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BIODIVERCITIES

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LOOKING BACK // // THINKING AHEAD

Joint
Research
Centre

As the first part of the project nears completion, we wanted to reflect on the past months of collaboration. BiodiverCities is centred on co-creation as the fundamental element in urban planning and policy making for biodiversity. In this spirit, thirteen participatory experiments across Europe are taking shape where citizens should be empowered to co-create policies that are fit-for-purpose: designed with citizens and for citizens. This already radical approach that places the inhabitants of the city closer to the heart of the decision-making process has become even more ambitious with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. As we watch the public spaces become more difficult to access, we try to re-think the ways in which meaningful engagement with each other and the urban environments can still be possible. How do we make sure that public participation is not out of touch with and of relevance to the context? The development of appropriate forms of participation will be the crucial task for the coming months. Roads will be built, right?

UPCOMING

- 6–12 DEC – [Citizen Engagement and Deliberative Democracy Festival](#)
- We are starting a new project, which will focus on the role of libraries as cultural hubs for biodiversity-related engagements, and hope to connect BiodiverCities with such experiments

The monthly **Engage Corners** were designed as moments for joint critical reflection on the process. We noticed several recurring themes in need of continuous reflection:

PARTICIPATION

- How to define appropriate forms and levels of engagement when real-life interactions are limited?
- Can we move beyond citizen literacy?

JUSTIFICATION

- Decision makers, planning authorities and practitioners are skeptical whether participation can produce workable and politically-sustainable outcomes.
- Citizens remain suspicious of decision makers' commitment and doubt their own political power.
- The pandemic moves all activities deemed 'not necessary' to the side.

COMMUNICATION

- How to communicate the key issue in a way that makes it politically desirable and understandable but does not banalise public participation?
- Struggle over words and shifting meanings (participation or consultation? empowerment or awareness? citizens or stakeholders?).

INNOVATION

- Institutional innovation brought by co-creation unsettles the established divisions and practices around planning and governance.
- Experimenting with new tools and methods, especially with the pandemic enforcing the use of hybrid tools.

CO-CREATION FROM PROBLEM FRAMING ONWARDS

There are many projects addressing urban biodiversity, nature-based solutions, and various forms of citizen engagement. What differentiates this project is the strong focus on participatory development, placing co-creation at the heart of the design and implementation of planning and policy practices.

This means engaging with citizens already at the stage of issue definition, opening up the debate to their matters of concerns. Who defines the issue at stake is crucial, as this sets the stage for all further work. In many instances, co-creation implies building a more inclusive narrative, with actors having a stake in what is happening.

"...the walks were designed to explore possible narratives on the future of food with the active participation of the public, using a visual-spatial sensory approach."

[Dialogues on Food. Food Futuring Tours of the #expo 2015](#)

CO-CREATION IS SIMULTANEOUSLY A "MINDSET, METHOD AND TOOL"

Co-creation implies sharing a purpose with others, taking stock of different matters of concern and forms of knowledge, and working together towards the outcomes.

Yet, citizen engagement may be difficult to visualize if it is not closely tied to a concrete issue

Interesting case studies on:

- [Open collaborations and environmental governance](#)
- Teaming up to fight floods in Yorkshire: [video](#)

WHICH TOOLS FOR WHAT KIND OF EMPOWERMENT?

Participation is not only a matter of choosing the "right" tools and methods but also of clarifying the meaning of the process and its guiding questions. Which tools do I use for what? As the pandemic made much of real-life interaction impossible, an "ecology of tools" is well suited for the designed purpose. Yet, challenges are manifold.

- Can the physical element be retained? If so - how?
- Can virtual spaces for public engagement open up meaningful conversations?
- Can digital applications and online platforms open new forms of access to the urban environment? How do we ensure that "e-tools and related processes are not 'self-sufficient' in the way they are designed, but rather seek to integrate or support various types of engagement methods?" ([Møller et al. 2019: 251](#))