting programme in Braga
Source: Braga Juverntude, 2023

4. Sustaining care as a cyclical process

In caring democracies, youth participation must be understood not as a sequence of disconnected acts, but as a continuous and self-renewing cycle. What sustains this cycle is not only the enthusiasm and quality of leadership, but also their ability to adapt and remain accountable to both peers and communities. Care becomes cyclical when young people are enabled to ask whether what they are doing works, and when systems exist to help them respond. Across our case studies, we understood the importance of institutionalizing such evaluative capacities, which when overlooked leaves youth initiatives vulnerable to stagnation or invisibility. In Manila, the Sangguniang Kabataan offers a solid institutional base for youth leadership. Many SK councils have taken steps toward more structured reporting and are beginning to explore how to make their work more visible and traceable to the public. This presents a promising opportunity to strengthen long-term learning and community engagement through creative accountability tools. In Braga, the participatory budgeting project "Tu Decides" has become a powerful avenue for youth to evaluate and shape resource allocation, encouraging a sense of ownership and public responsibility when caring for the community. In Envigado, young co-creators are already using social media and public events to share their results, normalize feedback and celebrate collective progress. Similarly, Quartier Jeunes in Paris is emerging as a physical and symbolic space where listening, evaluation, and adjustment can take root in the everyday life of youth policy

Financial responsibility also plays a crucial role in sustaining care cycles. When funding for youth projects is unstable or deprioritized, entire processes risk collapsing between leadership transitions. Direct allocation of budgets to youth-led bodies, coupled with training in financial reporting, allows for a more autonomous and reliable form of stewardship. Equally, compensating young decision-makers, as tested in some councils, can foster a deeper sense of commitment, but only when matched with clear expectations and collective accountability. Sustaining care, then, is not just about preserving activity. It is about creating ecosystems where self-assessment, peer feedback and resource continuity form the infrastructure for democratic renewal.

The Auckland Advisory Panel members starting in 2023.
Source: Inside Government, 2023

5. Care as accessible infrastructure

Accessibility of care was also one of the major points we have been able to observe and to witness during our five case studies. We could focus on both hard infrastructure we can understand as spaces, buildings, public equipment and urban planning and soft infrastructure considering services, relations, human accompaniments, information, and mediation.

Indeed, all the cases studied highlight the importance of giving access to spaces dedicated to both young people and care. Indeed, there is a need for people to have access to safe and maintained public spaces that are dedicated for them where they can gather and meet.Thus, caring must pass by the provision of safe, clean, resilient, and sustainable infrastructure to fight against symbolic injustices. Furthermore, young people with a dedicated and recognised place they own is also a key for youth integration within the community. For instance, *Quartier Jeunes* in Paris is a historical building, a former city-hall, that has been reused without changing its architecture and its aspect: the youth deserve to have qualitative places that are traditionally for other uses. Indeed, symbolically, it recognises their importance, their aspirations, and their considerations. *Casa de la Juventud* in Envigado is recognised by the youth as a place they own, where they can express their thoughts, and where they can gather: young people have appropriated this place as their own. Apart from the municipal-led spaces, young people considered other public places as important for them, to participate actively in the community life such as the skatepark in Envigado where care is concretely enhanced and spatialised. Thus, caring infrastructure that is public and accessible for all is considered as one of the cornerstones to reach a care-friendly living environment.

All five case studies have also underlined the related importance of soft infrastructure which is made possible through maintenance and a certain accessibility to hard infrastructure. Indeed, having buildings and equipment does not mean a city is caring for its community: there is also the need to have a strong use of these places which should be given an active role in the provision of public services and human relations. For instance, *Quartier Jeunes* has been invested with the provision of public services dedicated and oriented toward young people. Indeed, to facilitate access to services, there is no need to have an appointment to ensure flexibility that can be a characteristic of young people, to not convert access to public services as a burden, a constraint. In addition, the *aller vers* approach is put in place to create a social and human link. This human accompaniment is reinforced within *Quartier Jeunes* where young people can meet councillors that help them to navigate within administration and procedures: there is a concrete presence of public servants, and of the state which has been formed to attend young people. Same approach has been put in place in Envigado where the different *secretarías* have adopted new ways and tools of communication to reach more easily young people. Before being political, care is human and is represented by a form of encouragement, mutual respect, and recognition of the other. Participatory policymaking process is also a key feature of soft infrastructure: involving people within this process is creating new structural models that are then repeated and reused. Public assemblies where young people's speeches are valued is a key example of how soft infrastructure should be considered as important as the hard one.

6.   Care as identity

In some of our case studies, young people who felt attached to their local area expressed that this helped them to care for their area and to feel cared for. On the one hand, young people who felt integrated into their city or territory spoke of "loving" the place they lived. In part, this conveyed that they felt cared for. On the other hand, the notion of emotional investment that a young skateboarding teacher in Envigado introduced to us, is connected to having a love for the place one is in, not just the people. We heard about this sentiment from many people we met, including people working in the local government. Having a healthy local identity can be composed of feeling connected and grounded into the city. In this way, celebrating the local identity and the variety of identities within it through festivals, social media posts and awards can contribute to more investment, care and respect for their city. This includes taking more care of open spaces and of caring infrastructure.

The importance of young people having a local identity as a means to combat extremism and nationalism emerged in conversations with young people about Braga, and Portugal more broadly. Noting that local governments are situated in greater proximity than national or regional governments to their constituents, they can be the key providers of care. However, where these caring contributions are not recognised, or not sufficient, it can leave a gap for more extreme identities such as those promoting ethnonationalism and xenophobia, also known as exclusive identities. Local governments can collaborate with historical societies and cultural entities to promote a sense of belonging for all people in a given city. In addition, an example of care to do with identity and belonging are the activities that young children can participate in run by the Secretariat of the Environment in Envigado: playing in nature and getting to know the ecological landmarks of their territory. This fostering of connection is a means to promote care.

However, a number of young people conveyed that they did not feel especially connected to the city they were in, such as some university students in Braga. Coming from different places in Portugal and beyond, they did not express a sense of identity as someone in Braga. This highlights the importance of inviting new people, including mobile students, asylum seekers, refugees and migrating workers, into the local communities and identity.

A mural in Envigado saying "Envigado inspires love"
Source: Capstone Field Research, 2025

LEARNINGS

Throughout this capstone project, key principles and strategies have been identified to support local government in facilitating youth-inclusion within caring governance. The multi-scalar research and analysis, effective caring systems are identified by being built around co-creation, integration, long-term continuity, institutional resilience and a robust infrastructural support. These insights highlight not only what makes youth participation meaningful, but also how it can be scaled and adapted across diverse contexts.

1. **Co-creation**
- Decentralisation decision-making: spatially and politically
- Collaboration and balancing the role of governments to appropriately decide level of intervention, ranging from supporting to leading
- Fostering active participation by encouraging and incentivising youth to attend events
- Empowering young leaders by acknowledging and recognising their need and value within care systems, as through monetary remuneration and framing them as active participants within popular rhetoric.

2. **Integration**
- Invest in skilled, youth-led communication teams with training in youth inclusion
- Use social media and in-person events to foster continuous collaboration with youth
- Engage with, and invite, young people from outside the city for fruitful exchanges via conferences, events and mobility
- Collaborate with a variety of external actors including NGOs

3. **Continuity**
- Design flexible, staggered tenuring-out systems
- Ensure youth of all ages can access the same trainings and leadership roles
- Create awards and networking spaces that inspire and connect youth
- Use festivals and conferences to normalize youth as active agents of care

4. **Resilience**
- Reinforce effectiveness of feedback mechanisms
- Promote youth-friendly reporting (infographics, peer reviews)
- Introduce mandatory follow-up in youth programs
- Mandate traceable budgets and financial literacy workshops
- Grant direct budget allocation to youth institutions
- Compensate youth involved in governance to increase their responsibility sense

5. **Infrastructural**
- Protect sustainable youth infrastructure: governmental funds, legal protection
- Reinforce adaptability and inclusivity
- Focus on appropriation with ownership and leadership: expression and identity
- Foresee and promote flexibility and resilience
- Maintain confidentiality, trust and open-door approach
- Balance approach youth-centric safety, youth-centric security, and liberty

FIND OUT MORE

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UCLG Youth Caucus. (2022). Time for an Intergenerational Social Contract: The Inclusion of the Youth in Urban Processes. https://migrationyouthchildrenplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/UCLG-Youth-Caucus-Policy-Paper_-The-Inclusion-of-the-Youth-in-Urban-Processes-2.pdf

2025 UCLG Retreat. (2025). Day 3 - Youth Visions: Local Governments Actions https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8V0SqJguMfc

The Capstone project: an original educational tool

Thanks to this original tool, students are placed in a work situation on a real problem posed by a public, private, or associative organisation. For all the Masters of the Urban School, the structure and management are identical: the project is jointly monitored by the the Urban School and the partners, at all phases of the project, and regular methodological supervision is provided by a professional or academic tutor specialised in the issue. The Capstone projects allow the partners to take advantage of the research and training acquired within the Urban School, to benefit from the production of studies and quality work, and to have a capacity for innovation.

Capstone projects are a great tool to study, diagnose, forecast, lead a comparative analysis, even to prepare for evaluation, and more generally to deal with any problem that can enlighten the organisation concerned in a logic of "R&D ". Each project mobilises a group of first-year students from one of the Urban School's Master's. Students work between 1.5 days and 2 days per week on dedicated time slots, for a period of 6 to 9 months (depending on the Master's concerned). In Executive education, collective projects concern the Executive Master "Territorial governance and urban development" and mobilize professionals for a period of 4 months.