

Transformative Local Governments: Addressing Social Urban Challenges by Bringing People and Politics Together

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Abstract

As the tier of government closest to people, local government plays a key role in answering local needs and aspirations. However, local governments are often under-resourced, leaving them inadequately responsive to many of these critical local demands. Moreover, accountability to their citizens, which is the core of a well-functioning local democracy, is often lacking because the necessary formal laws and informal norms do not enable citizens to influence the decision-making process in a collaborative, creative, and evidence-based process that promotes collective learning. Through innovative case study analyses from around the world, the 12 contributions in this thematic issue delve into the multifaceted ways in which local governments can bridge the gap between people and politics, offering innovative perspectives on participatory governance, co-creation, and collaborative decision-making for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities. The cases showcase innovations and challenges in the urban environment, capturing different ways to bring people and politics together in an attempt to co-create solutions for a sustainable and resilient urban future. The insights provided by this plethora of cases provides lessons that can help revolutionise international, national, and local urban policy to empower local authorities and their local communities to address the increasingly urgent challenges faced by municipalities around the world, ensuring an inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable future for the generations to come.

Keywords

accountability; inclusive cities; local democracy; local government; localisation; participatory democracy; sustainable development; urban transformation; vulnerable groups

1. Introduction

The growing distrust in state institutions and a democratic decline in a growing number of countries (V-Dem, 2024) is highlighting the need to re-think the potentially transformational role of local governments in addressing the multitude of acute urban challenges faced by towns and cities globally (Dano et al., 2020). This collection of 12 articles delves into the multifaceted ways in which local governments can bridge the gap between people and politics, offering innovative perspectives on participatory governance, co-creation, and collaborative decision-making for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities. Through examining diverse case studies from around the globe, this collection highlights the transformative potential of local governments to understand and effectively respond to the evolving needs of their constituents (Anthony Jr., 2024). As cities are faced with complex issues such as inequality, climate change, and social fragmentation, the imperative for inclusive and accountable governance becomes ever more pressing. This editorial seeks to illuminate the pathways through which local governments can bring people and politics together, thereby revitalising democratic processes, and restoring public trust in an increasingly polarised world.

The interconnection between ever-changing and pressing urban issues shaped by global and local forces makes participatory urban planning complex. It is well-acknowledged that such collective endeavour benefits from interdisciplinary approaches informed by evidence. If we are to achieve inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities, it is essential that we embrace learning, diversity, inclusion, justice, and rights. Co-designed education is crucial for preparing future professionals to promote genuine participation of all parties involved in urban planning processes. To end merely tokenistic involvement in decision-making processes, models of effective participation must provide the tools to prompt all parties to express and negotiate their views with those who have the ultimate power to make the final decision count and means of ensuring different perspectives are given the due weight are welcome (Lundy, 2007). In this overlaying of opportunities and challenges, the articles of this thematic issue offer insights into reimagining policy, planning, design, and management as educational grounds for expression, negotiation, dissent, and learning.

The germination of this thematic issue took place during the Local Democracy Academy 2022 hosted in Visby, Gotland, by the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy and brought together 45 researchers from 27 countries. Our interest in calling for this thematic issue was to explore trans-disciplinary case studies that could illuminate the role of participatory democracy for local governments to better understand and respond to the needs of their constituents. The articles presented in this issue show a variety of cases exploring the dynamic interplay between proponents of citizen engagement and critics who caution against its potential pitfalls. On one hand, several studies highlight the transformative potential of participatory mechanisms. For instance, the development of a “Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework” emphasises the importance of amplifying children’s voices in urban planning, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Similarly, research on urban agriculture policies in Brazilian cities showcases how local government entrepreneurs can drive sustainable food systems through collaborative efforts. On the other hand, the issue also critically examines the challenges and limitations of such participatory approaches. This includes articles which, through discussing the implementation of human rights policies in Australia, and the negotiation of inclusion and exclusion in public spaces in Helsinki and Vienna, underscore the risks of tokenistic participation and the complexities of achieving genuine accountability. By juxtaposing these varied insights, this thematic issue contributes to the ongoing debates in participatory urban planning by providing a balanced view that acknowledges both the potential and the

limitations of citizen engagement in local governance. Collectively, these articles underscore the need for innovative, inclusive, and accountable governance practices that can navigate the delicate balance between empowering citizens and ensuring effective, meaningful participation.

2. Overview of the Articles

This issue starts with three articles that look into the potential of participatory local democracy to address the global challenge of climate change. These articles link local solutions to global challenges and illustrate both the possibilities and constraints that local democracy has for wider societal transformations that go beyond the case. We have grouped them in Table 1 below as examples of “transformative governance.” In the first article, Buschka et al. examine the challenges faced by civil society across Europe in driving initiatives aimed at meeting human needs within planetary boundaries, within the prevailing growth-oriented urban development paradigm. They highlight one key capacity limitation: the time commitment of the dedicated, often voluntary citizen members required to realise the potential of these important initiatives. Similarly, the article by van Eldik et al. exploring local spatial planning and water management among local governments in the Netherlands show the strategic challenges associated with long-term planning. However, their research illustrated how the co-creation of long-term visions has fostered more climate-aware dialogues between local government authorities and civil stakeholder groups. Complementing these, Smith et al. criticise the role of external experts in participatory climate events, such as climate assemblies. They argued that rather than externally imposed participatory design processes, it is the building of ongoing relationships between local communities and the local governments, and an embedding of an institutional culture that is willing to trust local citizens and ultimately cede decision making power, that will produce the enabling conditions needed to realise the necessary change.

The second group of articles delves into innovative practices that try to move beyond tokenistic involvement in decision-making, exploring models for effective participation, and highlighting tools that encourage co-governance. We start with Capra-Ribeiro and his tour of innovative best practices in urban Latin America and the Caribbean. Through exposing the most prevalent recurring issues and successful actions from the analysis of 45 case studies, the author underlines the importance of stakeholder collaboration in policy formation and the need for local authorities to utilise policies that foster cooperative relationships among the public, private, and community sector actors if we are to advance a wide variety of urgent sustainable urban development goals. Focusing on access to housing, Schmid et al. develop an interdisciplinary perspective on the interplay between collaborative housing organisations and municipal housing policies. In this exemplary case study analysis, the research shows how an innovative cooperative housing initiative in Freiburg, Germany, is integrated into the co-productive process between housing policy, planning law, and collaborative housing groups, and that local decision makers can show a high degree of political determination to enable and promote such initiatives as a new approach to urban development.

The next two articles also use collaborative governance, but here it is possible to see a more top-down approach, as both cases focus on the role of local bureaucrats. First, the study on urban greening in Europe by Chapman et al. collected a set of 126 indicators for collaborative governance and tested 80 of these in specific European cities. This study shows the possibility of addressing a more equitable distribution of benefits of green initiatives by using co-governance indicators to monitor success. However, this study also highlights barriers to such equitable distribution such as the limited agency of local government staff to

influence the results and the need to politicise practice-based research projects on urban greening. The second study by Alonso Ferreira et al. on urban agriculture policies in Brazilian cities highlights the role of local government bureaucrats as “policy entrepreneurs” in advancing sustainable food systems. Through a comparative case study of Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and Curitiba, the research identifies strategies such as collaboration with civil society, partnerships, and leveraging media to secure resources and legitimise actions. These policy entrepreneurs introduce resilient programs and integrate urban agriculture into planning regulations, demonstrating their pivotal role in shaping sustainable urban policies.

The third set of articles look into the role of participatory urban planning and design in bringing local governments and people together to address urban challenges. The article by Cairns et al. emphasises the critical role of local governance in facilitating children’s participation and inclusion in urban environments. It introduces the “Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework,” developed through an interdisciplinary approach, to advance the concept of child-friendly cities. The framework aims to address the complex challenges of child participation, aligning with the SDGs. The research highlights the potential of children to drive social and environmental change and underscores the importance of amplifying their voices within social, physical, and relational spheres. Similarly, the study by Cilliers et al. on school spaces in Australia explores the potential of public schools to serve as shared spaces that benefit local communities socially, environmentally, and economically. It highlights the need for a collective reimagining of school facilities as pivotal urban nodes, emphasising the importance of collaboration between education and urban planning disciplines. The research identifies managerial and legal challenges in shared use agreements and underscores the role of local planning authorities in facilitating a multi-disciplinary approach to reposition school spaces as focal points for sustainable city and community development.

Hanzl and Olczak’s study on transportation inequalities in Łódź, Poland, employs social-ecological urbanism to analyse the transformation of the tramway system. It integrates communicative planning theory with a detailed case study to understand the roles and attitudes of stakeholders. The research highlights the importance of public participation in strengthening transportation equity and emphasises the need to combine communicative planning methods with strategic planning. This approach helps in understanding the specific roles of various system components, aiding future redevelopment efforts.

The last group of articles takes a more sceptical look into the role of citizen participation in achieving inclusion. Dekker et al. provide a detailed account on the challenges and opportunities for a local government in implementing a human rights policy within a local government in Melbourne, Australia. They argue that successful implementation requires strong leadership, accountability, and operational capability. The authors show how lack of leadership, overreliance on quantitative monitoring, and diffused operational capability hinder progress. The authors argue that in this case example, there was tokenistic participation because the involvement of residents and community representatives is often superficial and does not lead to meaningful influence on policy decisions.

The collection concludes with Haselbacher et al.’s study on public spaces in Helsinki and Vienna and identifies four key challenges in negotiating inclusion and exclusion, highlighting the perspectives and tensions among various stakeholders. It underscores the critical role of public spaces in fostering sustainable and resilient urban futures, emphasising the need for local governments to balance universal and particularistic policy measures. The authors argue that proactive involvement of diverse stakeholders is essential to address vulnerabilities and effectively manage the overlapping and contradictory effects of policies.

Table 1. Overview of the articles.

Article Title	Category	Countries	Notes
Sufficiency Initiatives and Municipalities: Opportunities and Limitations for Bringing People and Politics Together (Buschka et al.)	Transformative Governance	EU Member States	Explores civil-society initiatives in fostering sufficiency and sustainable urban living.
Transition Processes in Dutch Spatial Planning and Water Management: A Shift to the Natural (van Eldik et al.)	Transformative Governance	Netherlands	Examines co-creation and public participation in climate-adaptive spatial planning.
Participatory Climate Action: Reflections on Community Diversity and the Role of External Experts (Smith et al.)	Transformative Governance	UK	Reflects on the role of researchers in participatory climate action projects.
Prevailing Issues and Actions in Urban Best Practices Across Latin America and the Caribbean (Capra-Ribeiro)	Collaborative Governance	Latin America and the Caribbean	Highlights community engagement and collaboration in urban best practices.
Towards a “Freiburg Model” of Housing for the Common Good? Fostering Collaborative Housing in Urban Development (Schmid et al.)	Collaborative Governance	Germany	Discusses collaborative housing and community involvement in urban development.
Towards More Equitable Urban Greening: A Framework for Monitoring and Evaluating Co-Governance (Chapman et al.)	Collaborative Governance	Europe	Provides a framework for monitoring and evaluating urban greening co-governance.
Cultivating Urban Agriculture Policies: Local Government Entrepreneurs’ Strategies in Three Brazilian Cities (Alonso Ferreira et al.)	Collaborative Governance	Brazil	Emphasises local government actors in promoting sustainable food systems.
Laying the Foundations for a Child-Focused Cities Analytical Framework: Reflections From an International, Interdisciplinary Collaboration (Cairns et al.)	Participatory Urban Planning	International (Sweden)	Focuses on incorporating children’s voices in urban planning.
Going Back to School: Reflecting on School Space as “Shared Space” to Shape Cities and Communities (Cilliers et al.)	Participatory Urban Planning	Australia	Discusses the potential of shared school spaces to enhance community engagement.
Social-Ecological Urbanism as a Research Perspective to Analyse Transportation Inequalities in the Region of Łódź, Poland (Hanzl & Olczak)	Participatory Urban Planning	Poland	Highlights public participation in addressing transportation inequalities.
Challenges and Opportunities for a Local Government Implementing a Human Rights Policy in Australia (Dekker et al.)	Tokenistic Participation	Australia	Examines the challenges of implementing a human rights policy in local governance.
Inclusion and Exclusion in Urban Public Space: Contemporary Challenges in Vienna and Helsinki (Haselbacher et al.)	Tokenistic Participation	Finland, Austria	Analyses the complexities of inclusion and exclusion in public spaces and urban governance.

3. Critical Reflections

This thematic issue aimed at collecting studies on “Transformative Local Governments” that were addressing social urban challenges by bridging the gap between people and politics. The cases presented looked into concrete needs of citizens related to housing, water, transportation, green urban spaces, human rights, climate action, and children participation. The local governments featured in these studies have demonstrated varying degrees of success in fostering transformation. By implementing co-governance models, they have made strides in moving beyond tokenistic involvement towards a wider involvement of citizens and ensuring diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. However, the extent of these transformations varies, with some local governments achieving more substantial changes than others. This highlights the need for continued research and policy development to re-think and reflect on different models and approaches to citizen participation in local governments.

While the enthusiasm for innovative models of citizen participation is commendable, it is crucial to remain cautious about the potential pitfalls of buzzwords and superficial engagement. To avoid tokenistic involvement in decision-making processes, it is essential to ensure that citizens genuinely have the power to influence outcomes. This means creating mechanisms that give due weight to diverse and dissenting perspectives, particularly those of marginalised groups, whose needs are often overlooked. Additionally, there is a significant risk that participatory forums could inadvertently replace democratic institutions, such as locally elected councils. It is vital to recognise that citizen participation in more direct democratic practices should complement, not replace, representative democracy. Effective citizen participation is a means of enhancing democratic processes by providing a platform for voices that might otherwise go unheard, thereby enriching the decision-making landscape. Ensuring that participatory models are designed to work alongside traditional representative democratic structures will help maintain the integrity and effectiveness of both.

It is our hope that readers, scholars, and policymakers critically engage with the findings of this thematic issue, challenging the status quo and pushing for genuine systemic change. By rigorously scrutinising and refining participatory frameworks, we can enhance inclusive urban governance, where the voices of marginalised communities are not just heard but have a tangible impact on decision-making processes.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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