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GAME CHANGER? **PLANNING FOR JUST AND SUSTAINABLE** **URBAN REGIONS**

Edited by
Marco Cremaschi

Cover
Camilla Ariani

Typesetting and formatting
Yuma Ando, Sebastien Wony

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Democratic Innovations In Urban Governance: A Comparative Analysis Of Participatory Practices In Three Mediterranean Cities

Isabella Rusconi (Iscte University Institute Of Lisbon, Dinâmia'cet Centre For The Study Of Socioeconomic Change And The Territory), **Alexandra Paio** (Iscte University Institute Of Lisbon, Dinâmia'cet Centre For The Study Of Socioeconomic Change And The Territory), **Fernando Nogueira** (University Of Aveiro, Department Of Social, Political And Territorial Sciences), **José Carlos Mota** (University Of Aveiro, Department Of Social, Political And Territorial Sciences)

In the current context, characterised by transversal and systemic crises and the intensification of socio-spatial inequalities, cities are asserting themselves as the main arenas for confronting and overcoming those crises (Fainstein, 2014; Bua and Bussu, 2023). The complexity of these challenges – democratic, environmental, socio-economic and urban - requires a deep transformation in the field of urban planning and governance, especially in the construction of new forms of relations between citizens and government institutions. Urban policy agendas have increasingly emphasised the role of public participation in producing more “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities” (UN, 2016). However, the significant gap between political discourse and the practices developed exposes the urgency of reinventing these relationships and the need to bring citizens to the centre of the political dispute over cities. Over the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of participatory innovations and experiments worldwide, at different scales and with different institutional designs (Smith, 2019). The spaces where these interactions take place are specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in decision-making processes, playing a crucial role in articulating community demands, defining projects and developing public policies that meet local needs (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). In this sense, understanding their methods and institutional arrangements is crucial, as well as analysing their influence on decision-making and in addressing social and spatial challenges.

The hypothesis is that, when well designed, they can blur the boundaries between state and civil society, articulating social and political movements for a radical transformation of institutional arrangements toward a new paradigm of governance, aimed at democratising the local economy, urban transformation for socio-spatial justice and sustainability, and advocating the inclusion of new forms of direct democracy in urban planning for collective decision-making. Therefore, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of different institutional designs for participation in three Mediterranean cities that have been recognised for innovating in urban governance: Lisbon, Barcelona, and Bologna. Firstly, based on a literature review, it builds a methodological framework that establishes criteria for observing how the institutional designs of participation respond to the challenges of: i) distributing socio-spatial justice; ii) transferring decision-making power to those affected; iii) promoting inclusion; and iv) strengthening relationships of trust and community ties. Then, it maps participatory practices on urban issues in these three cities and, through documental analysis, critically explores them in the light of the established theoretical framework to finally theorise about the potential for knowledge transfer and institutionalisation of these practices, thus informing urban policies.

It is expected to contribute recommendations aimed at expanding citizens' ability to influence decisions that impact their lives and communities, promoting increased socio-spatial equity, inclusion, and sustainability in cities. This research will help to clarify the importance of an ongoing commitment to innovation and experimentation in urban governance to respond effectively to the emerging and constantly evolving challenges of contemporary cities. This study will identify new paths to assure that public participation can contribute to explore how public participation can be mobilised to transform cities into more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable spaces, aligning with SDG 11, through an indicator that refers to the proportion of cities with a “structure for the direct participation of civil society in urban planning and management that operates regularly and democratically” (UN, 2016). By analysing such structures, it is hoped to provide valuable insights for the implementation of more effective and inclusive urban policies.

Keywords : urban governance, urban planning, participatory design, civic engagement, democratic innovations