

# DESIGNATHON WORKS



**Annual report 2025 & plans for 2026**

## Letter from the Designathon Works Board

As we reflect on 2025, one word stands out: **momentum**. This year built steadily on the foundations laid in previous years, as ideas deepened into more structured approaches, pilots informed wider conversations, and children's voices were heard more consistently in spaces where decisions are shaped.

Across classrooms, refugee camps, cocoa-growing communities, city halls, and cultural institutions, we witnessed a powerful shift. Children were not just participating in learning activities; they were shaping agendas, influencing mindsets, and inspiring adults to listen differently.

This report captures the highlights of a year defined by growth, collaboration, and deepened impact. It reflects our continued commitment to empowering children as designers of sustainable, inclusive futures and to supporting educators and communities as co-creators in this journey.

We are deeply grateful to our partners, educators, supporters, and most importantly, the children whose imagination and courage continue to guide our work.

With gratitude and confidence in what lies ahead,

Kind regards,

Michele Ernsting, Annemarike Smiers, Ebru Mercangoz-Ploeger, Judith Smaling, Satyam Vyas, and Shriya Sethi



## About Designathon Works

Designathon Works is a foundation dedicated to empowering children worldwide to become changemakers by designing sustainable futures. Using Designathon methodology, children engage in activities that promote creativity, critical thinking, teamwork and problem-solving skills. The programs guide participants through the process of ideation, prototyping, and presenting solutions to real-world challenges aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The foundation's mission is to empower children around the world to become changemakers for a better future.

By focusing on inclusivity, Designathon Works ensures that children from diverse backgrounds and abilities can participate, promoting global citizenship and environmental stewardship. Their methodology combines elements of Design Thinking and Maker Education, providing a comprehensive approach to learning and innovation.

Since its establishment, Designathon Works has reached over 200,000 children across more than 59 countries, training over 5,000 educators and it continues to inspire organizations and educators worldwide. The foundation's flagship event, the annual Global Children's Designathon, unites children from various countries to collaboratively develop innovative concepts addressing the pressing world issues.

Through its programs, Designathon Works aims to equip the next generation with the skills and mindset necessary to tackle global challenges, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility among young learners.

Our core values guide everything we do:

- **Inclusivity:** Ensuring every child, regardless of background, can participate and contribute
- **Sustainability:** Teaching children to design with long-term, sustainable solutions in mind
- **Empowerment:** Helping children recognize their ability to create meaningful change
- **Creativity:** Encouraging out-of-the-box thinking to address complex global problems
- **Global Citizenship:** Fostering a sense of responsibility toward the world and its future

## Our approach to enabling children

Our Designathon method aligns with key learning objectives outlined by OECD, UNESCO, and the World Economic Forum, ensuring children are equipped to navigate the challenges of tomorrow. We prioritize inclusivity, working with a diverse population of students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.



## Impact & influence

Through Designathon workshops, we've witnessed the transformative power of education at every level:

- **Individual impact:** Children develop competencies and agency, enriching not only their lives but also strengthening the fabric of society. Families are influenced by their children's enthusiasm and concern for global issues.
- **Regional impact:** Municipalities and organizations integrate children's perspectives into policy decisions, while schools report significant improvements in students' life skills, such as enhanced collaboration, problem-solving, and communication, as they actively apply our methodology.
- **Global impact:** By amplifying the voices of youth through research reports and collaborations, we contribute to shaping a more inclusive and sustainable world. Through rich collaborations between our network partners and sponsors, we strive to influence decision-makers on critical issues such as clean energy, water scarcity, inequality, and sustainable food systems.

## From children's insights to policy



Together, we create a virtuous cycle of impact, bridging communities and amplifying change on a global scale. At Designathon Works, our mission is clear: to empower children to be the architects of their own future and the guardians of our planet.

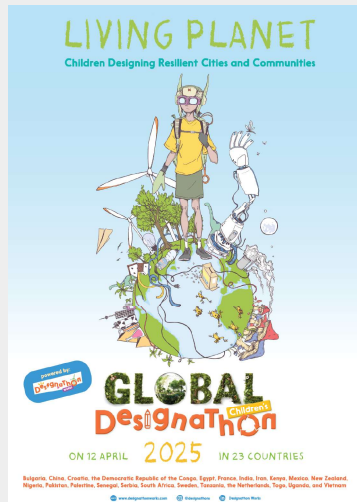
In 2025, our work increasingly moved from pilot innovation to system-level influence.

- Children demonstrated growing confidence, agency, and leadership, presenting ideas to policymakers, community leaders, and global audiences.
- Educators reported stronger pedagogical confidence, deeper engagement with participatory methods, and renewed motivation.
- Communities and institutions began recognising children not as beneficiaries, but as contributors to social and environmental solutions.

Together, these layers form a virtuous cycle of change where learning fuels participation, participation fuels trust, and trust fuels transformation.

### Global Children's Designathon | From Ideas to Action, Across Borders

In 2025, the Global Children's Designathon marked more than a milestone; it reflected the 10th anniversary of learning about what happens when children are trusted with real-world challenges.



Established in 2014, the Global Children's Designathon is our flagship annual event designed to ignite young minds through design and problem-based learning. Children worldwide engage in hands-on activities, brainstorming and prototyping solutions to some of the world's most pressing challenges, from climate change to food security and deforestation. Rooted in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, our programs inspire children to think globally and act locally. Through these initiatives, we continue to empower the next generation of changemakers, fostering a world where children's ideas drive sustainable innovation.

Across 23 countries, from Kakuma to Hanoi, Amsterdam to Togo, children came together around a shared theme: *Living Planet – Resilient Cities and Communities*. While their contexts differed, a common thread ran through their ideas: care for people, care for place, and a desire to belong to something larger than themselves.

In the Netherlands, children spoke thoughtfully about loneliness, public space, and inclusion. In refugee contexts, ideas focused on safety, green spaces, and dignity. In urban classrooms, children questioned how cities could be kinder, not just more efficient.

What stood out was not the sophistication of materials but the depth of thinking. Children identified barriers that adults often overlook: lack of trust, missing spaces to gather and systems that forget the smallest users. And they proposed solutions grounded in empathy and lived experience.

Ten years into the Global Children's Designathon, one thing has become clear: creativity is not a luxury. It is infrastructure for resilience.

### Education to Inspire - When Children's Ideas Take Root in Communities

If the Global Children's Designathon shows what is possible when children are invited to imagine, **Education to Inspire (ETI)** shows what happens when those ideas are trusted enough to be implemented.

In 2025, ETI reached a meaningful point in cocoa-growing communities in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. This was no longer about workshops alone; it was about follow-through. Children who had previously designed ideas for safer, healthier, and more inclusive communities were now seeing those ideas move closer to reality.

At the final events, children stood in front of teachers, cooperatives, local authorities, and community leaders, presenting solutions rooted deeply in their lived experiences. They spoke about rivers that become dangerous during the rainy season, about schools without safe access, about energy, water, and dignity. Their ideas were practical, contextual, and quietly ambitious.

In Ghana, one idea made a particularly powerful transition: a child-designed bridge to help students cross a river safely during the rainy season. What began as a drawing and



a model became a shared community effort, a reminder that children do not just point out problems; they offer pathways forward.

In Côte d'Ivoire, solar-powered solutions and safety-focused designs sparked a moment that stayed with us. A local minister, looking at the children's prototypes, asked simply: "Where can we keep these so others can see what our children can do?" That question marked a shift from presentation to preservation, from moment to legacy.

Out of this conversation grew the idea of a **community makerspace**: a place where children's ideas could live on, be built upon, and continue to shape community thinking. ETI, in this way, moved beyond a programme. It became a shared belief that children's creativity is not temporary, and their contributions deserve continuity.

What ETI continues to teach us is this: meaningful participation does not end when the workshop does. When children see their ideas respected, adapted, and carried forward, something changes not just in them, but in the adults and systems around them.



Education to Inspire is no longer only about inspiring children. It is about inspiring communities to take children seriously.

### Little Green Fingers | Where Environmental Citizenship Begins With Wonder

If Education to Inspire shows what happens when children's ideas are implemented, **Little Green Fingers** reminds us where climate agency truly begins, not with urgency, but with curiosity.



Across early childhood classrooms in Belgium, Ireland, Cyprus, Serbia, and the Netherlands, Little Green Fingers has been quietly reshaping how young children encounter the natural world. Here, sustainability is not taught as a concept to memorise, but experienced through touch, play, observation, and care.



In 2025, educators participating in Little Green Fingers consistently shared the same insight: children are already deeply connected to nature; what they need are adults willing to slow down and follow their lead. Sorting leaves, planting seeds, building small habitats, and asking questions about insects or water cycles became entry points into much larger conversations about responsibility and belonging.

The project was intentionally built *with* teachers, not simply delivered to them. Their insights shaped a curriculum that blends outdoor learning, STEAM education, and design thinking in age-appropriate, playful ways. The result is a learning environment where four- to eight-year-olds are not passive learners, but active explorers of their surroundings.

A pivotal moment came during the two-day transnational training in Brussels, where educators stepped into the shoes of children themselves. Building animal shelters, experimenting with natural materials, and reflecting together, teachers rediscovered the power of learning through play. Many spoke about how this experience shifted their own

assumptions about what young children are capable of.

**Little Green Fingers** is not just about producing early climate activists. It is about nurturing **environmental citizenship**, a sense that the natural world is something children belong to, care for, and can influence. By starting early, the project lays foundations that later programmes can build upon, ensuring that sustainability is not an add-on, but a way of being.

## BCORE21 | When Collaboration Becomes the Infrastructure for Change

BCORE21 did not begin with the question “*What should children learn?*” It began with a deeper one: “*How do we learn together?*”

Across Europe, educators, organisations, and municipalities often work toward similar goals while operating in isolation. BCORE21 set out to challenge that pattern by treating **collaboration itself as infrastructure**, not an optional extra, but a prerequisite for meaningful education reform.

Throughout the project, partners from Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Serbia, and Türkiye came together in visionary and design sessions that centered on participation, inclusion, and children’s right to shape the world around them. These were not theoretical conversations. They were spaces for honest reflection about what enables participation and what quietly blocks it.

Children played a central role. In Design Sessions across countries, they explored what participation meant in their own lives. Many named barriers adults rarely acknowledge: not being trusted, not being listened to and not knowing where to start. Their proposed solutions were strikingly practical child-inclusive surveys, youth councils, shared decision-making spaces, and training for adults on how to listen.

As BCORE21 formally concluded, something important became clear: while projects end, **our strong partnership lives on**. The relationships, shared language, and trust built over time now continue beyond the project framework.

**BCORE21 leaves behind more than outputs**. It leaves behind a living network of educators and organisations who understand that lasting change happens not through isolated excellence, but through shared purpose and sustained dialogue.

## CircleCoLabs | Learning That Serves, Making That Matters

CircleCoLabs emerged from a simple but powerful idea: learning becomes meaningful when it is connected to real people, real places, and real needs.

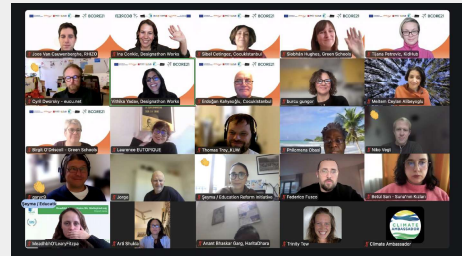


Bringing together Service Learning, Maker Education, and sustainability competencies (GreenComp), CircleCoLabs positions schools not as isolated institutions, but as active participants in community life. Children are encouraged to look outward to notice challenges around them and to respond through making, collaboration, and care.

The project’s launch in Amsterdam in November 2025 set the tone. Partners gathered not to present finished plans, but to co-create. Conversations moved easily between pedagogy and practice, between values and logistics, reflecting a shared belief that education must be both purposeful and grounded.

In CircleCoLabs, children will not just “practice” civic engagement; they will live it. Whether designing solutions for public spaces, responding to local environmental issues, or working alongside community partners, learning becomes an act of contribution. What distinguishes CircleCoLabs is its emphasis on **responsibility**. Children are supported not just to create ideas, but to reflect on their impact, feasibility, and ethics. Making is not about producing more things, but about understanding when and why to act.

CircleCoLab is still unfolding, but its direction is clear: it offers a bridge between learning and life, ensuring that education prepares young people not only to understand the world, but to participate in shaping it.



## Future Builders | Learning to See Yourself as Someone Who Can Build

Future Builders began with a simple question: *What happens when children are given the space to build before they are told what they are not good at?*

The **Future Builders Lab** pilot, co-created by Designathon Works, NewTechKids, TUMO Amsterdam, and Adyen, set out to intervene early. Piloted in Amsterdam Noord at IKC De Buikslotermeer, Future Builders brought together children, educators, and partners to explore learning through making, experimenting, and trying things out. Across a series of after-school sessions, children worked on challenges drawn from their own lives- designing, testing, and rebuilding ideas using digital tools, materials, and teamwork.

What stood out was not the technology itself, but the shift in how children saw themselves. Children who were hesitant at first began to persist. When ideas failed, they tried again. When something worked, they took pride not just in the result, but in the effort it took to get there.

For teachers and families, Future Builders filled a gap that many schools struggle to address: time and space for hands-on, creative learning where children can move from thinking to doing. The programme showed how confidence grows when children experience themselves as capable contributors, not just learners following instructions.

Future Builders offered a glimpse of what is possible when learning is rooted in agency, collaboration, and trust and why these experiences matter long before choices about education or work are made.



## Singapore Designathon | A Global Method, Rooted in Local Trust

In 2025, the Designathon methodology travelled once again. This time to Singapore, offering a powerful reminder that scalability is not about replication, but about translation with care.



Delivered in partnership with Methodist Preschool Services, **the Singapore Designathon** was fully fundraised and locally implemented, reflecting a model built on trust and shared ownership. Educators embraced the approach quickly, adapting it to local contexts while holding firmly to its core values: child agency, creativity, and learning through making.

Children engaged with sustainability and problem-solving through play, imagination, and collaboration. What stood out was not the novelty of the tools, but the confidence with which educators stepped into facilitation roles and allowed children to lead the process.

Singapore demonstrated that when alignment is strong in values, expectations, and partnership, Designathon can take root rapidly, even in new cultural and educational contexts. It reinforced an essential principle for the organisation's growth: global expansion must always be accompanied by deep local grounding.

## Theirworld Innovation Award

The **Theirworld Education Innovation Award** marked an important moment of recognition for Designathon Works, not as an endpoint, but as a responsibility.

The award supports and strengthens our commitment to advancing **climate and sustainability education** that is participatory, inclusive, and grounded in children's lived realities. Beyond European borders, and through our Community of Practice, we are collaborating across **Asia and Africa** to ensure the methodology reflects **regional ecosystems, cultural approaches, and educational realities**, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model.



A key focus has been testing the methodology in **resource-constrained and crisis-affected settings**. These contexts challenge assumptions about what is possible in education and they reaffirm why child-led, low-resource, and adaptable approaches matter. Our aim is to ensure that the curriculum remains **locally relevant, inclusive, and scalable**, even where infrastructure and resources are limited.

The advocacy connected to the Theirworld award has also supported tangible system-level uptake. In **Pakistan**, this work contributed to a partnership with the Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training, enabling Designathon learning to reach hundreds of public schools through teacher training and national-scale implementation.



## From Local Action to Global Reach | Children Designing Change Across Contexts

While global programmes matter, much of Designathon Works' impact continues to grow through deeply rooted local action.

In **Pakistan**, a partnership with the Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training marked a significant scale-up. Fifty-one public school teachers were trained to bring Designathon learning into more than **400 schools nationwide**. As a result, children across the public education system are now beginning to engage in problem-solving, sustainability, and creative collaboration at scale, a powerful example of what becomes possible when institutional trust meets child-centred pedagogy.

In **Meerut, India**, work with teachers at Chiragh Junior School highlighted the transformative power of play-based learning. The first inter-school Designathon brought together young designers to imagine solutions for a Cleaner, Greener, and Safer city. Teachers observed children who might otherwise struggle in traditional classrooms thrive when given space to think, make, and collaborate.

Closer to home, the **Amsterdam Children's Council** demonstrated [how child participation can meaningfully inform policy](#). In 2025, children co-created ideas for *The Year of the Pedestrian*, proposing wider sidewalks, play zones, and safer public spaces. Their ideas were formally presented to the city council and taken seriously, not as symbolic input, but as legitimate contributions to urban planning.

Together, these initiatives form a larger story: when children are invited into real decision-making spaces, participation shifts from consultation to contribution.

### Amplifying the Narrative - *Creativity, Scarcity, and the Power of Imagination*

In 2025, Designathon Works' Managing Director, **Vithika Yadav**, took this message to a wider audience through a TEDx talk titled ["Can Creativity Thrive in Scarcity?"](#)

Drawing on experiences from Kakuma refugee camps to Amsterdam classrooms, the talk explored how children use imagination, empathy, and frugal innovation or *jugaad* to navigate constraints. The message resonated deeply: innovation is not limited by resources, but by whether people are given permission to imagine and try. The talk amplified Designathon Works' core belief: children, when trusted, think beyond limitations and lead with hope.



## Partnerships and Spotlights

Our **partnerships** reflect our commitment to global collaboration, innovative projects and empowering education initiatives. In 2025, we worked with the following partners:

- ★ Municipality of Amsterdam: supporter of the Global Children's Designathon Amsterdam and partner for the 'Amsterdam Maakt Ruimte' initiative
- ★ Adyen: partners in the Future Builders program
- ★ The Chocolonely Foundation: partners in Education to Inspire program (Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire)
- ★ Patagonia: deepening the European Network and Community of Practice
- ★ Erasmus+: funder of the EU projects - BCORE21, Little Green Fingers and CircleCoLabs
- ★ Creative Europe: funder of the EU project - Heritage Understanding & Participation Hackathon
- ★ Theirworld: Theirworld Innovation Award helps us to scale up and reach even more marginalized young learners
- ★ PM Chiragh Junior School: partners for the Meerut Designathon
- ★ Methodist Preschool Services: partners for the Singapore Designathon
- ★ Partners for the BCORE21 project: An Taisce Environmental Education Unit Green-Schools (Ireland), RHIZO (Belgium), Çocuk Istanbul (Türkiye), KidHub (Serbia)
- ★ Partners for the Little Green Fingers project: An Taisce Environmental Education Unit Green-Schools (Ireland), KidHub (Serbia), Cyprus Center for Environmental Research & Education (Cyprus), Change Of Course (Belgium)
- ★ Partners for the CircleCoLabs project: KidHub (Serbia), Change Of Course (Germany), NUCLIO (Portugal), PAR (Croatia), Prva Kragujevacka Gimnazija (Serbia)
- ★ Partners for the Heritage Understanding & Participation Hackathon project: Dev. Agency Koz-jansko (Slovenia), Change Of Course (Belgium), Eduquest (Greece), MAAT (Portugal), ABBY, Kortrijk (Belgium), Nieuwe Instituut (the Netherlands)

### Spotlights

[Power of Childlike Innovation | Vithika Yadav | TEDxIIMSirmaur](#)

[Global Children's Designathon playlist](#)

[What Happens When Children Design a City?](#)

[Global Children's Designathon 2025: A Decade of Designing a Better Future](#)



## Plans for 2026

### From Momentum to Meaningful Scale

As Designathon Works looks ahead, the focus remains on deepening impact while scaling responsibly.

A key milestone for 2025 is the organisation's first Creative Europe grant, marking an important expansion into the cultural and creative sector. This opens new opportunities to collaborate with artists, museums, and cultural institutions, placing children's ideas not only in classrooms, but in public and cultural spaces.

Alongside this, priorities include:

- Strengthening the Community of Practice by deepening collaboration among educators, partners, and institutions to share learning, tools, and approaches for child-centred, participatory education across contexts
- Focusing on priority initiatives that support marginalized and refugee children, advance environmental citizenship, and expand inclusive access to digital, AI, and STEAM education, ensuring equity and relevance in rapidly changing educational landscapes
- Refining and scaling Future Builders into a longer-term pathway
- Diversifying funding to ensure long-term sustainability

### Impact tracking

We will invest in the improvement of our method and tools for development and impact tracking through:

- The development of our method and tools will be highly influenced by the demand of our partnerships, network partners and education systems.
- Tracking impact to 'prove' our method, and to learn and reflect.
- Conduct research and gather input to identify the unique needs of the children across all geographic regions.

### Engagement strategy

We will invest in our engagement strategy by:

- Building on our Community of Practice that has been set up and further being strengthened through the ongoing projects.
- Work towards a shared vision and a comprehensive communications plan with network partners that includes social media, email, and other channels to engage with stakeholders and promote our mission.
- Enhance our online presence with compelling content, video, and other multimedia to showcase our work and impact.
- Content development: thought leadership, white papers.

### Network partner acquisition

Our network partners are organizations that have a wealth of knowledge and capacity in their region and have a large network of community-based organizations. They have a similar DNA to Designathon Works. We will invest in network partner acquisition by:

- Vetting and onboarding of new network partners.
- Mission alignment on SDGs.
- Exploring ways to help network partners develop their business development practices to further scale their activities.
- Develop a targeted project with relevant partner organizations to reach underrepresented populations.
- Work with partners to develop and disseminate innovative & tailored educational content focusing on 21st century skills, knowledge and agency.
- Learn about children's perspectives as important stakeholders.



## The Foundation

### Organization

Stichting Designathon Works

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Email: [info@designathon.nl](mailto:info@designathon.nl)

CoC: 60140615

RSIN: 853781606

Bank: NL77 TRIO 0197 9551 85

### Board

In 2025 the board consisted of:

- Michele Ernsting: Chair Woman
- Maarten Nelissen: Treasurer\* (until March 2026)
- Ebru Mercangoz-Ploeger: Board Member
- Judith Smaling: Board Member
- Shriya Sethi: Board Member
- Satyam Vyas: Board Member

\*Annemarike Smiers is appointed as Treasure in March 2026.

### Remuneration

Board members do not receive any remuneration for their board activities, as stated in the Articles of Association. Designathon Works has a moderate wage policy for the management team and freelancers and aims at salary levels and working conditions that match the responsibilities. Employees do not receive bonuses for the 13th month.

### ANBI

The 'Belastingdienst' (Dutch Tax Authority) authorized Stichting Designathon Works with the ANBI status in January 2017. This means that Stichting Designathon Works is classified as 'Algemeen Nut beogende Instelling', meaning that the foundation is a non-profit, aiming to have as much impact as possible and holds a certain tax exemption status.



The board confirms that the 2025 annual report is accurate and true. This written confirmation can be signed in different copies and is dated in June 2026.



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Michele Ernsting  
Chair Woman, Stichting Designathon Works



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Annemarike Smiers,  
Treasurer, Stichting Designathon Works




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Judith Smaling  
Board Member, Stichting Designathon Works



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Ebru Mercangoz-Ploeger  
Board Member, Stichting Designathon Works



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Satyam Vyas  
Board Member, Stichting Designathon Works



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Shriya Sethi  
Board Member, Stichting Designathon Works