

ADVANCING CHILD RIGHTS IN URBAN GOVERNANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES IN THE CHILD-FRIENDLY CITY INITIATIVE IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The Child-Friendly City program in Indonesia aims to integrate children's rights into urban governance, promoting safe, inclusive environments for children's development. Initiated by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, this program has expanded significantly since its inception in the 2010s. It has gained recognition for establishing child-friendly infrastructure and services such as playgrounds, libraries, and health centers. However, rapid urbanization and climate risks have posed new challenges, prompting the inclusion of children's participation in urban decision-making. The program is guided by 24 indicators assessing health, education, protection, and participation, categorizing cities into four achievement levels. Despite successes, empirical data from Pemalang Regency reveals a gap between policy aspirations and outcomes, with rising child violence cases indicating ineffective child protection. The study explores the discrepancy between policy formulation and implementation, analyzing institutional barriers such as fragmented governance, inadequate coordination, and resource constraints. Additionally, socio-cultural factors, including the view of child protection as a familial responsibility, further hinder progress. This research employs a non-doctrinal approach, combining legal and field-based analysis to identify these challenges and offer recommendations. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive data systems, enhanced child protection training, and stronger coordination among local actors. By incorporating children's voices into policy creation and strengthening legal frameworks, the Child-Friendly City program in Pemalang can become a model for broader child-rights realization, ensuring children's safety, participation, and well-being in urban governance.

Keywords: Child-Friendly City; Children's Rights; Urban Governance; Child Protection; Child Abuse.

A. Introduction

Indonesia's Child-Friendly City programme has evolved into a central framework for integrating children's rights into urban governance. Initiated by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, the programme seeks to create safe, inclusive, and supportive environments that enable children to develop optimally (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak, 2016). Its core mandate is to uphold children's rights while ensuring that government institutions and communities provide adequate protection, services, and opportunities for participation.

Throughout the 2010s, the Child-Friendly City programme expanded significantly, with an increasing number of cities receiving recognition for establishing child-friendly facilities and

services such as playgrounds, libraries, health centres, and child-protection units (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2017). The programme's focus widened in response to emerging structural challenges, including rapid urbanisation, shifting social dynamics, and growing climate risks (Arliman, 2018; Darmini & Laurensius, 2018). This expansion underscored the need for policy frameworks that not only enhance children's wellbeing but also address vulnerabilities shaped by environmental pressures and urban transformation. A defining feature of the programme's recent development is the heightened emphasis on meaningful child participation in urban planning and decision-making processes. By incorporating children's perspectives into municipal governance, local authorities are expected to design policies and programmes that more accurately reflect children's everyday experiences and needs. This shift highlights the programme's broader normative orientation toward democratic, child-centred governance.

To ensure accountability, the Child-Friendly City assessment mechanism employs 24 indicators that cover key domains such as health, education, protection, and participation. Cities are categorised into four award levels *Pratama*, *Madya*, *Nindya*, and *Utama*, based on their level of compliance, with *Utama* representing the highest achievement (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2021b). assessment process brings together local governments, community actors, and children themselves, reinforcing a participatory and multi-stakeholder approach. Implementation is guided by national legal frameworks, notably the Child Protection Law and ministerial regulations issued by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, which outline children's rights, governmental obligations, and monitoring mechanisms. Local governments are further mandated to formulate supporting policies and allocate sufficient resources to ensure the continuity and institutionalisation of child-friendly initiatives.

Through the Child-Friendly City programme, children in Indonesia are envisioned to grow and develop in environments that are safe, healthy, and supportive, thereby enabling them to reach their full potential (Rumble et al., 2018; Wahanisa et al., 2021). Municipalities that attain Child-Friendly City status are expected to serve as models for other regions, promoting the wider adoption of child-friendly principles across the country. The development of the Child-Friendly City concept, both globally and within Indonesia, thus reflects a broader shift from early concerns about children's rights toward more structured and strategic efforts to design urban spaces that prioritise children's wellbeing and participation (Sapsağlam & Eryılmaz, 2024; van der Graaf, 2020; Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023). These efforts demonstrate a strong national commitment to ensuring that every child has the opportunity not only to live and thrive but also to engage meaningfully in community life.

In line with the national development of the Child-Friendly City programme, Pemalang Regency in Central Java has adopted a series of programmes aimed at institutionalising the programme. However, empirical conditions suggest substantial gaps between policy ambition and actual child protection outcomes. Data obtained from the Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection (reveal persistent and fluctuating increases in cases of violence against children. Between 2019 and 2023, reported cases rose from 32 in 2019 to 52 in 2020, peaked at 61 in 2021, declined to 42 in 2022, and rose again to 48 cases in 2023 (see Figure 1). These patterns demonstrate that violence against children remains a systemic and unresolved problem, despite Pemalang's declared commitment to achieving Child-Friendly City status.

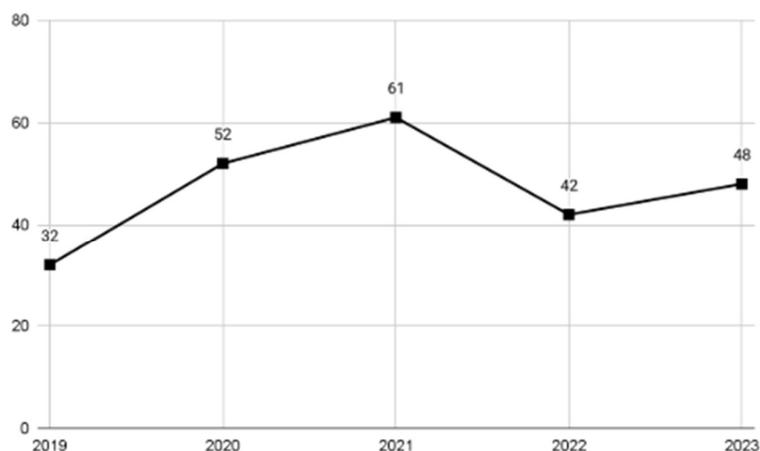


Figure 1. Number of Cases of Violence Against Children in Pemalang Regency

Source: Authors, based on data from the Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection

Against this backdrop, the present study formulates the following research problem: How can the Pemalang Regency Government design and implement effective policy strategies to realise a Child-Friendly Regency amid rising child violence rates? This question is not only policy-relevant but also theoretically significant given the gaps between regulation and implementation.

Existing research on Child-Friendly City implementation in Indonesia has largely focused on normative compliance (Andriani & Zainal, 2015), institutional readiness (Duadji & Tresiana, 2018; Siskasari, 2021), or sectoral interventions such as child-friendly schools (Safitri & Ridwan, 2019), and health services. However, previous studies have not sufficiently examined why violence against children persists in regions that have formally adopted Child-Friendly City regulations, nor have they analysed institutional fragmentation, limited community participation, and resource constraints as structural barriers. The novelty of this article lies in analysis of the discrepancy between policy formulation and actual implementation in Pemalang, and in its effort to situate child violence trends as an evaluative indicator of Child-Friendly City effectiveness. By addressing these gaps, the study contributes to a more grounded understanding of how local governments can strengthen child protection systems within the broader framework of child-friendly urban governance.

B. Method

This research employs a non-doctrinal methodological approach to examine how Child-Friendly City policies operate in practice within the Pemalang Regency. Unlike doctrinal studies that focus primarily on interpreting legal norms, this approach investigates the lived realities of policy implementation and the extent to which legal frameworks translate into actual improvements in children's protection and well-being (Sanne & Wibren, 2024). The study begins with a focused review of relevant laws and regulations governing child protection and Child-Friendly City implementation at the national and local levels, not for normative interpretation, but to contextualize the institutional mandates that shape local governance. This regulatory mapping is complemented by an analysis of monitoring reports, administrative records, and internal documentation produced by the Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection of Pemalang Regency, which provide empirical evidence of how Child-Friendly City programmes have been executed over time.

To deepen this analysis, the study collects primary data through field-based interviews with key actors directly involved in child protection and Child-Friendly City implementation, including

officials from the Social Services Department Child-Friendly City Pemalang, social workers, and programme coordinators. These interviews explore their experiences, challenges, and institutional constraints, allowing the research to identify gaps between formal policy commitments and their operational realities. By integrating documentary analysis with qualitative field data, this non-doctrinal approach enables a grounded assessment of the structural, administrative, and socio-cultural barriers that influence the effectiveness of Pemalang's Child-Friendly City initiatives. The combined evidence provides a basis for generating context-sensitive recommendations to strengthen local child protection systems and enhance the transformative potential of Child-Friendly City policies.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Child-Friendly Cities in a Human Rights Framework

The concept of a child-friendly city, known in Indonesia as *Kota Layak Anak* (KLA), reflects a normative shift in urban governance that situates children's rights at the core of local development and policy-making (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak, 2016). This shift corresponds to the broader evolution of international human rights law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which obliges States parties to recognize children as rights-holders with entitlements to survival, development, protection, and participation across civil, political, economic, social, and cultural domains (Verhellen, 2015). Ratified by Indonesia, the CRC establishes that children are individuals with dignity and rights and mandates that all actions concerning children be carried out in their best interests, respecting their views and enabling their fullest development (Wahanisa et al., 2021).

In international policy discourse, the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) promulgated by UNICEF and related agencies represents a rights-based approach to local governance that operationalizes the CRC within municipal frameworks (UNICEF, 2022). The initiative posits that cities and communities should be spaces where children's needs, perspectives, and rights are systematically integrated into policies, programs, and public decision-making processes. In this sense, child-friendly cities are not merely environments with child-appropriate infrastructure; they are governance systems that actively value, respect, and protect children's human rights through institutional mechanisms and participatory processes (Powell, 2024).

A human rights lens emphasizes that child-friendly cities must go beyond service provision to encapsulate substantive normative commitments. The CRC's foundational principles, non-discrimination (Article 2), best interests of the child (Article 3), the right to life, survival and development (Article 6), and respect for the views of the child (Article 12) serve as guiding pillars for evaluating child-friendly governance. These principles demand that local authorities ensure equity in access to services, safeguard environments conducive to children's holistic development, and institutionalize channels for meaningful child participation in local governance (Powell, 2024; Verhellen, 2015).

From a human rights perspective, the rationale for integrating children's rights into urban governance stems from recognition of their vulnerability and the asymmetrical impacts of urbanization on young people. Rapid urban growth can exacerbate inequalities in access to health, education, safety, and public space, disproportionately affecting children who lack formal political voice or economic power (Malone, 2015). Rights-based models like CFCI thus frame urban policy as a venue for realizing legally binding entitlements rather than discretionary welfare measures (Chawla & van Vliet, 2016). This framework aligns with scholarship that conceptualizes child-friendly cities as environments where children are valued participants in shaping the physical, social, and political landscapes of municipalities.

Conceptually, child-friendly cities embody an expansive human rights agenda that intersects with broader rights to adequate housing, quality education, health care, protection from harm, and civic participation. Applying the human rights lens, cities are expected to operationalize these rights through comprehensive, child-responsive planning and governance systems that integrate policy goals across sectors. Such integration requires multi-level coordination, cross-sectoral strategies, and robust monitoring mechanisms that ensure accountability for rights realization at the local level. UNICEF's guidance notes explicitly emphasize that CFCI implementation must contribute to measurable improvements in children's rights outcomes and must be rooted in the CRC's general principles and measures of implementation (UNICEF, 2022).

The normative link between child-friendly cities and human rights is also reflected in Indonesian law and policy. National frameworks such as Law No. 35 of 2014 on Child Protection, which amended Law No. 23 of 2002, mandate local governments to protect and fulfill children's rights as part of obligatory governmental functions. Furthermore, Presidential Regulation on Child-Friendly Cities elaborates that Child-Friendly City development systems must guarantee the fulfillment of children's rights and provide special protection in a planned, comprehensive, and sustainable manner, aligning domestic policy with international human rights obligations (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2021).

Human rights specialists underscore that child-friendly governance also entails active non-discrimination and inclusion, ensuring that municipalities address structural inequalities that marginalize certain groups of children, including those with disabilities, those from low-income families, or those facing discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, or migration status. A child rights approach therefore reframes policy evaluation from assessing service availability to evaluating whether rights are equitably realized for all children within a jurisdiction (Chawla & van Vliet, 2016). The CRC's non-discrimination principle obliges states to adopt positive measures that dismantle barriers to inclusion and equal participation for all children.

Critically, a human rights framing of child-friendly cities highlights children's agency rather than mere protection. Respecting children's views and including them in governance processes is not peripheral but central to human rights. The CRC's Article 12 articulates children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with these views given due weight in accordance with age and maturity (Britto & Ulkuer, 2012). Operationalizing this right in local contexts involves creating institutionalized forums such as child councils, participatory budgeting processes, and formal consultation mechanisms that meaningfully integrate children's voices into municipal decision making. UNICEF's implementation guidance reinforces that child participation should be systematically embedded in local governance structures to ensure children are not passive beneficiaries but active claimants of rights (UNICEF, 2022).

Implementing a child rights approach at the city level, however, involves navigating complex governance landscapes where multiple stakeholders, national and local governments, civil society, communities, and children themselves, must negotiate priorities and resources (Raz & Almog, 2023). Human rights frameworks emphasize the accountability obligations of duty-bearers, particularly local authorities, to report progress and setbacks in children's rights realization. This accountability extends to transparent monitoring systems that track indicators of rights fulfillment and public reporting mechanisms that allow communities, including children, to hold authorities responsible for policy outcomes. Rights-based governance thus intersects with accountability regimes that are integral to human rights practice.

Empirical research on child-friendly cities in Indonesia reveals the structural and institutional challenges in translating human rights norms into local policy and practice. Despite policy mandates, disparities persist in service delivery, participation opportunities, and protection mechanisms across cities and regencies. Scholars have observed that while some municipalities demonstrate strong institutional commitment to children's civil rights and freedoms, gaps remain in areas such as access to identity documentation, child-friendly information centers, and sustained

collaboration among government, communities, and civil society actors. These findings demonstrate that realizing human rights in local contexts requires more than nominal program adoption; it demands persistent institutional capacity building and inclusive governance practices (Andriani & Zainal, 2015; Arliman, 2018; Darmini & Laurensius, 2018).

Moreover, rights-based interpretations of child-friendly cities emphasize contextual responsiveness, where local policies must adapt human rights norms to the specific social, cultural, and economic landscapes of diverse communities. This adaptation is vital in decentralized governance systems like Indonesia's, where regional autonomy grants significant policy discretion to subnational governments. Integrating human rights into local development agendas thus involves aligning national legal obligations with local priorities while ensuring that children's fundamental rights to safety, education, health, and participation are safeguarded as universal entitlements rather than variable policy concessions.

Human rights frameworks also provide evaluative benchmarks for assessing the effectiveness of child-friendly city initiatives. Rather than focusing solely on compliance with procedural indicators, a rights-based evaluation considers outcomes related to equity, dignity, freedom from discrimination, and the enhancement of children's substantive liberties (Nisa, 2022). For example, evaluation frameworks might assess whether children have genuine opportunities to influence policy, whether services are accessible and acceptable to the most marginalized groups, and whether public spaces and services uphold children's rights to safety and play. Such benchmarks reflect a rights-based performance standard that is rooted in core human rights norms.

After all the explanation above, approaching child-friendly cities through a human rights lens underscores that Child-Friendly City is not only a planning or welfare initiative but an embodiment of legal and ethical commitments to the full realization of children's human rights. This perspective situates children as rights bearers whose entitlements to protection, participation, development, and non-discrimination must shape urban governance and public policy. Embedding human rights into child-friendly city frameworks therefore demands robust legal foundations, cross-sectoral governance mechanisms, participatory structures that empower children, and accountability systems that operationalize the normative principles of the CRC in substantive local outcomes. Only through such comprehensive and rights-grounded approaches can child-friendly cities contribute meaningfully to the realization of children's human dignity and agency in diverse urban contexts.

2. The Multiple Obstacles to Realising the Child-Friendly City in Pematang Regency

Efforts to institutionalize the Child-Friendly City framework in Pematang Regency reveal a complex constellation of structural, institutional, and socio-cultural obstacles that collectively undermine the transformative ambitions of child-centred governance. Although formal commitments to Child-Friendly City principles are evident through local policies and administrative arrangements, empirical realities indicate that these commitments have not yet translated into a coherent system capable of substantially reducing children's exposure to violence or improving their everyday well-being. The persistence of these obstacles underscores the gap between policy adoption and rights realization, a challenge frequently identified in the literature on decentralized governance and social policy implementation in Indonesia (Reviansyah & Turtiantoro, 2017).

At the normative level, limited understanding of children's rights among both governmental actors and the broader community constitutes a foundational constraint. Child protection in Pematang continues to be framed predominantly as a private family matter, shaped by entrenched cultural norms that prioritize parental authority and social harmony over children's autonomy and voice. This orientation is inconsistent with the rights-based paradigm of the CRC, which conceptualizes children as independent rights holders entitled to protection and participation in matters affecting their lives (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2009). When child

protection is relegated to the domestic sphere, community vigilance weakens, incidents of abuse are underreported, and institutional intervention is often delayed until harm has escalated.

These socio-cultural dynamics also influence how children's participation is perceived and practiced in local governance. Interviews with members of the Pemalang Children's Forum (*Forum Anak Kabupaten Pemalang*) suggest that children's views are frequently acknowledged in form but disregarded in substance, reflecting deeper power asymmetries embedded in local decision-making structures. This pattern resonates with Quennerstedt (2013) observation that children's participation rights are often symbolically endorsed while remaining structurally marginalized in policy processes. In contrast to international child-friendly city models that institutionalize children's participation through school councils, youth parliaments, and consultative mechanisms at the municipal level, Pemalang's participatory spaces remain fragile and highly dependent on political goodwill rather than legally enforceable guarantees.

Beyond normative barriers, weaknesses in data governance significantly constrain the effectiveness of child-friendly policies. Reliable, disaggregated, and up-to-date data are indispensable for identifying patterns of violence, targeting interventions, and evaluating policy outcomes. In Pemalang, however, child protection data remain fragmented across agencies, inconsistently recorded, and often outdated. This fragmentation reflects not only limited administrative capacity but also the absence of an integrated reporting system that links education, health, social services, and law enforcement institutions. Similar challenges have been documented in other Southeast Asian contexts, where institutional silos impede evidence-based policy making and weaken accountability mechanisms (Christine, 2024).

The consequences of inadequate data management are far-reaching. Without accurate information, early detection of abuse becomes difficult, resource allocation lacks empirical grounding, and monitoring mechanisms fail to capture the effectiveness of existing programmes. Interviews with officials from Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection indicate that policy adjustments are often reactive rather than strategic, responding to high-profile cases instead of addressing structural risk factors (*Interview with the Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection of Pemalang Regency, 2025*). This condition undermines the Child-Friendly City framework's aspiration to function as a preventive and rights-responsive governance system.

Educational institutions represent another critical arena where the limits of child-friendly governance become apparent. While school enrollment rates in Pemalang have improved, qualitative deficits persist in the form of inadequate facilities, insufficiently trained teachers, and curricula that lack explicit integration of children's rights and gender-sensitive perspectives. These shortcomings are not isolated phenomena but are linked to longstanding structural problems in rural education, including chronic underfunding, uneven teacher distribution, and limited pedagogical supervision (Joppe et al., 2018). As a result, schools often struggle to function as safe and empowering environments that actively promote children's dignity and agency.

Comparative experiences from other Indonesian cities illustrate that these challenges are not inevitable. In Surakarta, for example, rights-based learning modules and community-based monitoring mechanisms have strengthened schools' role in preventing violence and fostering participatory cultures (Ratna, 2021). Denpasar has similarly integrated child-friendly standards into school governance, supported by local regulations and cross-sectoral collaboration (Natali et al., 2025). Pemalang's partial implementation suggests that the obstacle lies not in the absence of policy models but in the limited institutional capacity to adapt and sustain them. Strengthening school quality in this context is inseparable from broader efforts to cultivate a rights-conscious community that recognizes children as legitimate social and political subjects.

Health services further reflect spatial and socio-economic inequalities that complicate the realization of child-friendly governance. Children in remote and underserved areas of Pemalang

continue to encounter significant barriers to accessing essential healthcare due to shortages of facilities, trained personnel, and effective referral systems. These disparities are exacerbated by uneven budget distribution across subdistricts and limited incentives for health professionals to work in peripheral areas (*Interview with the Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection of Pemalang Regency, 2025*). Such conditions undermine the CRC's emphasis on children's right to the highest attainable standard of health, which encompasses both physical and mental well-being (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2009).

International child-friendly city frameworks highlight the importance of child-responsive primary healthcare, including mental health services that address trauma resulting from violence and neglect (Pia & Bezboruah, 2025; UNICEF, 2022; UNICEF, 2026). In Pemalang, however, the integration of mental health support into primary healthcare remains embryonic. This gap is particularly concerning given the documented prevalence of violence against children in the region, which necessitates accessible and trauma-informed health services. Extensive international research demonstrates that exposure to violence and neglect during childhood has long-term consequences for cognitive development, emotional regulation, and physical health, underscoring the need for early, integrated mental health interventions (Gilbert et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2017). Ensuring equitable access to immunization, maternal and child health programmes, and child-sensitive medical care is therefore not merely a technical challenge but a normative requirement grounded in human rights obligations, particularly the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health as articulated in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and elaborated in General Comment No. 15 (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2026; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019).

Economic vulnerability intersects with and intensifies nearly all the obstacles outlined above. Poverty shapes children's exposure to malnutrition, irregular schooling, inadequate healthcare, and heightened risks of violence and exploitation. Comparative studies in low- and middle-income countries consistently show that socio-economic deprivation multiplies children's vulnerability across multiple dimensions of well-being, limiting their capacity to benefit from public services even where such services formally exist (Engle et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2020). National studies consistently demonstrate that children from low-income households experience compounded disadvantages that limit their ability to benefit from public services (SMERU, BAPPENAS, 2025). From a human rights perspective, these conditions signal structural inequalities that contravene the principle of non-discrimination embedded in Article 2 of the CRC, which obliges states to take proactive measures to ensure equal enjoyment of rights for all children, regardless of socio-economic background.

Comparative evidence from other districts suggests that child-focused poverty reduction strategies can yield tangible improvements when they are explicitly linked to education and health outcomes. International evaluations of conditional cash transfer programmes indicate that when social protection is designed with child-specific objectives, such as school attendance, nutritional monitoring, and access to healthcare, it can significantly reduce child labour, improve educational attainment, and enhance long-term developmental outcomes (Baird et al., 2014). Integrated family support teams in Kulon Progo and conditional cash transfer programmes tied to school attendance offer examples of how social protection can be aligned with child-friendly objectives (*Interview with the Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection of Pemalang Regency, 2025*). The absence of similarly integrated approaches in Pemalang indicates a missed opportunity to address poverty as a structural determinant of child protection failures rather than as an isolated welfare issue, a concern echoed in international child rights scholarship emphasizing the indivisibility of social and economic rights.

Institutional coordination constitutes a further layer of constraint that cuts across sectors and policy domains. The realization of a child-friendly city requires sustained collaboration among governmental agencies, civil society organizations, and community actors. In Pemalang, however, coordination remains fragmented, with overlapping mandates and unclear lines of responsibility. Governance research on child protection systems indicates that fragmented institutional arrangements often result in service duplication, accountability gaps, and ineffective case management, particularly in decentralized settings (FRA: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2025). The shortage of safe play areas, rehabilitation centres, and fully functional child protection units reflects not only fiscal limitations but also weaknesses in integrated planning and inter-agency communication. Without coherent coordination mechanisms, resources are dispersed inefficiently, and programmes operate in isolation rather than as components of a unified child protection system.

Taken together, these obstacles illustrate that the challenges facing Pemalang's Child-Friendly City implementation are not isolated deficiencies but interconnected manifestations of deeper structural and governance issues. Cultural norms that marginalize children's voices, weak data systems, uneven service provision, economic vulnerability, and fragmented institutional arrangements reinforce one another, creating a policy environment in which child-friendly aspirations struggle to materialize. This pattern reflects what international scholars describe as the "implementation gap" between human rights norms and lived realities, particularly in decentralized governance systems (Hafner-Burton et al., 2008).

3. What Can be Done? Expectations and Future Plans

Pemalang's achievement of the *Nindya* category in the Child-Friendly City assessment reflects a growing institutional commitment to advancing children's rights. Local leaders, including the Acting Regent Mansur Hidayat, have emphasized that this recognition should serve not as an endpoint but as a catalyst for strengthening coordination, accountability, and cross-sectoral collaboration (*Interview with the Department of Social Affairs, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection of Pemalang Regency, 2025*). From a human rights perspective, this framing is crucial, as international human rights law consistently underscores that recognition or certification mechanisms are meaningful only insofar as they generate sustained improvements in the lived experiences of rights holders. The challenge for Pemalang, therefore, lies in translating symbolic achievement into a durable governance architecture that progressively realizes children's civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

Sustaining momentum toward the *Utama* predicate requires more than rhetorical commitment or episodic programme expansion; it necessitates a long-term, politically supported policy roadmap grounded in human rights obligations. Experiences from districts such as Sleman demonstrate that measurable progress in Child-Friendly City outcomes depends on consistent political will, predictable budget allocation, and institutionalized monitoring systems that survive electoral cycles (Izzul, 2016). International human rights scholarship reinforces this insight, emphasizing that rights realization is inherently incremental and contingent upon stable governance arrangements capable of embedding rights norms into routine administrative practice (Chawla & van Vliet, 2016; Freeman, 2011). For Pemalang, expectations must therefore be calibrated toward systemic transformation rather than short-term performance indicators alone.

A foundational step forward lies in the consolidation of a human rights-based local policy architecture. Building a Child-Friendly District in Pemalang requires the development of an integrated Child Protection Policy Framework that aligns local regulations with national legislation and international human rights standards, particularly the CRC. Such alignment should not be treated as a formalistic exercise but as a process of normative translation, ensuring that abstract rights principles are operationalized through clearly defined institutional mandates, budget

lines, and performance indicators. Comparative studies on subnational human rights implementation show that clarity of institutional roles and fiscal responsibility significantly enhances policy effectiveness and accountability (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006).

Within this framework, expectations for future progress must be articulated through concrete and measurable targets that directly address rights deficits. These may include expanding school accessibility for children with disabilities, reducing incidents of school-based violence, and increasing the availability of child-sensitive health services in rural and peri-urban areas. Such targets resonate with the CRC's emphasis on equality and non-discrimination (Article 2) and the obligation to ensure the best interests of the child in all actions affecting them (Article 3). Evidence from Bandung illustrates that rights-based educational interventions such as school-based reporting mechanisms, participatory curriculum modules, and systematic teacher training can significantly enhance both protection outcomes and children's sense of agency (Darmini & Laurensius, 2018). For Pematang, adopting similar approaches would signal a shift from compliance-oriented governance toward rights-centered service delivery.

Future plans must also confront the structural relationship between economic vulnerability and rights violations. Poverty remains a critical determinant of children's exposure to exploitation, school dropout, and inadequate health care. Human rights law, particularly as interpreted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, imposes obligations on local governments to utilize maximum available resources to progressively realize children's economic and social rights. Expanding conditional assistance programmes that link income support to school attendance and health check-ups aligns with international evidence demonstrating the positive rights impacts of social protection schemes when designed with child-specific objectives (Baird et al., 2014; Engle et al., 2011). The expectation for Pematang, therefore, is not merely to expand assistance coverage but to embed child rights indicators into programme design and evaluation.

Addressing sexual exploitation, trafficking, and other severe forms of rights abuse requires an even more coordinated and rights-sensitive approach. International best practices emphasize the necessity of multi-agency rapid response mechanisms that integrate law enforcement, social services, and health care providers within a single, trauma-informed protocol (UNICEF, 2022; Edmonds & Pavenik, 2005). For Pematang, future planning should prioritize the formalization of such mechanisms through local regulations and standard operating procedures, ensuring that institutional cooperation does not depend on personal initiative or ad hoc arrangements. This approach reflects the human rights principle of due diligence, which obliges authorities to prevent, investigate, and remedy rights violations through effective institutional action (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 1988).

Inclusive access to services represents another critical axis of future planning. Children with disabilities and those living in remote villages often face compounded barriers to education, health care, and participation. Strengthening mobile outreach units, supported by dedicated budget allocations within the regional development plan, offers a pragmatic means of addressing spatial and infrastructural inequalities. Human rights research consistently highlights that mobile and community-based service delivery models are particularly effective in reaching marginalized populations when combined with participatory needs assessments and rights awareness initiatives (Lansdown, 2005). For Pematang, investing in such models would demonstrate a commitment to substantive equality rather than formal uniformity.

The justice and protection system constitutes a further domain in which expectations for reform must be explicitly articulated. Upholding the rights of children in conflict or contact with the law requires institutional practices that are consistent with restorative justice principles and the CRC's emphasis on rehabilitation and social reintegration (Article 40). Mandatory child-sensitive training for police officers, prosecutors, social workers, and judges should therefore be viewed as a core component of future planning rather than an ancillary activity. Empirical studies show that

specialized training significantly improves procedural fairness, reduces secondary victimization, and enhances trust between children and justice institutions (Carroll, 2021). Establishing an Integrated Child Protection Team, modeled on successful arrangements in Yogyakarta, would further reduce institutional fragmentation and ensure timely, coordinated responses to complex cases.

International partnerships can play a strategic role in supporting these reforms. Collaboration with organizations such as UNICEF and Save the Children offers access to technical expertise, comparative data, and independent evaluation tools that can strengthen local capacity and credibility. From a human rights perspective, such partnerships are consistent with the principle of international cooperation, which recognizes that rights realization often benefits from shared knowledge and resources (Stadniczeńko, 2022; United Nations Committee on Economic, 2002). For Pemalang, leveraging these partnerships should be oriented toward institutional learning and sustainability rather than short-term project delivery.

Central to consolidating future efforts is the formulation of a comprehensive Local Action Plan that operationalizes the Child-Friendly City pillars into actionable, time-bound strategies. A rights-consistent Local Action Plan should define annual targets linked to specific rights outcomes, integrate community-based reporting and mediation mechanisms, allocate dedicated budgets for child-friendly infrastructure, and establish a district-wide monitoring and evaluation system supported by digital data tools. Such an approach resonates with international guidance on rights-based planning, which emphasizes transparency, participation, and accountability as prerequisites for effective implementation (European Union External Action, 2018).

Expectations surrounding monitoring and evaluation deserve particular attention. Rights-based indicators must capture not only outputs such as the number of facilities built or programmes launched, but also outcomes related to children's safety, well-being, and participation. Involving children and communities in monitoring processes can enhance data quality and democratic legitimacy while fostering a culture of shared responsibility. Research on participatory governance underscores that inclusive monitoring mechanisms contribute to more responsive policy adjustment and greater public trust (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009).

Ultimately, the future of child-friendly governance in Pemalang depends on sustained commitment from government, communities, and families alike. Human rights frameworks provide both normative guidance and evaluative tools for navigating this process, clarifying expectations while allowing for contextual adaptation. By adopting a structured roadmap grounded in legal obligations, empirical evidence, and comparative learning, Pemalang can progressively transform its Child-Friendly City agenda from a compliance-oriented programme into a robust vehicle for realizing children's rights. Such transformation would not only advance the district toward the *Utama* predicate but also contribute to a deeper culture of rights, inclusion, and accountability that benefits children across generations.

4. The Future Impact of Child-Friendly City

The Child-Friendly City framework represents a significant shift in how children's rights are operationalized at the local governance level. Rather than positioning children merely as beneficiaries of social policy, the Child-Friendly City approach reframes them as rights holders whose entitlements must be actively respected, protected, and fulfilled by state institutions. From a human rights perspective, this shift carries profound implications, as it aligns local development agendas with binding international obligations, particularly those articulated in the CRC. The impact of Child-Friendly City policies and the associated solutions implemented by local governments such as Pemalang must therefore be assessed not only in terms of service delivery outcomes but also in relation to their contribution to the broader realization of human rights.

At its core, the Child-Friendly City framework operationalizes the principle of the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights. Children's rights to education, health,

protection, and participation are not isolated entitlements but mutually reinforcing dimensions of human dignity. International human rights law consistently affirms that the denial of one right often undermines the enjoyment of others (Erdianti & Anggraeny, 2024; Wahanisa et al., 2025). In this sense, the adoption of integrated child-friendly policies has the potential to generate cumulative rights gains. When local governments invest in child-sensitive education systems, accessible health services, and protective legal mechanisms, they simultaneously advance civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in a holistic manner.

One of the most significant impacts of Child-Friendly City-oriented solutions lies in their contribution to the realization of the right to survival and development, as enshrined in Article 6 of the CRC. Child-friendly health policies, including expanded immunization coverage, maternal and child health programmes, and the gradual integration of mental health services, directly address structural determinants of child mortality and morbidity. Empirical studies demonstrate that decentralized, rights-based health interventions significantly improve child health outcomes when they prioritize equity and accessibility (Andriani et al., 2022; Rammohan et al., 2024; Septiono et al., 2025). In regions like Pemalang, where disparities persist between urban and rural areas, the expansion of child-responsive primary healthcare represents a concrete mechanism through which the state fulfils its obligation to ensure the highest attainable standard of health for every child.

Beyond physical health, Child-Friendly City solutions increasingly recognize the importance of mental health and psychosocial well-being as integral components of children's rights. Exposure to violence, neglect, and poverty has long-term consequences for cognitive development and emotional stability, often reproducing cycles of exclusion and vulnerability (Felitti et al., 1998). By promoting trauma-informed services and integrating mental health support into primary care and social protection systems, child-friendly policies contribute to the realization of the right to recovery and reintegration under Article 39 of the CRC.

The impact of Child-Friendly City policies is also evident in the advancement of the right to education, understood not merely as access to schooling but as the provision of inclusive, safe, and participatory learning environments. Human rights bodies emphasize that education must be available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable (the "4A framework") to meet international standards (Tomaševski, 2001; *Understanding the 4As Framework: A Rights-Based Approach to Education*, 2025). Solutions such as rights-based curricula, anti-violence mechanisms in schools, and teacher training in child rights contribute directly to these dimensions. Comparative research shows that schools that embed child rights principles experience lower levels of violence, higher student engagement, and improved educational outcomes (Covell & Howe, 2005; Hannam, 2011). In this regard, the Child-Friendly City framework strengthens education as both a substantive right and an enabling right that empowers children to claim other entitlements.

Equally important is the role of Child-Friendly City policies in promoting the right to protection from violence, exploitation, and abuse. Local child protection systems, when designed in line with human rights standards, enhance the state's capacity to exercise due diligence in preventing and responding to violations. Multi-agency coordination mechanisms, standardized reporting procedures, and child-sensitive justice processes reduce institutional fragmentation and increase the likelihood that cases are handled effectively and humanely (West & Delap, 2012). The establishment of such mechanisms in districts like Pemalang contributes to the fulfilment of Articles 19, 34, and 40 of the CRC, while also reinforcing broader human rights norms related to access to justice and equality before the law.

The impact of child-friendly solutions extends further into the realm of economic and social rights, particularly in addressing poverty as a structural driver of rights deprivation. Social protection programmes that are explicitly linked to children's education and health outcomes exemplify how Child-Friendly City policies can operationalize the right to an adequate standard of living under Article 27 of the CRC. International evidence demonstrates that conditional and

child-sensitive cash transfer programmes reduce school dropout rates, improve nutritional status, and mitigate child labour (Baird et al., 2014). When implemented within a rights-based framework, such programmes move beyond charity-based assistance and function as instruments of social justice and redistribution.

From a human rights perspective, the most transformative impact of the Child-Friendly City framework lies in its emphasis on participation. Article 12 of the CRC affirms children's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, yet this right has historically been marginalized in local governance. Child forums, youth councils, and participatory planning mechanisms promoted under the Child-Friendly City agenda create institutional spaces in which children's voices can influence policy priorities. Research on participatory governance indicates that meaningful inclusion of children enhances policy relevance, accountability, and democratic legitimacy (Lansdown, 2005; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009). In this sense, Child-Friendly City solutions do not merely protect children but actively reshape power relations between the state and its youngest citizens.

The cumulative impact of these measures also resonates with the principle of non-discrimination, a cornerstone of international human rights law. By prioritizing marginalized groups, child-friendly policies address substantive inequalities that formal legal equality alone cannot resolve. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) further reinforces this obligation, emphasizing inclusive access to education, health, and community life. Integrating disability-sensitive approaches within Child-Friendly City programmes enhances their human rights impact by ensuring that no child is left behind due to structural or social barriers.

At the governance level, implementing Child-Friendly City solutions strengthens institutional accountability and the rule of law. Human rights scholarship underscores that rights are meaningful only when supported by effective institutions capable of enforcement and redress (Freeman, 2011). Local action plans, monitoring systems, and budgetary commitments translate abstract rights into concrete administrative responsibilities. When these mechanisms are institutionalized, they reduce dependence on political goodwill and create durable pathways for rights realization. In Pemalang, the gradual embedding of Child-Friendly City principles into planning and budgeting processes reflects an incremental but significant step toward rights-based local governance.

The impact of Child-Friendly City policies must also be understood in intergenerational terms. Protecting and empowering children today generates long-term social benefits by fostering healthier, more educated, and more engaged citizens. Human development research consistently demonstrates that investments in early childhood yield high social and economic returns, reducing inequality and enhancing social cohesion (Baek et al., 2025; Gosal, 2025). From a human rights perspective, this reinforces the argument that child-friendly governance is not merely a sectoral concern but a foundational strategy for sustainable development and democratic resilience. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the impact of Child-Friendly City solutions is neither automatic nor uniform. Without sustained political commitment, adequate resources, and robust monitoring, child-friendly policies risk devolving into symbolic compliance. Human rights bodies caution against the instrumentalization of rights language without corresponding structural change (European Union External Action, 2018; United Nations Committee on Economic, 2002). The true measure of impact therefore lies in whether children experience tangible improvements in safety, well-being, participation, and dignity in their everyday lives.

After all, the implementation of Child-Friendly City policies and solutions has far-reaching implications for the fulfilment of children's rights and human rights more broadly. By integrating education, health, protection, participation, and social protection within a coherent rights-based framework, child-friendly governance enhances the state's capacity to meet its international obligations. In contexts such as Pemalang, where structural challenges persist, the Child-Friendly City agenda offers a viable pathway for translating human rights norms into local realities. Its ultimate impact depends on the extent to which these policies are institutionalized, adequately

resourced, and continuously evaluated through a human rights lens. When these conditions are met, the Child-Friendly City framework can function not merely as a policy label but as a transformative instrument for realizing the full spectrum of children's rights and human dignity.

D. Conclusion

The Child-Friendly City programme in Indonesia represents a crucial development in integrating children's rights into urban governance, with a strong focus on creating environments that support children's growth and participation. Launched by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, the initiative seeks to establish cities where children's rights are actively protected and upheld. Over the past decade, the programme has expanded significantly, with numerous cities receiving recognition for building child-friendly infrastructure and services such as playgrounds, health centres, and child protection units. However, as urbanization accelerates and environmental risks grow, there has been an increasing need to adapt policies that address these challenges while ensuring the active participation of children in shaping their communities.

The Child-Friendly City programme is guided by a clear set of indicators that assess compliance in critical areas such as health, education, protection, and participation. Cities are ranked on a scale from *Pratama* to *Utama*, with the highest level reflecting cities that are most successful in meeting the programme's objectives. While the programme's framework ensures accountability through these rankings, it also emphasizes a participatory approach where local governments, communities, and children themselves play active roles in evaluating and enhancing child-friendly initiatives. This participatory approach represents a broader shift toward child-centred governance that empowers children not just as beneficiaries of policies, but as active agents in decision-making processes.

Despite the growth and success of the Child-Friendly City programme, empirical data, such as those from Pemalang Regency, reveals a concerning gap between policy aspirations and actual outcomes. Violence against children continues to be a significant issue, as seen in the fluctuating cases of child abuse in Pemalang from 2019 to 2023. The persistence of this problem highlights the shortcomings of Child-Friendly City implementation, particularly when it comes to translating legal commitments into tangible results. Pemalang's challenges reflect broader institutional barriers such as fragmented governance, insufficient coordination among agencies, and a lack of comprehensive data management systems. These obstacles prevent effective monitoring and delay the implementation of interventions needed to protect children from violence.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural context in Pemalang also presents challenges, as child protection is often still viewed through a traditional lens where it is considered primarily a familial responsibility. This perspective hinders the broader community's engagement in safeguarding children's rights and weakens the institutional response to child abuse. Moreover, despite the establishment of child protection units, these mechanisms remain underdeveloped in terms of resources and operational capacity, further undermining the effectiveness of the Child-Friendly City programme.

To address these issues, the Child-Friendly City programme in Pemalang must evolve beyond symbolic commitments and take concrete steps toward reducing violence and ensuring that all children have access to essential services. This requires robust legal frameworks that mandate child-sensitive training for all relevant stakeholders, including educators, social workers, and law enforcement. Additionally, comprehensive data systems should be developed to track incidents of violence and measure the impact of child protection programmes. Strengthening the coordination between government bodies, community organizations, and educational institutions is essential to create a more responsive and integrated system of child protection.

Moreover, the Child-Friendly City programme should incorporate a rights-based approach that emphasizes the participation of children in decision-making processes, ensuring that their

voices are not only heard but also respected in the creation of policies that affect them. This would align with the broader goals of the CRC, which advocates for children's participation in matters concerning their lives. Creating platforms for children's active involvement in local governance, such as child councils and participatory budgeting processes, will ensure that their needs are addressed more effectively.

Ultimately, the future success of the Child-Friendly City programme in Pemalang and other regions hinges on the continuous commitment of local governments, the active participation of communities, and the establishment of sustainable mechanisms that prioritize the safety and well-being of children. By integrating child rights into urban planning and governance, Pemalang can move beyond policy compliance toward a genuinely transformative child-friendly city model that guarantees children's rights and well-being are upheld in both law and practice.

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Competing Interest

The authors declares no competing interests.

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