

The Challenges of Citizen Engagement in Urban Transformation: Key Learnings from Three European Cities

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Abstract : The impact of citizens in urban transformations has become increasingly important in the pursuit of creating citizen-centered cities. Citizens at the forefront of the urban transformation process are key to establishing resilient, sustainable, and inclusive cities that cater to the needs of all residents. Therefore, collecting data and information directly from citizens is crucial for the sustainable development of cities. Within this context, public participation becomes a pillar for acquiring the necessary information from citizens. Public participation in urban transformation processes establishes a more responsive, equitable, and resilient urban environment. This approach cultivates a sense of shared responsibility and collective progress in building cities that truly serve the well-being of all residents. However, the implementation of public participation practices often overlooks strategies to effectively engage citizens in the processes, resulting in non-successful participatory outcomes. Therefore, this research focuses on identifying and analyzing the critical aspects of citizen engagement during the same participatory urban transformation process in different European contexts: Ermua (Spain), Elva (Estonia) and Matera (Italy). The participatory neighborhood regeneration process is divided into three main stages, to turn social districts into inclusive and smart neighborhoods: (i) the strategic level, (ii) the design level, and (iii) the implementation level. In the initial stage, the focus is on diagnosing the neighborhood and creating a shared vision with the community. The second stage centers around collaboratively designing various action plans to foster inclusivity and intelligence while pushing local economic development within the district. Finally, the third stage ensures the proper co-implementation of the designed actions in the neighborhood. To this date, the presented results critically analyze the key aspects of engagement in the first stage of the methodology, the strategic plan, in the three above-mentioned contexts. It is a multifaceted study that incorporates three case studies to shed light on the various perspectives and strategies adopted by each city. The results indicate that despite of the various cultural contexts, all cities face similar barriers when seeking to enhance engagement. Accordingly, the study identifies specific challenges within the participatory approach across the three cities such as the existence of discontented citizens, communication gaps, inconsistent participation, or administration resistance. Consequently, key learnings of the process indicate that a collaborative sphere needs to be cultivated, educating both citizens and administrations in the aspects of co-governance, giving these practices the appropriate space and their own communication channels. This study is part of the DROP project, funded by the European Union, which aims to develop a citizen-centered urban renewal methodology to transform the social districts into smart and inclusive neighborhoods.

Keywords : citizen-centred cities, engagement, public participation, urban transformation

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