

Chapter 9

# Significance of the “Child Friendly Cities and Communities Initiative” and Its Status Today

## Introduction

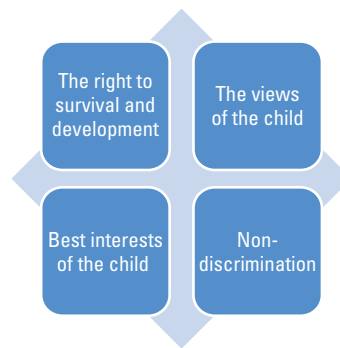
The Child Friendly Cities and Communities Initiative (CFCI) is a UNICEF initiative being rolled out worldwide. What comes to mind when you think of the phrase “child friendly”? Does it just mean when adults do things for children? That is part of it, of course, but does this alone constitute “child friendliness?” In any case, the term puts a spotlight on the attitudes of the adults who live around children. I hope that this chapter will provide an opportunity for us to think together about these issues.

UNICEF’s CFCI, initiated at the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in 1996, is a project in which local governments play a leading role. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted in 1989 and entered into force the following year, has also had a significant impact. “Child-friendly” means “a city, town, village or community, or any local governance system, committed to realizing the rights of the child as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.” As such, it refers to a municipality or community where children’s voices, needs, priorities, and rights are an integral part of public policies, programs, and decisions. This initiative is aligned with the transition from the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where there are no developing or developed countries, no governments or private sectors, no children or adults, just everyone working together to protect the planet. In the 21st century, humanity as a whole must engage in activities to care for the Earth. When children are respected as human beings and are involved in society, there is hope for achieving a sustainable world.

## 1 What Are the Rights of Children?

The CFCI is an embodiment of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as applied by local governments. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 to protect the lives and healthy development of the world’s children and has now been ratified by 196 countries and regions, making it the most widely recognized human rights treaty in the world. The Convention regards children (people under the age of 18) as agents and recognizes that they are entitled to rights as individuals, just like adults. Furthermore, the process of growing into adulthood is also taken into consideration. The principles of the Convention are shown in Figure 9-1. The CFCI places particular emphasis on the “child’s right to participation.”

Figure 9-1: Four principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child



Here, the ideas of Janusz Korczak, a Polish Jewish physician and writer who devoted his life to protecting children, and whose pioneering practice during World War II led to the enactment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are instructive. He emphasized the independence of children, stressing not only “self-determination” (which is often the focus of children’s rights), but also the link between self-determination and freedom. Fundamental to this approach is respect for others. In other words, the goal of respecting the rights of children

grew out of the desire to persuade people to value others as they value themselves. As Korczak astutely pointed out, “Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect.”

## 2 What Is a “Child-Friendly Community”?

What does a “child-friendly community” look like? One of the key factors is the importance of children’s participation in the decision-making processes of municipalities. We can say that a child-friendly community is a place that protects the healthy development of children and where children have self-confidence and a sense of active participation in society. What is especially important is for adults to be attentive to children’s opinions. In this regard, Article 12, Paragraph 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child...”

As indicated here, listening closely to the voices of children will encourage their participation in society. Accordingly, a child-friendly community promotes respect for children’s rights, treating them as holders of rights, not just recipients. Respect for children’s human rights is something closely intertwined with everyday life, and it is important to respect children’s human rights from when they are young. Respect for the rights of children leads to the protection of human rights for all, and as such, being “child-friendly” means being friendly to all. A child-friendly community is one that is attuned to children, encourages them to think and make decisions autonomously, and provides them with chances and spaces for them to feel a sense of accomplishment.

## 3 Why Promote the CFCI?

What is the rationale for promoting the CFCI? Essentially, it is because a society in which everyone participates, children and adults alike, is imperative for achieving a sustainable world. It is especially important to establish systems that include children’s opinions and ideas in this process.

The CFCI plays a major role in this regard. In order to build a sustainable planet, we must confront the situation we face today and work to ensure that safe and secure societies continue to exist. For these reasons, the CFCI shares a close relationship with the SDGs. The SDGs represent an effort to harness the efforts of everyone —developing and developed countries, businesses, and citizens alike— to make our planet a better place to live. The CFCI is relevant to each of the 17 goals, especially Goal 11 “Sustainable Cities and Communities” which calls for making “cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” Specifically, it aims to maintain the places where people live as safe, inclusive, and resilient communities. Such communities require people with flexible ways of thinking. The key issue here is the involvement of all people who live on our planet, and especially the participation of children, who are essential to making this effort sustainable. Having children participate in society as a matter of course during their childhood, when the foundations of humanity are laid, and harnessing their potential, will lead to a sustainable planet.

## 4 The Focus of the CFCI

Using several examples, we will examine how children’s perspectives can be taken into account when advancing the CFCI.

### (1) The Town as Seen from the 95 cm Eye Level

Let’s examine the “town” as seen from the eye level of a child. As shown in [Figure 9-2](#), crouching down reveals the view from a child’s perspective. The average height of a five-year-old child in Japan is about 110 cm, so the eye level of such a child is about 95 cm from the ground. An adult holding a cigarette in their hand casually waves their hand just around a child’s eye level. Even when a cigarette is not being smoked, it is likely to be burning at around 250 to 260 degrees Celsius, so it could cause serious harm if it comes into contact with a child’s eyes. This is an example of how a casual or ill-advised wave of the hand can affect someone in a different position, such as a young child. Imagining or experiencing how a town looks like from a “95 cm perspective” will reveal that we have been looking at a town from an adult-centric view. It is unlikely that any adult would want to harm a child, but when adults act without considering other people in different positions,

❖ **Figure 9-2: A workshop on the town as seen from a 95 cm perspective (photo courtesy of Urban95/Amsterdam Placemaking Week)**



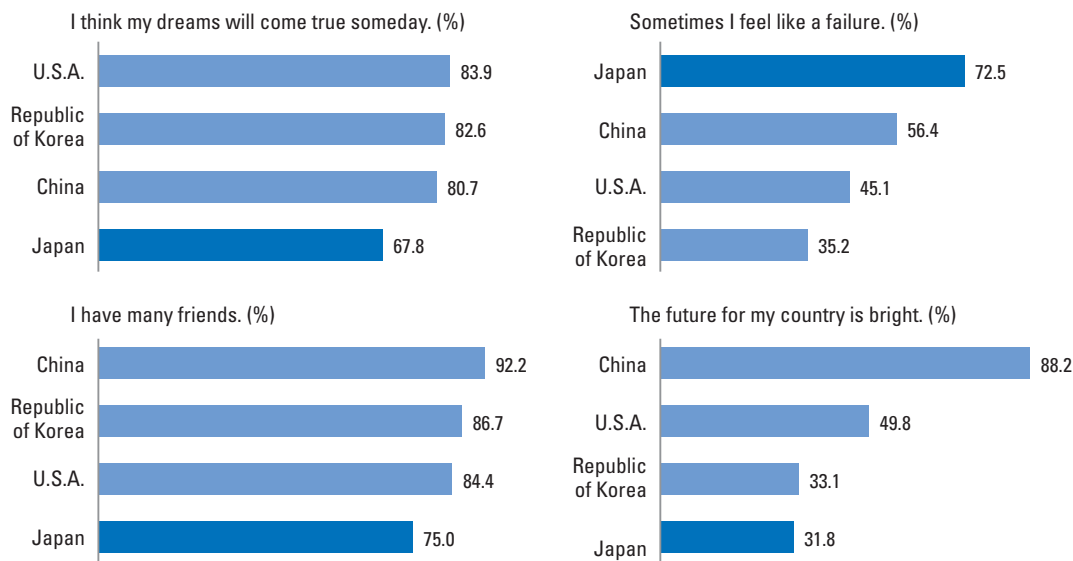
such as children, it can have serious consequences. With this understanding, we can shift our perspective of the “town” from being merely a physical place to a human place. In other words, we can develop the ability to think flexibly and to see things from a different standpoint. This means conceiving of towns from a variety of perspectives: not just that of children, but also elderly people, women, and people with disabilities. In turn, this leads to towns with sharing, cooperation, and peace of mind, where everyone can live in comfort. As such, a town that is friendly to children will be friendly to everyone.

## (2) Low Self-Esteem among Japanese Children

In 2014, an interesting study was conducted that compared self-esteem among Japanese children with that of children in other countries. The National Institution for Youth Education of Japan surveyed high school students in Japan, the United States, China, and the Republic of Korea. The survey results are shown in **Figure 9-3**.

What do the results of this survey tell us? Japanese children do not seem to have very positive attitudes about themselves or their hopes for the future. Why is that? This view of oneself in society may be the result of being treated in a way that negates one’s feelings of self-affirmation. A similar pattern can be seen in the results of a survey of children in 38 developed countries from UNICEF’s *Report Card 16*, published in September 2020. This has important implications for the relationship between children and society. Shukuro Manabe, the 2021 Nobel Prize winner in Physics, explained why he left Japan to become a U.S. citizen: “In Japan, people always worry about not disturbing others. But in the U.S., I can do things I like.... That’s one reason I don’t want to go back to Japan. Because I cannot bear a way of life that places too much emphasis on harmony.” (*Mainichi Shimbun*, October 6, 2021). There seems to be a common thread between Manabe’s comments and the reasons for Japanese children’s

❖ **Figure 9-3: Comparison of self-esteem of children in four countries**



Source: National Institution for Youth Education (August 28, 2015), *Survey Report on High School Students’ Views on Life: A Comparison of Japan, the United States, China, and South Korea*.

low levels of self-esteem. Do we recognize and praise children’s progress in Japan without comparing them to other children? Are we imposing instructions on children’s thoughts and opinions from above? Are we encouraging children to think and make decisions on their own? Put another way, the question is whether adults can respect children’s autonomy and refrain from imposing excessive demands on them.

### (3) Japanese Children’s Attitudes toward Social Participation

A comparison of the attitudes of high school students in the four countries revealed that Japanese high school students have low levels of self-esteem and view the future of their country in a negative light. However, Japanese children do not necessarily have pessimistic attitudes. The results of a survey of attitudes of junior and senior high school students toward social participation conducted by Chiba City in 2009 provide some insights (Figure 9-4). According to the results, more than 60% of children answered “no” when asked whether they would like to speak out about the local environment and activities. However, when asked the reason why that was, they said that even if they spoke up, nothing would change and no one would listen. In other words, it is a question of listening on the part of adults. If children have opportunities to voice their opinions and a social system that is receptive to them, we expect that their motivation will increase, and their participation in society will be enhanced. How can we build a society for the future if children have no interest in society? This raises questions about the attitudes and approaches taken by adults.

### (4) The Power of Children Shown in Rebuilding Schools after the Great East Japan Earthquake

A school rebuilding project in Otsuchi Town, Iwate Prefecture, which was severely damaged by the Great East Japan Earthquake, is a clear example of how children’s voices and ideas can play a major role in community development. The Japan Committee for UNICEF asked elementary school students, who had lost their school buildings in the earthquake and had experienced studying in temporary school buildings, to help design a new school. The goal was to use their experience to create a school that was resistant to earthquakes and tsunamis, as well as one that was conducive to learning. The “Classroom of the Future” workshop was held three times, starting in October 2012, with the participation of approximately 90 fifth-grade students studying in temporary school buildings. In this workshop, the children built models of their ideal classrooms and school facilities. Under the guidance of experts, the children had a fun time building the models. They came up with many ideas on how to make the school more disaster-resistant, freely throwing around ideas as only children can. The workshop report, with comments from the experts, was then submitted to the Otsuchi municipal government. The Otsuchi Board of Education began construction of a new school building that embodied the children’s ideas, and the result of their efforts came to fruition as Otsuchi Gakuen (academy) in November 2016. This was a project in which the power of children contributed greatly to the recovery from a major disaster. Through this experience, they learned that children have a considerable capacity to contribute to society. It was a tangible demonstration of the wonderful possi-

Figure 9-4: Children’s attitudes toward social participation in Chiba City

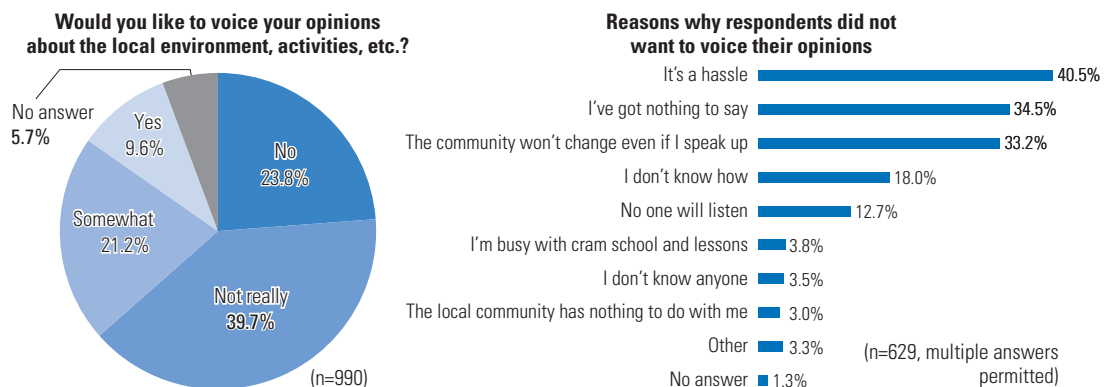


Figure 9-5: "Classroom of the Future" workshop



bilities for community development undertaken together with children. This great achievement, which bore fruit through the participation of children, also served as a catalyst for the Japan Committee for UNICEF to start working on CFCI in Japan.

## 5 CFCI around the World Today

The CFCI is a global initiative promoted by UNICEF. The extent to which this initiative has spread around the world gives us a glimpse of a sustainable future for the planet. The Child Friendly Cities Summit was held in Cologne, Germany, from October 15 - 18, 2019, coinciding with the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The summit was attended by 682 participants from over 250 municipalities around the world, including mayors of towns and cities, experts, children, and young people. A Mayors' Declaration was

Figure 9-6: Child Friendly Cities Summit



also issued, which appealed to municipalities around the world to become more child-friendly. Since the Summit, the number of countries and municipalities implementing the CFCI has increased rapidly, and as of March 2021, there were 5,676 municipalities in 58 countries taking part. Why does the CFCI focus on municipalities? This is because municipalities, as a system of administration, are closer to their residents and familiar with their needs. This makes them suitable for working with children, families, and other members of the community to find solutions. Among recent activities in developing and developed countries, there are active efforts to promote children's participation in society, to expand support for families, to coordinate with the SDGs, and to provide support for children amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, there is a growing recognition that a sustainable planet cannot exist unless both developing and developed countries work hand in hand on this project.

## 6 The CFCI in Japan Today

What do the activities undertaken through the CFCI look like in Japan? The CFCI has common global standards, but as circumstances differ from country to country, there is also room for mechanisms to reflect those circumstances. For example, Japan's CFCI is based on the nine elements defined as universal standards by UNICEF, and also includes a tenth element that represents the challenges faced by each local government that is engaged in the CFCI. It also advocates "Our Local CFCI," an initiative in which municipalities voluntarily engage in sustainable municipal management. This helps an attachment to the project to develop, which in turn allows it to take root. This is not a self-centered approach that assumes that using this initiative is enough to improve only your own town. Putting the CFCI into practice will affect the municipalities around the area in question, as well as nearby cities, prefectures, and countries, until it eventually becomes something the entire world is engaged in. Implementation in Japan began with a forum held on October 29, 2018, at which UNICEF commissioned five municipalities (Niseko Town, Hokkaido; Abira Town, Hokkaido; Tomiya City, Miyagi Prefecture; Machida City, Tokyo; and Nara City, Nara Prefecture) to work on testing a UNICEF Japan-based CFC model. This testing work was completed over two years and produced excel-

❖ **Figure 9-7: Mayors participating in the CFCI Forum (held on October 29, 2018)**



lent results (for an example of CFCI, see Chapter 11, 11-2, about Tomiya City’s initiatives). Among these efforts, proactive and tangible measures are enhancing systems for implementing the CFCI, including establishing “Children’s Future Divisions” in local governments; including the CFCI in Comprehensive Plans; and incorporating the CFCI into training programs for new employees. These measures clearly indicate that the CFCI is an important project for local government management in Japan. For more information on the implementation of the CFCI in Japan, please refer to the following website: <https://www.unicef.or.jp/cfc/japan/> (in Japanese).

Amidst a plethora of issues involving children, such as child poverty, abuse, and bullying, major changes are taking place in the systems and legislation related to children in Japan. The Diet adopted the Basic Act on Children’s Policy, which incorporates the spirit and principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Act Establishing the Children and Families Agency, which centralizes the responsibility for child policy and the comprehensive coordination of measures regarding children (June 15, 2022). Although 28 years have passed since Japan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, there is still little understanding in the country regarding respect for children’s rights, including in schools. Under these circumstances, a clear national policy on respecting the rights of the child is a landmark achievement.

As a result, local governments are required to organize councils for implementing, liaising on, and coordinating matters related to policies involving children, and to ensure coordination among relevant departments. Drastic improvements in policies related to children and childcare are now expected, not only by the national government but by local governments as well. It is extremely important to take advantage of the new national systems and legislation to ensure widespread acceptance of their substance and principles, but it is the governments of the municipalities where children live that will take the lead in implementing them. The CFCI is an initiative in which local governments take the lead in protecting the human dignity of children, as embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in increasing child participation. Therefore, CFCI can be seen as a project to meet these expectations in a tangible way. It is hoped that as many municipalities as possible will take a cue from the CFCI activities of the five commissioned municipalities and make a significant contribution to the future roll-out of the CFCI in Japan.

## 7 Conclusion

It goes without saying that people are influenced by their surroundings. Thus, children who grow up in an environment where human rights are respected will become people who respect human rights. Municipalities are the level of government closest to children. They can listen to their opinions on matters that concern them and incorporate new perspectives into municipal management. If we value the qualities that children naturally possess, they will develop an interest in the community and participate in its projects. This leads to greater activity in the community and facilitates interaction between people, resulting in safe and stable municipalities. This process will serve as a “glocal” initiative that is friendly to all, which will help protect the planet we live on. This will create sustainable communities that belong to everyone.

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Note: This chapter represents the author’s personal views and not those of his organization.