

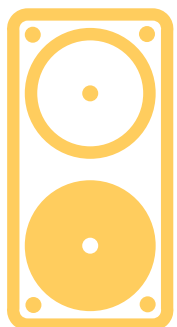
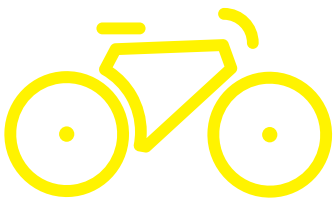


BYCS

LIFE GOALS

Youth Building Confidence and Connection in a New Environment

Pilot Results and Pathways for Scaling



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BYCS

BYCS is an international NGO supporting community-led urban change through cycling.

LIFE GOALS

Life Goals uses the power of sport and exercise to enable people in vulnerable positions to participate in society.

Introduction

Across Europe, thousands of children and youth arrive each year having fled war, conflict, and humanitarian crisis. They bring resilience, curiosity, and a desire to belong - but they also carry the weight of displacement, and often find themselves at the margins of the communities they arrive in. Supporting their recovery and inclusion is not only a humanitarian priority; it is a social and public health imperative.

Start Cycling Together is a programme by BYCS and Life Goals built on a simple but powerful idea: that learning to cycle together can be a gateway to many aspects of wellbeing. Developed as part of the European Union's Sport Supports initiative - an emergency sport action for youth affected by humanitarian crisis - the programme combines cycling training with social-emotional coaching for children and youth aged 8 to 16 with a refugee background. Its goals are as practical as they are ambitious: to promote community connection, improve physical activity and support social-emotional wellbeing among the target group.

What makes **Start Cycling Together** distinctive is its dual focus. Where many programmes address either physical activity or psychosocial support, this one brings them together - using the bicycle not just as a means of transport, but as a vehicle for confidence, independence, and belonging.

This document presents the results of the pilot, which was implemented across five locations in the Netherlands in partnership with Life Goals. It is intended both as an account of what was achieved and as an invitation: to the organisations, municipalities, and funders who are best placed to take this work forward - in the Netherlands and beyond.



Positioning and Relevance of the Programme



Children and youth with a refugee background often experience reduced access to safe physical activity, psychosocial support, and opportunities for social connection, which can negatively affect their physical health, mental wellbeing, and sense of belonging.

Young migrants in the EU and The Netherlands

Children and youth represent a significant proportion of people seeking protection in Europe. **In 2023, EU Member States received 1,048,880 first-time asylum applications**, the highest annual number in recent years. **Nearly one in four applicants (approximately 24%) were under the age of 18**, amounting to roughly 255,000 children and young people seeking protection (Eurostat, 2024).

According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS, 2025), **over three-quarters of all asylum seekers are under the age of 35 upon arrival in the Netherlands, and half are under the age of 25**. These figures confirm that the asylum population is predominantly young, with a substantial share consisting of children and youth. The demographic profile underscores the importance of targeted programmes that address their physical health, psychosocial wellbeing, protection needs, and social integration, particularly during the critical early stages of settlement.



Mental and physical health challenges for newcomer children

Research consistently shows **higher prevalence rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among refugee children** compared to non-migrant peers (e.g., Steel et al., 2011; Fazel et al., 2012). Exposure to war, displacement, family separation, and prolonged uncertainty during asylum procedures places children at increased risk of psychological distress.

Reception conditions can further compound these vulnerabilities. Reports by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), UNICEF, and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights indicate that lengthy procedures, unstable housing, and frequent relocations hinder recovery and limit access to child-friendly spaces and specialised psychosocial support. Emergency and temporary reception facilities often lack adequate recreational infrastructure, while overcrowding and remote locations can restrict opportunities for outdoor play and structured activities.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe notes that children with a refugee background are at increased risk of physical inactivity due to socioeconomic barriers, environmental constraints, and limited inclusion in organised sports systems. **Participation in sport and structured group activities can significantly enhance social inclusion, belonging, and mental wellbeing** among displaced children and youth - yet access to such opportunities is not systematically ensured.

Mobility as a bridge to belonging

For children and young people with a refugee background who have recently arrived in a new country, **building connections to their new community is both one of the most important and one of the most challenging aspects of their new life**. Contextual factors - language, cultural norms, social networks, and access to shared spaces - shape whether newcomers feel included or isolated. Physical mobility plays a quietly significant role in this process: access to efficient, affordable, and independent means of getting around influences not just where people can go, but whether they **build connections and have access to opportunities**.

Cycling, where it is part of everyday life, functions as more than transport. It is a gateway to **autonomy, peer interaction, and participation in community spaces**. For children, learning to cycle often means gaining the independence to move through their environment on their own terms - a small but meaningful step towards feeling at home (The City at Eye Level for Kids, 2018). Yet for many children with a refugee background, **cycling is not a familiar skill**, as community surveys and local studies indicate. Differences in infrastructure, cultural norms around cycling, and limited early access to bicycles mean that many arrive without basic cycling proficiency - and with that, one less bridge to the world around them. **Start Cycling Together was designed with precisely this gap in mind**.

Evidence-informed Discussion on the Benefits of Physical Activity and Cycling

This section draws on existing research to explore what we know about the benefits of physical activity and cycling specifically - for physical health, social-emotional wellbeing, and community connection - and why these benefits are particularly relevant for this group.

Physical health

Participation in physical activity and sport enhances overall physical, social, and psychological wellbeing (Bailey et al., 2006; Eime et al., 2013). Cycling, in particular, provides measurable physiological benefits:

- Improved cardiovascular fitness (Whitaker, 2005; Andersen et al., 2009)
- Enhanced heart and lung function and metabolic regulation (Oja et al., 2011)
- Improved bone health and reduced adiposity (WHO, 2020)
- Better cardiometabolic markers such as blood pressure and insulin regulation (WHO, 2020)

The WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour confirm that **regular physical activity improves both physical and mental health outcomes in children and adolescents**. Cycling also supports neurological and cognitive development. Structured cycling programmes have been shown to improve executive function and cognitive control (Ryu et al., 2019). Complex motor learning, such as mastering cycling skills, activates executive functioning, planning ability, and procedural memory (Diamond, 2000). In addition, active commuting (cycling or walking) is associated with significantly higher cardiovascular fitness compared to non-active peers (Andersen et al., 2009).

Social-emotional wellbeing

Beyond physical outcomes, **physical activity plays a critical role in social-emotional development**. Research shows that specifically youth sport participation contributes to:

- Increased self-worth and self-efficacy (Fuller et al., 2018)
- Development of transferable life skills such as confidence, perseverance, and respect (Papacharisis et al., 2005; Chinkov & Holt, 2016)
- Improved emotional regulation and resilience (Clanton et al., 2021)

Cycling specifically has been shown to have a positive impact on one's mental state. It has been associated with:

- Greater independence and autonomy (Jensen, 2021; Grimes & Smirnova, 2020)
- Enhanced confidence and sense of responsibility (Clanton et al., 2021)
- Mental clarity and stress relief across vulnerable populations (Whitaker, 2005; Schnor et al., 2019)

Importantly, **personal-development-focused sport programmes generate the strongest long-term impact** (Jacobs & Wright, 2018). When cycling is delivered as a structured, skills-based programme - rather than only recreational activity - it can become a powerful tool for empowerment.



Community connection

Physical activity, sport and cycling also strengthen community participation and belonging. Specifically, participation in sport is associated with:

- Reduced antisocial behaviour (Carmichael, 2009; Schafer, 1969)
- Greater civic engagement and life satisfaction (Delaney & Keane, 2005)

Cycling uniquely connects children to their local environment. Research by Bruce Appleyard shows that children who walk or cycle develop more detailed mental maps, demonstrate stronger place attachment, show greater environmental awareness and experience higher levels of social interaction.

Active mobility environments foster community trust and safety (Pucher & Buehler, 2012). Cycling therefore functions not only as transport allowing easier access to locations such as school, the local sports club or friends, but as cultural participation and a “social language” that facilitates integration (Jensen, 2021; Mohammadi, 2019). Cycling therefore functions not only as transport, but as **cultural participation and a “social language” that facilitates integration** (Jensen, 2021; Mohammadi, 2019). Conversely, children without cycling skills may experience reduced independence and fewer peer interactions (Tranter & Pawson, 2001).

Specific relevance for target group

For children and youth who have experienced **war, displacement, and humanitarian crisis, the benefits of physical activity and sports are particularly significant.**

Trauma research highlights the role of bodily movement in recovery:

- Van der Kolk (2014) emphasises that physical activity supports regulation of trauma-related stress responses.
- Rosenbaum et al. (2015) demonstrate that exercise reduces PTSD symptoms through neurochemical regulation.
- UNICEF's trauma-informed approaches stress the importance of safe physical activity, play, and structured group experiences in rebuilding resilience and restoring a sense of safety.



Presenting the Start Cycling Together Programme



About the programme

Start Cycling Together responds directly to the needs and opportunities identified in the previous sections. BYCS and Life Goals have developed a 12-week coaching programme focusing on cycling skills and social-emotional competencies, designed specifically for children and youth navigating displacement and resettlement.

The programme includes weekly cycling lessons and community rides, positioning cycling not merely as a transport skill but as a pathway to independence, confidence, and community belonging. **Unique to this programme is that participants are continuously and explicitly supported in practicing life skills:** soft skills that are beneficial to their social-emotional development and wellbeing, such as respect and communication.

These two dimensions are deliberately interwoven. **Cycling provides a concrete, embodied context for practicing skills like perseverance, communication, and trust** - children experience the immediate result of working through frustration or supporting a peer. At the same time, social-emotional development supports cycling progress: as participants build confidence and self-regulation, they become more willing to take risks, navigate challenges, and engage with their environment. **The bicycle becomes both the medium and the outcome of personal growth.**

This integrated approach is supported by a specific framework for cycling uptake: **the human infrastructure of cycling.** This framework shapes how the programme addresses barriers and creates opportunities that go beyond simply teaching someone to ride a bike.

From evidence to action

Together, this body of evidence highlights the powerful role that physical activity, and cycling in particular, can play in supporting the physical health, social-emotional wellbeing, and community integration of children and young people navigating displacement.

Yet despite these well-established benefits, access to structured, inclusive, and development-focused programmes remains limited for many in this group. Realising this potential requires approaches that go beyond access alone, combining physical activity with intentional support for confidence, skills, and connection in ways that are responsive to their lived experiences.

"I learned to stick out my hand to show where I'm going."

- Participant Mahmoud

The Human Infrastructure of Cycling

The Human Infrastructure of Cycling refers to the largely intangible elements - as contrasted with built infrastructure, such as bike lanes - that both enable and hinder a person to safely and enjoyably cycle. Human infrastructure is a relatively new concept when applied to cycling and was first used by Adonia Lugo during ethnographic research on Los Angeles' open street event, CicLAvia in 2010.



The Four Components

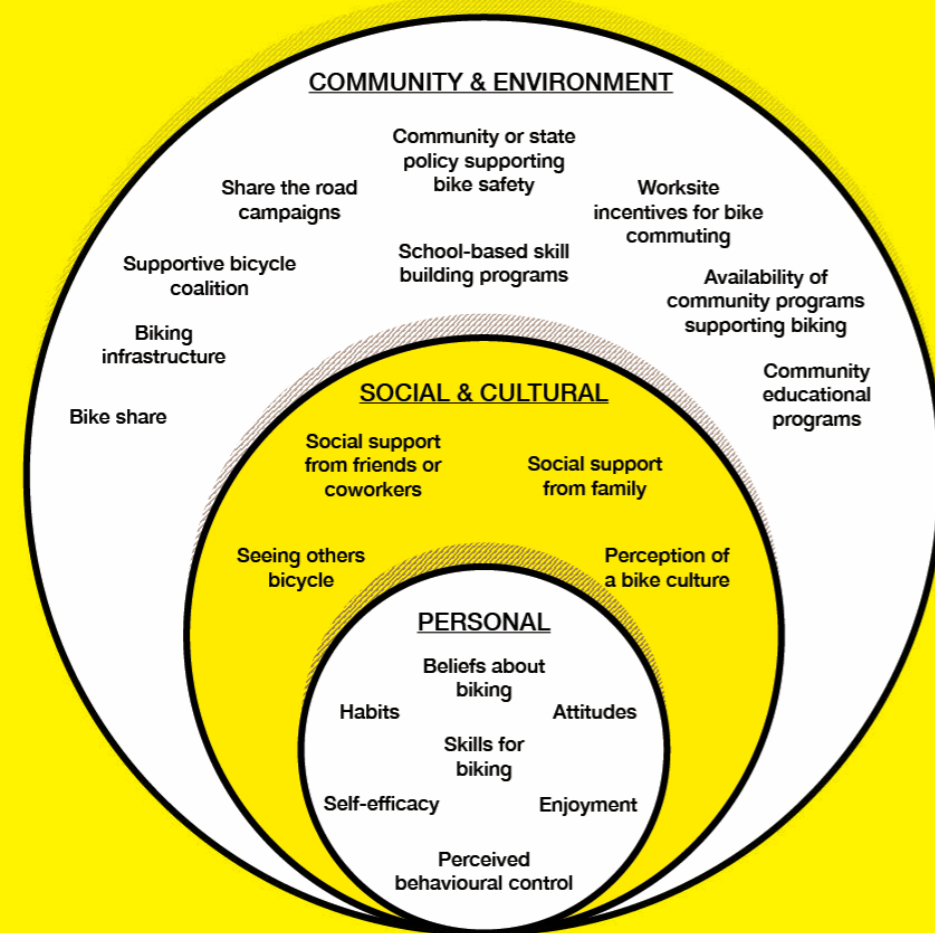
The human infrastructure of cycling can be categorised into four key components - awareness, skills, access, and stimulation. In order to achieve the best results in the Start Cycling Together programme, it is important to have a mix of activities across all four components and balance the emphasis of certain components based on the specific needs of the participating children. For example, if many of the children know how to ride a bike, but have a negative perception of cycling, then the focus should be on awareness and stimulation rather than on skills.

Stimulation

Stimulation is about the incentive to keep cycling. Children need to feel a stimulus to cycle, either because they find it fun, because friends also cycle, or because they prefer cycling over other modes of transport.

Awareness

In order to take up cycling, children (as well as their parents) need to know that it is a viable and safe means of transport and that cycle is for everyone. They also need to be aware of safe and enjoyable cycle routes and the rules of the road. Awareness of the benefits of cycling is also encouraging.



For a more complete explanation of the concept of human infrastructure of cycling, the Four Components, and including examples of initiatives and case studies, consult: [‘Strengthening the Human Infrastructure of Cycling: Soft Strategies for Inclusive Uptake’](#).



Access

Access relates to the availability of an appropriate bicycle and related equipment, as well as a secure place to store the bicycle and equipment, and opportunities to repair the bicycle.

Skills

Children need the skills to cycle, utilise infrastructure properly and eventually safely navigate traffic. More advanced cyclists can also benefit from acquiring the skills to maintain a bicycle.

Programme structure

With this framework in mind, Start Cycling Together was designed to address all four human infrastructure components simultaneously yet dynamically, while life skills are woven into every session.

The 12-week coaching programme consists of three phases:

1

Cycling- and Life Skills (ca. 6 weeks)

The first six weeks focus on learning to cycle safely and confidently, alongside the personal development of the participants. Each weekly session covers a particular social-emotional skill, such as communication or respect. The session incorporates this theme in the group games and cycling instructions.

2

Group rides (ca. 6 weeks)

During the second six weeks, the emphasis is on participating safely in traffic together through organised group rides. These group rides only start if the whole group is ready. In pairs, the group explores their surroundings. The rides often pass relevant locations such as school or the supermarket but also travel to nearby nature or recreational areas. Life skills are woven into the session, but are less prominent.

3

Closing event

Each programme concludes with a festive event for participants, parents/caregivers, and the local community. This event takes different shapes depending on the location, target group and stakeholders, but always has a celebratory and inclusive character.

Partnership with local sports coaches

For the implementation of the programme, **BYCS and Life Goals partnered with local organisations that know the context and are experienced working with vulnerable youth.** A cycling-specific version of Life Goals' Community Sportscoach Course was developed together with De Fietsmeesters (an initiative by Start Cycling Together partner SportUtrecht). Professional sports coaches from the partner organisations, some coming from the target communities, were trained to lead the weekly sessions. The three-day training covers cycling instruction and social-emotional coaching and topics such as group dynamics, leadership development and coaching with language barriers. Coaches also learn about the target group, how to reach them, and how to motivate people in vulnerable situations to participate in sports and cycling specifically. **The training provides coaches with practical tools to set up accessible cycling and play activities, and to use these activities to support and enhance the positive health of participants.**

Involving parents and guardians

The programme emphasises the involvement of parents or legal guardians of the participants. Their engagement is essential, not only because consent is required due to the participants' age, but also to **ensure that parents recognise the importance of cycling and can support their child ensuring lasting benefits beyond the programme.** This support includes for example having conversations to take away barriers that parents might experience or inspiring them to cycle themselves. The coaches encourage the participating children and youth to share their progress with their parents and to show them what they are learning.

"Sometimes [the children] don't dare to cycle to school, which increases the risk of falling behind academically. That's what we want to prevent."

*Jelle Zuijdam, SCT coordinator in Alkmaar
(article in Trouw newspaper, 18 December 2025)*



Quantitative Results of the Pilot Programme

The programme was piloted in 5 cities across The Netherlands - Amsterdam, Utrecht, Harderwijk, Zaandam (and Velsen), and Alkmaar - to test the methodology and materials, gather learnings for improvements, and observe how participants respond in real-life settings. Beyond testing logistics, the pilots offered an opportunity to see the programme's impact on children and youth firsthand and in different contexts. This section presents the data and figures, offering an evidence-based picture of both the pilot's reach and impact.



Total pilot reach

Total number of programme iterations	14
Total number of sessions delivered	174
Total number of participants that completed the programme	224
Total number of stakeholders reached (e.g. parents, community initiatives)	333
Total number of coaches trained	14
Total number of volunteers involved	27

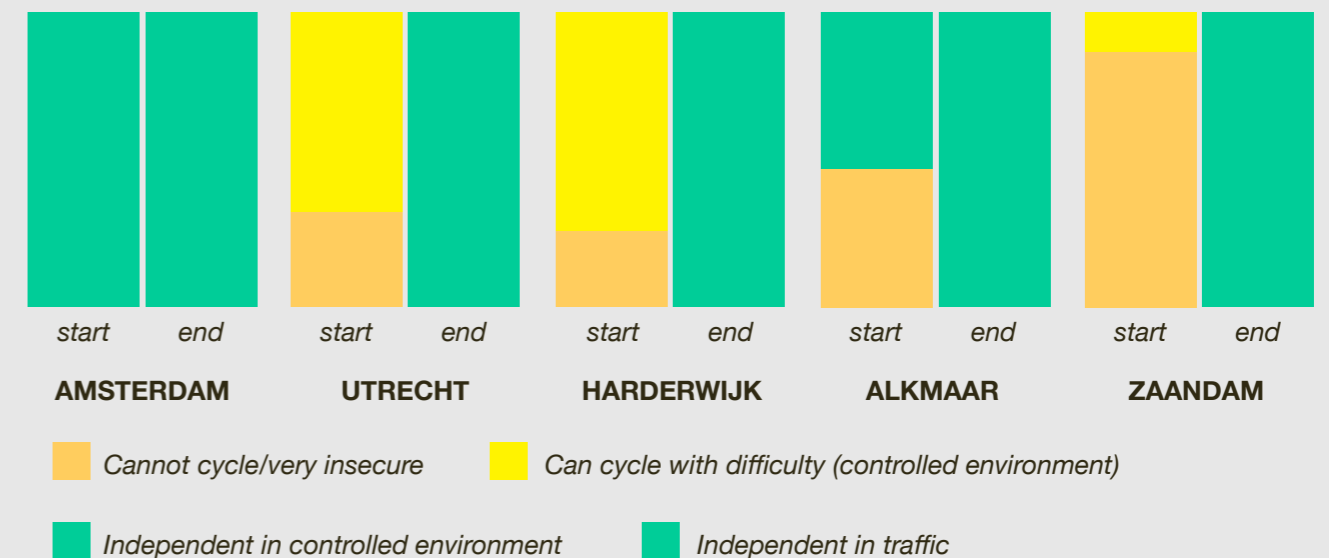
Impact on participants

From the outset, the programme's ambitions were to increase participants' engagement with the local community, increase their physical activity levels, and to improve their social-emotional wellbeing. The results below show the extent to which these ambitions were met. In some cases, results exceed expectations.

Physical activity and cycling skills

The most powerful finding from the pilot is also the most consistent: across every location, without exception, **the highest cycling skill level was reached by almost all participants**. This result was achieved regardless of location, group composition, or starting level - and starting levels varied enormously. In Zaandam, 90% of participants arrived unable to cycle or feeling deeply insecure on a bike. In Alkmaar, half of all participants had no cycling ability at the start. In both cases - as in every other location - the programme brought all participants to full traffic competency.

Cycling skill level - start vs. end, per location



Beyond skills, the programme also generated broader gains in physical activity. In Amsterdam, **69% of participants reported becoming more physically active overall**, and the share of participants who enjoy cycling rose from 65% to 88%. Across locations where participants' sense of physical health was measured, the results point in the same direction: 57% of participants in Alkmaar, 28% in Harderwijk and even 96% in Utrecht reported **feeling healthier by the end of the programme**.

Community connection

The pilot demonstrates that structured, community-embedded programming can meaningfully shift participants' relationship with their local environment - even within a twelve-week period. Participants did not just learn to cycle; they began to see and use their surroundings differently. Across all five locations, **100% of participants reported a better understanding of their local environment** by the end of the programme.

Where community engagement was measured in more depth - most comprehensively in Amsterdam - the shifts were substantial.

The share of participants feeling welcome at local activities more than tripled, from 12% to 42%. Awareness of local opportunities increased more than sixfold, from 8% to 50%. Knowledge of people in the local community rose from 12% to 39%. And 73% of participants expressed a desire to continue engaging with the local community through cycling after the programme ended. In Utrecht, participants reported a significant increase in participation in local activities, going from 9% to 45%.

"At the beginning, the boys came in somewhat quiet and reserved. Now they walk into the workshop confidently and easily mix with the other participants."

Koen Polder, SCT coordinator in Amsterdam

Social-emotional wellbeing

Across the locations where social-emotional wellbeing was systematically measured, **the results point consistently towards meaningful personal development - particularly in the areas of self-confidence, perseverance, and collaboration.** These are not peripheral outcomes; they reflect the programme's core ambition to support the whole child, not just the cyclist.

Self-confidence improved in every location where it was measured, with between 72% and 85% of participants reporting growth in this area. Improvements in collaboration and communication were similarly consistent, typically reported by 50% to 70% of participants. Perseverance - a quality that is both taught and tested in the process of learning to cycle - showed strong gains across locations, with between 61% and 75% of participants in Harderwijk, Alkmaar and Utrecht reporting improvement.



% of participants reporting improvement per indicator, per location

AMSTERDAM
Self-confidence 85%
Communication 70%

HARDERWIJK
Self-confidence 72%
Perseverance 67%

ALKMAAR
Self-confidence 71%
Perseverance 71%

Communication 56%
Collaboration 61%

Communication 64%
Collaboration 64%

Communication 64%
Collaboration 64%

ZAANDAM
Self-confidence 80%
Collaboration 50%

UTRECHT
Self-confidence 80%
Perseverance 75%

Communication 61%
Collaboration 64%

It is worth noting that social-emotional outcomes were the hardest to capture through standard measurement tools. In Zaandam, results are based on structured coach observation rather than self-reporting. In Amsterdam, a different monitoring instrument was used than in other locations. The consistency of findings across these different approaches adds to their credibility, but also points to a need for more accessible and standardised monitoring instruments in future iterations.

From Pilot to Practice

The positive outcomes reflected in these findings have motivated implementation partners to continue and expand the work initiated by Start Cycling Together. In Harderwijk, additional cycling lessons are now being organised as a direct follow-up to the programme. In Amsterdam, participating youth have been integrated into ongoing weekly cycling activities and the broader cycling community. Meanwhile, our partner in Zaandam is exploring how to extend cycling lessons to mothers, recognising the potential for wider family and community impact. These developments demonstrate not only the programme's immediate value, but also its capacity to catalyse sustained local engagement - a theme that emerges clearly in the reflections and experiences shared by implementation partners in the following section.

Stories from the Pilot Programme



Through personal stories and testimonials, this section showcases how the sessions in this programme go far beyond skill-building - fostering confidence, independence, social interaction, and a sense of belonging. The cases presented not only outline implementation but also demonstrate the tangible results and transformations experienced by participants and observed by their coaches.

The beating heart of the workshop is Koen Polder. His love for cycling and his commitment to the target group give Streetwise Cycling energy and direction. “I strongly believe that cycling can help you get out of your head and back into your body,” Koen says. It was precisely this conviction that made him enthusiastic about the Start Cycling Together project. In Amsterdam, the focus is specifically on unaccompanied minors.

While most of the young people that joined the programme in Amsterdam already had good cycling skills, the project brought something new: **more attention to roadcycling technique and to life skills such as working together, building trust and exploring boundaries.**

Becoming part of a cycling community

Partner:
Life Goals Amsterdam / Streetwise Cycling / De Regenboog Groep

Target group:
Boys 14-18 years old



In Amsterdam Zuidoost cycling club Streetwise Cycling has its own bike workshop. This is a place where people in a vulnerable position not only learn how to ride a bicycle, but also explore the mechanics behind it. From repairing a flat tyre to fully dismantling and rebuilding a bike. The initiative is supported by Life Goals Amsterdam and operates within De Regenboog Groep, an organisation that assists people facing a wide range of challenges such as debt, addiction, mental health issues, or homelessness.



“They come in here with a backpack full of difficult experiences, and you see them slowly relax and gain more trust.”

Koen Polder, SCT coordinator in Amsterdam



Keep cycling, keep growing

Koen saw the young people visibly change. **What touches him most is how cycling brings people together.** “It really doesn’t matter here what someone’s background is. They grab a bike together and head out.” Thanks to a loan bike, participants can also ride outside the organised moments. “I know that a number of the boys at the asylum seeker centre still cycle together on weekends,” Koen says with a smile.

Cycling not only broadens someone’s world, but also someone’s network. “I’ve really seen that the boys have had much more contact with the neighbourhood. Their range of action becomes larger, and with that their self-confidence.”

A safe place in an unsettled time

For unaccompanied minors with a refugee background, building stability and a sense of belonging in the Netherlands remains challenging - especially when they are frequently and unexpectedly relocated. All the more valuable, Koen finds, that Streetwise Cycling can be a place where they feel safe. **In Amsterdam, the pilot shows what a bicycle can mean beyond transport: a tool to make contact, to grow, and to build trust.** At Streetwise Cycling, they continue to carry this forward every day: helping people get moving - on the bike and in life.

“Cycling lessons are important if you don’t have money for the bus.”

- Participant Sultan



Growing into an independent cyclist

Partner:

SportUtrecht / De Fietsmeesters

Target group:

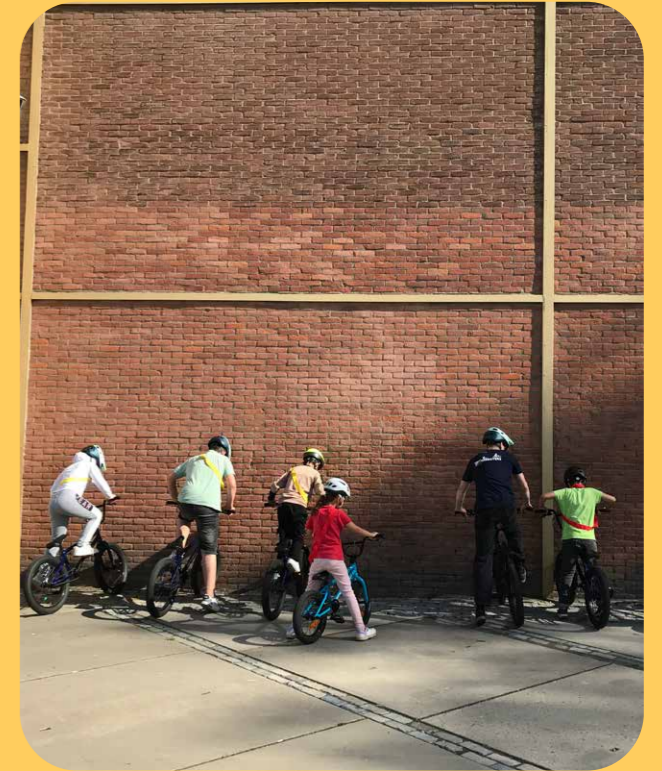
Children 8-12 years old



Laughter fills the air at the reception centre in Utrecht. Children are cycling around everywhere. “Hi teacher!”, they shout when they see Jetske Hoppen, cycling instructor at SportUtrecht. Months after their cycling lessons have ended, Jetske is still enthusiastically recognised.

Learning to cycle together

SportUtrecht organises sports activities for all ages. Drawing on their experience, they developed their own cycling method: Trappen in Etappen (“Pedaling in Stages”), through which children and adults learn to cycle playfully and safely. Their method was key for developing the cycling part of the Start Cycling Together programme. Besides co-creating the training course for coaches and the programme, Jetske and her colleagues took on the implementation of the pilot in Utrecht.



The programme was implemented at a new reception centre in Utrecht in collaboration with Welkom in Utrecht. This organisation works in Utrecht’s reception centres and aims to connect residents with Utrecht locals by organising various shared activities, such as Dutch language cafés, exercising, cooking, going to concerts - and now cycling too!

“For people who are new to the Netherlands, cycling is truly enriching. If you can cycle, it’s easier to get to the supermarket, the sports field, or to people you know. Your world becomes bigger, you stay active, and it’s good for your health.”

Jetske Hoppen, SCT coach in Utrecht

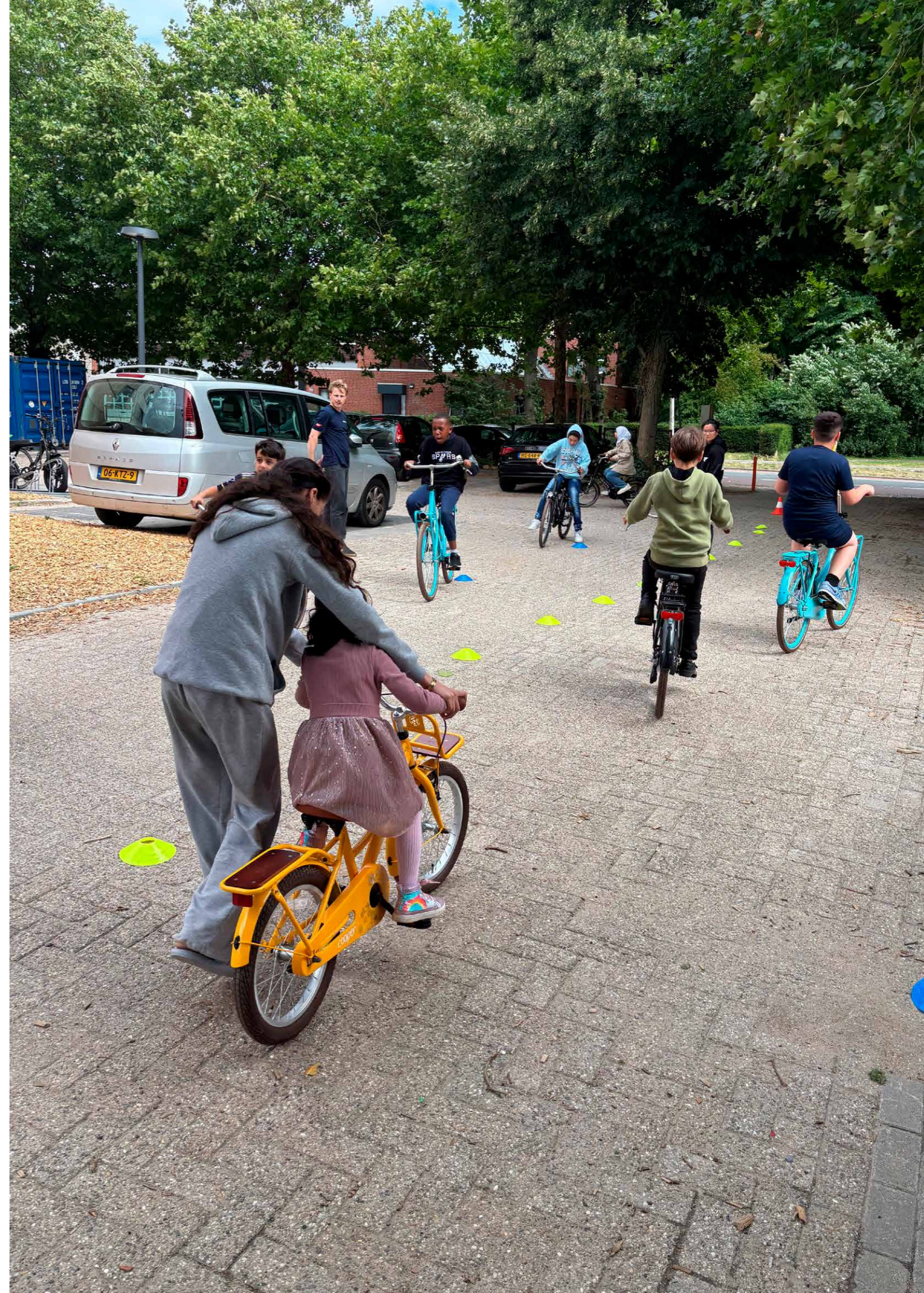
Practicing both cycling and life skills

Interest in the programme was high: the first edition thirty children participated, all with little or no cycling experience. **The attention to life skills made this programme stand out compared to 'normal' cycling lessons.** "Many of the children have experienced traumatic events, and we sometimes noticed this in their frustration or hesitation," Jetske explains. "We worked on respect and communication during the lessons and saw that they carried this behavior beyond the lessons. A more pleasant atmosphere emerged at the location, as the children - besides learning to cycle - also practiced patience, waiting their turn, functioning in a group, and listening."

Small steps, big impact

The lessons proved to be a great success. **Some children now cycle to school or to the park on their own.** Take participants Kamal and Siyabonga, who have shown great progress over the course of the programme. Kamal demonstrates what Jetske taught him: carefully looking right, left, and over his shoulder. Siyabonga is one of the children who now cycles weekly and can ride to school independently. Their enthusiasm reflects how the children gradually build skills and confidence, and how great the impact of the cycling lessons is on their independence and self-confidence.

Not everyone is ready to go out on the road alone yet, but the foundation has been laid. "It's a great stepping stone that they can build on by continuing to practice," says Jetske. Adult residents also became enthusiastic. "It's wonderful to see that not only the children are inspired, but that adult residents are now also signing up for our cycling lessons."



"Cycling lessons are important because you can cycle together and go into nature and see flowers."

- Participant Diana

Developing confidence through cycling

Partner:
Sport-Z

Target group:
Children 11-15 years old



The final, festive session of Start Cycling Together takes place at the Sportpaleis in Alkmaar, one of the only few indoor cycling tracks in The Netherlands. For many of the participating children, this is their first time seeing an indoor cycling track, and they can't wait to take a lap.

Sport for wellbeing

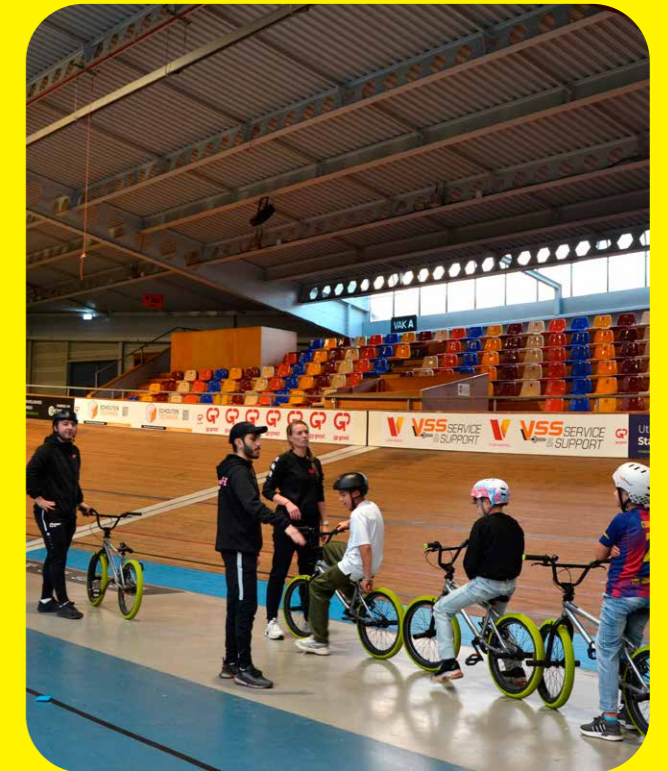
Sport-Z believes that sport and physical activity is about more than improving physical health alone. Sport is a great tool to foster positive outcomes such as learning to work together, developing social skills and experiencing success, and feeling a sense of belonging - all of which contribute to greater self-confidence and overall wellbeing. Cycling was never part of their activities, but appeared to work perfectly with the impact they want to make.

From basic skills to navigating in traffic

"Most of the children could already ride a bike, but they weren't yet familiar with traffic rules in the Netherlands," Jelle explains. "That's why we started with a quiz, to explore in a playful way what the children already knew and what they didn't. Many children weren't familiar with traffic lights or zebra crossings, so we started with the basics of traffic theory." In the following weeks, the children got on their bikes under guidance. They first practised at the location itself and later on a large nearby parking area. The team simulated traffic situations using traffic signs that the children had to follow. **This allowed them to apply theory directly in practice, in a safe environment.**

"It is healthy for the children to spend time outdoors and to briefly escape the cramped living conditions with parents who are sometimes distressed and downcast. Many of them are living in uncertainty about their future."

Fadi Ibrahim, SCT volunteer in Alkmaar (article in Trouw newspaper, 18 December 2025)



Volunteers supporting the learning process

"If you ask the children what they enjoyed most, it was definitely playing tag on bikes," says volunteer Fadi Ibrahim. He supports communication between the coach and the children by translating into Arabic. The participants can count on the compliments of Ibrahim. In Syria, Fadi followed sports coaching education - a dream he is determined to pursue. As a volunteer with Sport-Z, he is gaining valuable experience.

More than improved cycling skills

Jelle observed not only an improvement in the children's cycling skills, but also growing self-confidence. Some of the girls initially experienced hesitation in traffic, highlighting the importance of a safe learning environment in which confidence can grow. Another direct positive effect of the cycling lessons: instead of staying in their rooms, the children play outside, spend time together and participate in a collective learning process.

Grace (13) came to the Netherlands from Syria and had never learned to ride a bike before. At first, she was nervous on the road and even fell during one of the first lessons. Through the Start Cycling Together program, she gained confidence and now cycles to school independently - a 20-minute ride that would take much longer on foot. The lessons have helped her overcome fear, build self-reliance, and enjoy the freedom of being outside, giving her a sense of normalcy amid uncertainty about her future.

Building a cycling culture by including the whole family

Partner:
We All Fit In

Target group:
Children 8-12 years old



Sport and exercise is for everyone, some people just need a helping hand to get started. That is the philosophy of We All Fit In in a nutshell. From her own experience, initiator Noes Cornelisse knows how important physical activity can be for self-confidence and mental wellbeing. “I want everyone to be able to participate, regardless of age, background or the baggage someone carries with them,” says Noes. This made her decide to join the Start Cycling Together pilot, with a team of trained coaches, volunteers and interns.

Learning to cycle together

We All Fit In collaborated with a school for children who have not been living in the Netherlands for long. This allowed participants to go straight to their weekly session after school. No extra barriers, just get on the bike and go. The enthusiasm was palpable, says Noes: “the children were always keen to get started. And often the parents would also stand along the schoolyard watching.”

Learning by doing

The cycling lessons were playful, practical and above all fun. Using coloured tiles in the schoolyard, the children learned the meaning of green, orange and red in traffic. Through demonstration and practice, real traffic situations were simulated with traffic signs and other materials. A great bonus was the presence of Eyad, a community sports coach who speaks Arabic. “That made explaining and guiding much easier,” Noes explains.

More than cycling

The wonderful thing about the lessons was that the effect went beyond just cycling, already noticeable during the course. Children visibly grew in self-confidence. **Not everyone could cycle immediately, but that very fact created cohesion: children helped and encouraged each other.** The programme also made an immediate difference for parents. Parents without a car or other means of transport now more easily get on a bicycle together with their child. This offers families more freedom and opportunity.

Building a cycling culture within families

Noes has clear plans for the future. **She wants to actively involve parents in the cycling lessons.** “It would be wonderful to teach children and parents together. And if parents want to help with the lessons, then I also want to offer appropriate compensation for that.” In this way, Start Cycling Together continues to develop: as a place where physical activity connects and where everyone can participate.



“The most fun was the pumptrack, this was the best day of my life!”

- Participant Mahmoud



“What could be better than hopping on your bike on a warm Friday afternoon and cycling safely to a playground with the whole class - building things, playing with water, swinging, or simply relaxing in the shade? That’s now possible because the children have learned how to ride a bike!”

Petra Lievense, SCT coach in Harderwijk



Cycling to expand children’s worlds

Partner:
Veld 42



Harderwijk is a small city in a rural environment, located centrally in the Netherlands. Thanks to the Start Cycling Together project, 95 children with a refugee background in Harderwijk got to explore their new surroundings on two wheels.

Target group:
Children 9-12 years old and
girls 12-16 years old

Collaboration is key

The project, implemented by Veld 42, became part of the curriculum of AZS De Vlieger, a primary school for children who have not been living in the Netherlands for long. **The collaboration with the school and volunteers from the community proved crucial.** Volunteers provided practical guidance and created trust. Some spoke the same language as the children. “That helped enormously,” says Kees Grovenstein, founder of Veld 42. “We could explain things better and respond more quickly to the dynamics between the children.”

Unlocking opportunities

More than just technique, the project is about freedom. **Children who started cautiously in the schoolyard grew into confident cyclists within a few weeks.** Cycling trips were organised to playgrounds, the forest and local sports clubs. In this way, they not only learned to cycle, but also got to know their new surroundings. “They can now independently go to places in the neighbourhood,” says Kees. “That gives enormous self-confidence.”

Attention for every child

Not every child learns at the same pace. Therefore, personal guidance was provided. Children who needed extra support received one-on-one attention, while others continued practising. “When cycling to a playground, they could ride on the back with an instructor and receive one-on-one cycling lessons there, while the other children played,” Kees explains. **This approach ensured that everyone could participate and experience success.**

Pride among children and parents

The final lesson of each course was given a festive character: one event children could participate in a BMX clinic and another edition the local mountain bike club was invited. **Parents were welcome to see what their children had learned. This resulted in proud faces among both children and parents.** “You then see that parents allow their children to cycle independently with greater peace of mind,” says Kees. The likelihood that children continue cycling after completing the programme increases enormously with this approach.

Now the pilot has ended, Veld 42 hopes to continue and expand the cycling lessons, including cycle training for parents, to build a solid foundation for road safety and self-reliance within families.

Key Insights



The Start Cycling Together pilot generated important learning — not only about what worked, but about why it worked and what was surprising along the way. These insights are drawn from the experiences of coaches, coordinators, and participants across all five pilot locations.

Cycling as a gateway to broader development

Perhaps the most important insight from the pilot is that **learning to cycle is rarely just about cycling**. Across locations, coaches observed outcomes that went beyond the programme’s primary objectives: participants who had arrived with a fear of cycling overcame that fear; children who rarely spoke began having informal conversations in Dutch; young people who had little experience of independence started navigating their surroundings with growing confidence. Learning a physical skill - and mastering it - proved to be a powerful driver of self-esteem and a tangible expansion of participants’ worlds.

“All Dutch people bike. If you do not know how to ride a bike you don’t speak Dutch.”

- Participant Diana

Success depends on low thresholds and local trust

One of the clearest lessons from the pilot is that **participation is fragile**. Children and families dealing with displacement face numerous practical and emotional barriers, and even small obstacles, such as an unfamiliar location, a long journey or an unclear expectation, can be enough to prevent attendance. Programmes that were embedded in existing structures, such as school rhythms, consistently saw stronger and more stable participation. **Equally important was the role of local coaches and volunteers**: familiar faces who spoke the language of the community, literally and figuratively, made a decisive difference in building trust and keeping participants engaged week after week.



Events and group rides as catalysts for community building and local connection

The **group rides and end-of-programme celebratory gatherings emerged as disproportionately powerful elements of the programme**. In Amsterdam and Utrecht, events generated visible enthusiasm and strengthened the sense of belonging among participants. Beyond motivation, events served a connective function: they brought together children and involved families creating shared memories that extended the programme’s impact beyond the weekly sessions. Moreover, it connected the participants with local residents and organisations crucial for building local connections beyond the programme.

Measuring what matters is challenging

The pilot also surfaced an honest methodological challenge: **the outcomes that matter most are often the hardest to measure**. Standard monitoring tools proved too complex for many participants due to language barriers, and some of the most meaningful moments - a smile after a first successful ride, a child helping a peer who was struggling - do not translate easily into numbers. This points to a need for more creative, participatory approaches to monitoring and evaluation in programmes like this one, and should be considered in future iterations and similar initiatives.

Learning through play

A consistent observation across locations was that **the most effective moments of learning happened when participants were not aware they were learning**. Games, playful exercises, and informal challenges proved to be far more engaging than instruction-led sessions — particularly for younger children and for participants who arrived with anxiety around cycling. Play created a safe environment to take risks, make mistakes, and try again. This insight has implications for how the programme is designed and facilitated: a playful approach is not a nice-to-have, but a core methodological principle.

Parents as essential allies

Parental involvement emerged as one of the most significant dynamics. In several locations, parents who initially observed from a distance gradually became active supporters and in some cases, participants themselves. In Zaandam, parents attended lessons regularly and some mothers assisted during sessions; by the end, families were asking whether cycling lessons for adults could be organised. In Harderwijk, a father who had initially refused to allow his daughter to participate witnessed her cycling independently and left with an entirely different perspective. These moments illustrate that the programme’s impact often extended well beyond the individual child.

Transferability and Scaling Across Europe



This section demonstrates how the Start Cycling Together programme is relevant for different European contexts and shows how it can be adapted and implemented when circumstances vary. **Given the scale and persistence of displacement across Europe - and the recurring need for evidence-based support when new humanitarian crises emerge - programmes like this one should not remain pilot initiatives.** Start Cycling Together offers a ready-made, field-tested intervention that can be deployed rapidly in response to displacement, while remaining adaptable to local conditions. This section distinguishes between the programme's core components which safeguard the integrity of the method, and the essential conditions required for quality delivery. By clarifying where flexibility is needed and where fidelity matters, it provides practical guidance for replicating and scaling the programme to new settings across Europe.

Core components: what remains constant across contexts

The Start Cycling Together model was designed and piloted in the Netherlands, yet its foundation is transferable to diverse European contexts. The combination of cycling skills with social-emotional coaching is not inherently tied to Dutch culture or geography.

What matters is how the programme is tailored to local realities while preserving its core principles. Several elements remain non-negotiable across contexts:

- The programme's grounding in the human infrastructure of cycling.
- The integration of cycling instruction with structured life skills coaching.
- The combination of learning to cycle safely and confidently, group rides exploring the local area, and a festive closing event.
- The creation of a safe and supportive group-based learning environment.
- The presence of trusted, trained local coaches who have meaningful connections to participants' communities.
- An environment that supports participants to continue to cycle after the programme ends, based on the components of the human infrastructure of cycling.

Essential local conditions for implementation

Successful implementation depends on certain local conditions being in place. Implementing organisations should have at least experience in sports coaching or cycling, as well as affinity with the target group, to ensure effective implementation. Additional requirements include access to basic cycling equipment and safe practice spaces, as well as partnerships between the implementing organisation and institutions such as schools, reception centres, and municipalities. Importantly, insights from the pilot revealed that trusted local coaches were more decisive for programme success than high-quality infrastructure. This finding underscores that **the model is fundamentally social, not infrastructure-dependent, which enhances its scalability across varied European settings.**

Context-specific adaptation: where flexibility is required

Cycling culture and infrastructure

The role of cycling culture and infrastructure varies considerably across Europe. In high-cycling countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, or Denmark, cycling is already socially normalised. In countries where cycling is less common - particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe - **the programme may need to place greater emphasis on:**

- **building basic confidence;**
- **addressing safety concerns;**
- **and providing more intensive road-safety education.**

In these contexts, introductory or shortened formats may be more appropriate initially. Programme framing is also vital here: rather than positioning cycling primarily as a mobility tool, it may be framed as a tool for empowerment, sport-based engagement, or health promotion.

Training coaches across borders

Coaches from implementing organisations will need to follow the three-day training. In a future situation some training components can be taught online, but in-person training remains critical for cycle training and teaching group dynamics.



Length of stay and participant stability

The length of stay and stability of participants also shape programme design.

This varies significantly across Europe: countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands tend to have relatively longer reception processes and more stable integration pathways, while countries closer to external EU borders—such as Greece, Italy, or Poland—often experience higher mobility and shorter stays due to their role as transit countries or their use of temporary reception facilities. Programme formats can be adapted as follows:

- In contexts with short-term stays or high mobility: shortened or modular formats, or stand-alone workshops focussing on separate programme components.
- In more stable contexts: the full twelve-week trajectory with stronger emphasis on community integration and sustained relationships.

Urban versus rural settings

Urban and rural settings each present distinct opportunities and constraints.

Urban areas typically offer greater density of potential partners—including schools, municipal services, NGOs, and reception centres—as well as more developed cycling infrastructure and diverse participant groups. However, they may face challenges related to space availability and road safety.

Rural areas often enable deeper community bonding due to smaller, more close-knit social networks, and participants may experience stronger visibility and recognition within the community. At the same time, rural contexts face logistical challenges because of longer distances between sites and lack of transport availability when participants do not cycle yet.

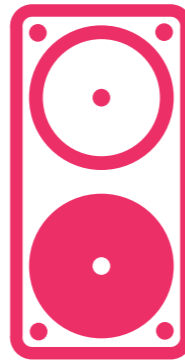


European relevance and policy alignment

As outlined in the relevance section, the barriers children and youth with a refugee background face when settling in a new country - and the resulting impact on their mobility, independence, and social development - are serious and found across all European countries.

The Start Cycling Together programme directly contributes to several key EU policy frameworks. It **aligns with the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027**, which emphasises inclusive education and empowering both migrants and host communities. By combining cycling instruction with social-emotional coaching, the programme promotes mental wellbeing, facilitates adaptation, and creates bonds between children and youth with a refugee background and local communities. It also **supports EU4Health objectives by promoting physical activity and combating childhood health issues through cycling as sustainable transport**. Beyond health and social inclusion, **it connects to broader EU priorities around sustainable urban mobility**, supporting initiatives such as CIVITAS and contributing to goals around clean air, safer streets, and reduced car dependency.

Recommendations for Future Initiatives



The Start Cycling Together pilot has demonstrated that combining cycling with social-emotional coaching can generate meaningful outcomes for children and youth with a refugee background - outcomes that extend well beyond the bicycle. The following recommendations are addressed to civil society organisations and government agencies as partners to take this work forward.

Pathways for scaling

Scaling does not mean simply replicating the programme in more places. It means **building the infrastructure that allows others to implement it well**. This includes developing structured knowledge transfer packages that capture the methodology, tools, and lessons learned from the Dutch pilot in a form that is accessible and adaptable for organisations in other contexts. A training-of-trainers model offers a particularly promising pathway: by investing in local capacity rather than centralised delivery, the programme can take root in new communities without losing its quality and human-centred approach.

In the light of building cross-border partnerships, BYCS and Life Goals have submitted a proposal for the 2026 European Commission's Cooperation Partnerships call, proposing a concrete opportunity to scale Start Cycling Together and to bring together partners with complementary expertise across member states.

Bilateral partnerships between experienced implementing organisations and new partners - whether in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe - provide a practical starting point. **Cross-border partnerships can further support knowledge exchange and contextual adaptation**, allowing organisations to learn from each other's experiences across different national settings.



Recommendations for implementing organisations

For organisations considering adopting or adapting the Start Cycling Together model, the following priorities stand out, targeted at building a strong foundation.

The evidence from the Start Cycling Together pilot offers potential implementing partners a strong foundation to legitimise their initiative: outcomes across wellbeing, health and community connection make the programme relevant to a wide range of funding streams and organisational mandates. The advice is to frame the programme not primarily as a cycling initiative, but as an integration and wellbeing intervention that uses cycling as its vehicle.

As mentioned before, the programme fits best with partners experienced in sports coaching or cycling and with affinity with vulnerable children and youth (with a refugee background). Organisations are furthermore encouraged to identify and secure commitments from key local partners: a reception centre or school willing to host or refer participants, a municipality or public health body that can provide institutional backing, and ideally a connection to the local cycling ecosystem such as clubs or cycling advocacy organisations. **This creates pathways for participants after the programme ends, and strengthens the programme's legitimacy and visibility within the local community.**



Recommendations for EU and local government agencies

Start Cycling Together is a flexible, evidence-informed response to pressing health and inclusion challenges facing European communities today. Its adaptability positions it as a relevant and scalable model for addressing mental and physical health challenges, social inclusion, and community cohesion among refugee populations across Europe. **The programme does not require large-scale infrastructure investment - it requires investment in people: in local coaches, in community relationships, and in the time needed to build trust.**

For government agencies and funders, this is precisely what makes it compelling. Targeted investment in the human infrastructure of cycling and social-emotional development can yield outcomes across health, inclusion, and community cohesion domains - domains that are typically addressed through separate, siloed policy instruments.

Local governments are encouraged to integrate cycling-based integration programmes into urban mobility and public health strategies, and to create enabling 'ecosystem' conditions - such as dedicated space, institutional partnerships, and sustained funding - that allow civil society organisations to deliver them well. At the European level, continued investment through health, integration, and youth funding streams would allow the model to be tested, adapted, and scaled across member states, generating shared learning and a stronger evidence base for future policy.



Five Key Takeaways



1. Cycling Builds Confidence, Health, and Connection

Start Cycling Together proves that learning to cycle opens doors far beyond mobility - it creates independence, strengthens physical and mental wellbeing, and connects children and youth to their communities.

2. Success Across All Participants

Almost every participant reached full cycling competency, regardless of starting level. All gained a better understanding of their local environment. Up to 85% grew in self-confidence.

3. A Working Model Ready to Scale

Grounded in the 'human infrastructure of cycling' and tested across five Dutch cities, this evidence-based approach is ready to scale across Europe, adapting to diverse contexts while maintaining its core impact.

4. Local Trust Drives Results

Success depends on trained local coaches, low-threshold access, playful learning, and embedding programmes in schools and communities. Investment in people, not infrastructure alone, unlocks transformation.

5. Partnership Makes it Possible

BYCS and Life Goals bring complementary expertise: global cycling advocacy meets community sport practice. Together with implementing partners and local supporters across the Netherlands, we've created a replicable model ready for wider collaboration with civil society and government across Europe.

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BYCS

BYCS is an Amsterdam-based global NGO supporting community-led urban change through cycling. With a strong track record of establishing successful partnerships and pilot programmes, BYCS has become the leading cycling advocacy organisation that relates to global cycling community organisations, activists and their movements.

Nienke Sluimer
nienke@bycs.org

LIFE GOALS

Life Goals uses the power of sport and exercise to enable people in vulnerable positions to participate in society. Life Goals advances social sport initiatives by providing guidance, concrete projects, and practical tools, creating a network of social sport initiatives accessible to thousands of people in vulnerable positions.

Tessa van Ruiten
tessa.vanruiten@stichtinglifegoals.nl

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Authors: Nienke Sluimer, Programme & Project Lead, BYCS
Clara Gade, Project & Grants Coordinator, BYCS

Design: James Crossley, Creative & Communications Consultant

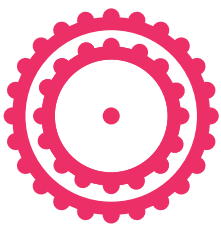
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