CHILD-CENTERED GOVERNANCE FUNCTIONALITY SCALE

Companion Guide to the Child-Centered Governance Self-Assessment Tool

Using the Functionality Scale

This document provides practical guidance for completion of **Section 2 of UNICEF USA's Child-Centered Governance Self-Assessment tool.** It is intended as a learning resource and reflection guide that draws on insights and emerging evidence from the field. Whenever possible, complete the assessment collaboratively with people closest to the structure, such as government staff, youth participants, community partners, and other stakeholders. Identify areas where information may be limited.

For each existing governance structure, a local government chooses to assess, cities should identify the stage of development—from initiating to advanced — that *most closely* reflects how that structure currently functions across each dimension and briefly explain the reasoning behind that selection. The descriptions provided throughout this guide illustrate common characteristics of each stage and are intended as illustrative examples, not exhaustive or prescriptive criteria. ***Cities do not need to meet every element listed to identify with a particular stage.***

Cities should assess each existing governance structure across **three dimensions**:

- **Core Functionality:** how well the structure is established, resourced, and influencing decisions, including how it is sustained over time.
- **Youth Participation:** the extent to which young people meaningfully shape the structure, whether through direct participation or other forms of engagement appropriate to the structure's purpose.
- **Inclusion:** how well children and young people of all backgrounds—including those furthest from opportunity—are intentionally considered and included.

Progress may vary across these dimensions. For example, a structure may be well-established and influential while youth participation or inclusion remains limited. Although these dimensions are interconnected, considering each one separately can help cities identify strengths, gaps, and priorities for improvement.

The **Youth Participation** and **Inclusion** scales are universal and apply across all structures rather than being tailored to each structure. **Structure-specific examples illustrating how Core Functionality may apply to each individual governance structure are provided below.**

Note: This guide is part of a beta set of child-centered governance tools developed by UNICEF USA. Feedback from early users will help inform future refinements.

Core Functionality: General Development Scale

Core functionality refers to the extent to which a child-centered governance structure is established, resourced, and consistently influencing decision-making in ways that reflect children's needs, rights, and lived experiences.

Long-term sustainability should be a core consideration when establishing any child-centered governance structure. Formal codification is a key strategy for sustainability and continuity across leadership changes and political cycles. While the timing and form of codification will vary depending on the structure and local context, communities should begin planning for codification at the outset as part of their broader sustainability strategy. Codification should be designed intentionally to reinforce, but not restrict, the structure's intended purpose. As you complete your assessment, **consider whether your structures are already codified, whether there are plans to do so, and how existing policies or formal requirements support or constrain effective implementation.**

Political and institutional support may evolve over time and can strengthen or weaken at any stage. As you assess functionality, consider not only whether support exists, but whether leaders and institutions continue to provide the authority, resources, and commitment needed for the structure to operate and influence decision-making.

This scale illustrates common characteristics of governance structures at each stage of development and is not an exhaustive list. Structure-specific examples are provided below, and cities should review those before completing Section 2 of the CCG Self-Assessment. Assess the structure based on how it **currently** functions, not its highest previous level of functioning (indicate if active, paused, or dormant). If the core functionality of your structure seems to fall between two stages, select the stage that ***most closely represents the structure's typical and consistent practice*** *and note any characteristics of other stages in your explanation.*

Initiating (Early-Stage Commitment)	Operationalizing (Setting Up the Structure)	Functioning (Influencing Decisions)	Advanced (Sustained Impactful Practice)
• A commitment to prioritize children is taking shape. • Stakeholders are beginning to plan, gather information and perspectives, pilot ideas and build	• The structure is operating and has defined roles, leadership, and governance. • Resources are allocated, and processes for gathering and using relevant inputs (such as data,	• The structure is consistently operational and influences how decisions are made. • Relevant inputs (including data, analysis and stakeholder perspectives) meaningfully inform	• Continuous quality improvement is in place with decisions refined based on data, outcomes, and community feedback. • Decisions are aligned to advance children's rights and contribute to

leadership and institutional support. • Efforts are early, informal, or limited in scope.	analysis and stakeholder perspectives) are established. • Leaders demonstrate institutional support needed for the structure and its role in decision-making. • Baseline data on children's well-being and relevant systems is collected and used to inform priorities and early decision-making.	decisions and, where appropriate, are reflected in policies, resource allocations, or actions. • Strategic goals related to children's well-being are actively being met. • Data are regularly used to set goals, guide decision-making, and track progress on children's well-being. • Consideration of children's needs and disparities is integrated into decision-making processes. • Where appropriate, efforts are made to include voices and perspectives from a diverse group of children.	improvements in outcomes for children, where evidence is available. • Processes and decisions are transparent and shared with the public in an accessible form. • Political and institutional support for the structure and its influence is sustained across leadership transitions, budget cycles, and changing priorities.

Note: These stages support reflection rather than a single score or rank. A structure may demonstrate characteristics of different stages across aspects of its functioning—for example, it may be well established and resourced but have more limited influence on decision-making. Use the descriptions to identify strengths, areas for development, and opportunities to strengthen the structure's effectiveness, influence, and sustainability.

Youth Participation Scale

Youth Participation refers to the extent to which young people are meaningfully involved in the functioning of the structure, whether through direct participation or other forms of engagement appropriate to the structure's purpose.

This scale draws on established frameworks for understanding youth participation, including the work of Roger Hart on levels of participation and the Lundy Model of Participation, which emphasizes that meaningful participation requires space (opportunities to express views), voice (the ability to express views), audience (being listened to) and influence (having those views acted upon).

While this scale reflects a progression in levels of participation, **it does not assume that higher levels are always appropriate for every structure**. Instead, the appropriate level of participation depends on the purpose and function of the structure, and direct youth participation may not be appropriate for some structures. For example, youth councils are designed for shared or youth-led participation, while structures such as child-friendly budgeting or children's cabinets may primarily incorporate youth perspectives through consultation, data or other inputs rather than continuous direct participation. However, all structures should intentionally incorporate youth perspectives. Direct participation or youth leadership should be used where appropriate to the structure's purpose. Efforts to engage young people should be intentional, meaningful, and equitable.

While reflecting the diversity of the community is a core component of strong youth engagement, it is assessed separately through the ***Inclusion Scale*** to allow for more intentional consideration.

Adult-Led	Consultative	Collaborative	Shared or Youth-Led
• Decisions are primarily shaped by adult perspectives on child and youth needs. • Youth experiences and perspectives may be reflected indirectly through data, research, or prior engagement.	• Young people are consulted to share their perspectives or experiences. • Young people have appropriate opportunities to express their views (space and voice), though influence on decision-making may be limited or inconsistent.	• Young people collaborate with adults on defined aspects of the work. • Youth perspectives and priorities are actively influencing some decisions, while adults may retain primary decision-making authority. • Adults have training and capacity to engage young people in developmentally appropriate and meaningful ways. • Young people have clear opportunities to express their views, are listened to and see how their input was considered and how it influenced decisions (space, voice, audience and emerging influence).	• Young people are engaged as co-leaders in shaping the structure or process. • Young people work alongside adults as partners in decision-making and may hold decision-making authority over appropriate aspects of the work. • Portions of the work may be youth-led, with young people working independently or with support from adults as needed. • All elements of meaningful participation—space, voice, audience and influence—are intentionally embedded and sustained across the structure's work, including clear feedback to young people about how their views were considered and what decisions were made.

Inclusion Scale

Inclusion refers to the extent to which children and young people of various backgrounds are included and able to benefit from the child-centered governance structure. This includes participants, whose voices shape decisions, and how the structure addresses differences in outcomes for children.

Initiating (Understanding Inequities)	Operationalizing (Equitable Design and Outreach)	Functioning (Inclusive Practice)	Advanced (Sustained Inclusive Practice)
• The local government has begun collecting and analyzing data to understand different childhood experiences.	• Information about underrepresented children and youth is regularly shared and is shaping strategy. • Initial processes are being developed to expand access and reduce barriers to participation.	• Processes and engagement approaches are in place to reach a diverse range of young people, including those who may otherwise be underrepresented.	• Participation consistently reflects the diversity of the local community's population. • Equity considerations are embedded across planning, decision-making and implementation processes and sustained over time.

Core Functionality Scale by Governance Structure

The following scales adapt the four Core Functionality stages to each governance structure. They offer illustrative examples—not exhaustive or prescriptive criteria—of what each stage may look like. Cities should continue to use the universal scales for Youth Participation and Inclusion.

Children's Budgets: The local or state government has a comprehensive understanding of public spending for children and provides visibility into child-related allocations within the local or state budget. This may include producing a public-facing document demonstrating how funds are spent on children or highlighting child- and youth-related expenditures in the broader budget. The effort may be completed internally or carried out in collaboration with a nonprofit, research institution, or other external partner, but it must be owned or formally endorsed by the local or state government. This process may be completed annually or at other established intervals. Children's budgets are used to identify investment gaps, inform planning and resource allocation and strengthen equitable investment in children over time.

Initiating (Early-Stage Commitment)	Operationalizing (Setting Up the Structure)	Functioning (Using Information to Inform Decisions)	Advanced (Sustained Impactful Practice)
• The local government has begun reviewing budget allocations and procedures to understand how funding supports children, youth, and families. • Child-related expenditures can be identified, even if informally or inconsistently.	• Processes are being developed to track child- and youth-related expenditures within the broader local government budget. • The local government is working toward consistently identifying how resources across departments and funding sources support children and youth.	• The local government can produce and communicate a clear, consolidated view of how resources across the budget support children and youth. • The local government regularly shares clear and accessible information with the public about how resources are allocated for children and young people. • Budget analysis is routinely used to inform planning, prioritization and resource-allocation decisions related to children and youth. • Information on children's needs and disparities in outcomes and access across groups of children are explicitly considered during budget development, review and implementation.	• The local government has designated and trained staff responsible for coordinating child-friendly budgeting efforts. • Budget decisions are informed by data on disparities and child well-being outcomes. • Allocations for children and youth are considered across the full budget, with resource-allocation decisions increasingly aligned with priorities for children's well-being.
Youth Participation Focus: Though not identified as a core component of children's budgets, some communities have implemented a mechanism for including youth in the community budgeting process through participatory budgeting framework.			

Youth Ombuds Offices: The local or state government has a designated, independent individual or office responsible for investigating complaints or emerging threats to the wellbeing of children. This office is empowered to receive and investigate complaints or concerns related to the child wellbeing, welfare, or access to services. This office may serve specific populations—such as youth in foster care, juvenile justice, or early childhood systems—and has the authority to enforce corrective action. The literature suggests that a broad mandate can strengthen an ombuds office's ability to identify and address systemic issues affecting children across government.

Initiating (Early-Stage Commitment)	Operationalizing (Setting Up the Structure)	Functioning (Influencing Decisions)	Advanced (Sustained Impactful Practice)
• Political will exists to establish a children's advocate position.	• A children's or youth advocate is hired. A clear mandate, vision, and	• Findings and recommendations are informing agency and	• Findings and recommendations consistently contribute to systemic

• Resources are identified to support the creation of the position or office. • Initial steps are taken to define the role, scope, and authority of the position, potentially through executive action or other formal mechanisms.	work plan are in place to support children in exercising their rights. • Initial procedures for receiving concerns or complaints are established. • The advocate has formal authority to operate with independence and receive and investigate complaints.	community-wide practices and decision-making. • The office is regularly receiving, investigating, and resolving complaints or concerns related to children's well-being. • The advocate engages with children and young people, as appropriate, to inform their work. • The youth ombuds office has wide authority, beyond limited topic areas, to monitor and evaluate local government services for children.	changes in policy, practice, and service delivery. • The office reports regularly to the Mayor, local legislature, and the community. • The office monitors and advances children's rights, driving systemic improvements for children's well-being.

Child Impact Statements: The local or state government uses a formal or informal process to consider how a policy, budget decision, or other action may affect children and youth, even if the primary issue is not focused on children. This could be a child-focused question, checklist, form, or standard practice used by a legislative body, departments or decision-makers to assess potential impacts on child well-being. This process may be embedded within another decision-making process, such as an Equity Impact Assessment, provided it explicitly requires consideration of potential impacts on children and youth. The intent of Child Impact Statements is that they are routinely integrated into government decision-making and inform policies, budgets, and other actions affecting children and youth.

Initiating (Early-Stage Commitment)	Operationalizing (Setting Up the Structure)	Functioning (Influencing Decisions)	Advanced (Sustained Impactful Practice)
• Impacts on children, youth, and families are discussed in some policy conversations, but inconsistently. • The local government has reviewed existing policies to assess whether and how children and youth are considered. • There is interest from one or more local government leaders to more systematically consider impacts on children when decisions are made that affect them.	• Procedures are identified for developing child-responsive policies, including consultation with service providers, parents, and young people. • Questions about child and youth impacts are explicitly integrated into existing policy review or analysis processes, or through a standalone child impact statement process. • The local government begins defining when and how child	• Impacts on children, youth, and families are routinely considered in policymaking. • A clear process is established to determine when a formal impact assessment or statement is required, and it is applied consistently across decisions. • Findings from impact assessments are shared publicly and influence decision-making.	• Child impact statements are conducted for all relevant policies and decisions. • Findings from child impact statements are systematically integrated into decision-making and accountability processes. • Child impact considerations are embedded across policy development, budgeting, and implementation processes.

	impact considerations should be applied, potentially through guidance, policy, or administrative direction.	• A clear process exists to determine when and how children and young people are consulted.	• Children and youth are meaningfully included in the drafting process. • Policies explicitly reference children's rights and well-being and prioritize children's best interests in decision-making.

Youth Councils: The local or state government provides a structured, ongoing opportunity for youth to engage with local government. This may take the form of a youth council, advisory board, youth commissions, or another formal body, regardless of what it is called. These groups may focus on educating youth about how local government works, gathering their perspectives on community issues, or offering input into local or state government programs, services, policies, legislation, or budgets. At a minimum, the group is convened by the local or state government and regularly connects young people to civic life and local leadership. Preliminary evidence suggests that these structures are most effective when youth have input on formal decision-making.

Because this structure is explicitly designed for youth participation, cities should expect stronger alignment with the Youth Participation and Inclusion dimensions when assessing this structure.

Note: Where youth participation structures are formalized through policy or ordinance, cities should ensure those requirements enable meaningful, developmentally appropriate participation. In practice, this often includes flexibility in meeting formats (including virtual options), enabling stipends or compensation, providing food or other supports, and structuring transparency requirements (e.g., minutes or recordings) in ways that do not hinder authentic youth engagement—for example, by allowing more informal, youth-friendly discussion and reducing barriers to participation.

Initiating (Early-Stage Commitment)	Operationalizing (Setting Up the Structure)	Functioning (Influencing Decisions)	Advanced (Sustained Impactful Practice)
• The local government has mapped existing opportunities for children and young people to participate in civic and governmental processes. • Informal, pilot, or issue-specific participatory mechanisms exist or are being explored.	• Formal participation mechanisms (e.g., youth council, advisory board) are established with defined roles, purpose and structure. • Dedicated staffing and resources are allocated, including youth stipends. • Youth Council staff receive training to engage youth in	• Youth input is regularly considered in programs, services, or policies and where appropriate, is reflected in those decisions. • Youth participation is strengthened through formal mechanisms that connect youth input to government decision-making, such as incorporating child impact statements into the council's work. • Youth participation mechanisms are active, consistent, and engaging a	• Youth participation is embedded as a core component of governance and decision-making. • Youth perspectives are systematically integrated into local government decision-making processes and consistently inform policies, programs, and services. • The local government assesses how youth participation is influencing policies, services, and communities,

	meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways. • Youth input is influencing policymaking, although it may be inconsistent, informal, or limited in scope.	defined and representative group of young people. • Adults regularly receive training to engage youth in meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways • Processes are put in place to actively recruit and engage youth who are less likely to be invited into civic spaces • There is a clear annual calendar with defined goals, agendas, and roles.	and uses findings to strengthen youth participation. • The local government invests in a long-term youth civic leadership pipeline that develops young people's skills and creates opportunities for them to advance into broader community leadership, public service, or government-support roles. • The local government has mechanisms for communicating back to participants how their input was considered and what decisions were made, including when recommendations are not adopted.

Children's Cabinets: The local or state government has an established group that brings together leaders from multiple departments or agencies that serve children and youth to coordinate planning, programs, or investments. This group is focused on improving services and outcomes for children and families through cross-departmental collaboration. While the group may also include community partners and/or youth, it is government-led or facilitated. Preliminary evidence suggests Children's Cabinets are strengthened when cross-government planning and decision making are informed by the perspectives of children and young people through appropriate participation mechanisms.

Initiating (Early-Stage Commitment)	Operationalizing (Setting Up the Structure)	Functioning (Influencing Decisions)	Advanced (Sustained Impactful Practice)
• The local government is exploring the idea of a community-wide children's cabinet (or similar coordinating body) focused broadly on children's well-being across sectors. • A focal point or informal champion has been identified to support early coordination. • Cross-departmental conversations or meetings may already be occurring, often focused on specific children's issues or topics,	• A children's cabinet or similar coordinating body has been formally convened with representation from relevant departments and sectors (e.g., health, education, social services, public safety). • Roles, membership, and purpose are being defined. • The coordinating unit has been appropriately staffed. • A concept paper, charter, or guiding framework has been	• The coordinating unit meets regularly with active and sustained participation from members. • Shared community-wide goals and priorities for children are being implemented. • The body has a clear vision, shared goals, and measurement structures informed by data and evidence. • The coordinating unit influences decision-making and monitors	• The body reports regularly to the Mayor, local legislature, and the public, including children and young people, and drives continuous improvement across systems. • The coordinating unit's influence is embedded, consistently shaping policymaking, regulatory decisions, and system-level outcomes. • Community-wide strategies and decisions increasingly advance

but they are not yet coordinated around child well-being system-wide.	developed and shared with key stakeholders. • Shared community-wide priorities for children are being developed.	policies, strategies, programs, and services affecting children.	children's rights and contribute to improved outcomes for children and youth.