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Municipalities as Enablers of Citizen-Led Urban Initiatives: Possibilities and Constraints

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Abstract : In recent years, bottom-up urban development has started growing as an alternative to conventional top-down planning. In large proportions, citizens and communities initiate small-scale interventions; suddenly seeming to form a trend. As a result, more and more cities are witnessing not only the growth of but also an interest in these initiatives, as they bear the potential to reshape urban spaces. Such alternative city-making efforts cause new dynamics in urban governance, with inevitable consequences for the controlled city planning and its administration. The emergence of enabling relationships between top-down and bottom-up actors signals an increasingly common urban practice. Various case studies show that an enabling relationship is possible, yet, how it can be optimally realized stays rather underexamined. Therefore, the seemingly growing worldwide phenomenon of 'municipal bottom-up urban development' necessitates an adequate governance structure. As such, the aim of this research is to contribute knowledge to how municipalities can enable citizen-led urban initiatives from a governance innovation perspective. Empirical case-study research in Stockholm and Istanbul, derived from interviews with founders of four citizen-led urban initiatives and one municipal representative in each city, provided valuable insights to possibilities and constraints for enabling practices. On the one hand, diverging outcomes emphasize the extreme oppositional features of both cases (Stockholm and Istanbul). Firstly, both cities' characteristics are drastically different. Secondly, the ideologies and motifs for the initiatives to emerge vary widely. Thirdly, the major constraints for citizen-led urban initiatives to relate to the municipality are considerably different. Two types of municipality's organizational structures produce different underlying mechanisms which demonstrate the constraints. The first municipal organizational structure is steered by bureaucracy (Stockholm). It produces an administrative division that brings up constraints such as the lack of responsibility, transparency and continuity by municipal representatives. The second structure is dominated by municipal politics and governmental hierarchy (Istanbul). It produces informality, lack of transparency and a fragmented civil society. In order to cope with the constraints produced by both types of organizational structures, the initiatives have adjusted their organization to the municipality's underlying structures. On the other hand, this paper has in fact also come to a rather unifying conclusion. Interestingly, the suggested possibilities for an enabling relationship underline converging new urban governance arrangements. This could imply that for the two varying types of municipality's organizational structures there is an accurate governance structure. Namely, the combination of a neighborhood council with a municipal guide, with allowance for the initiatives to adopt a politicizing attitude is found as coinciding. Especially its combination appears key to redeem varying constraints. A municipal guide steers the initiatives through bureaucratic struggles, is supported by coproduction methods, while it balances out municipal politics. Next, a neighborhood council, that is politically neutral and run by local citizens, can function as an umbrella for citizen-led urban initiatives. What is crucial is that it should cater for a more entangled relationship between municipalities and initiatives with enhanced involvement of the initiatives in decision-making processes and limited involvement of prevailing constraints pointed out in this research.

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