



POLICY BRIEF

Will we ever learn?

Incentivise knowledge sharing for sustainable and just Cities

Summary

Cities need to be rapidly transformed in order to simultaneously improve sustainability and justice. This is particularly urgent in view of EU-wide ambitions like the European Green Deal.

Learning from local urban initiatives will help accelerate the pace of change. However, translocal (intercity) learning efforts are not delivering the expected results.

Based on the University of Freiburg's research on translocal learning for sustainable and just cities, **European research and development funding schemes need to integrate better incentives and support for translocal knowledge sharing from local projects.**

Policy Recommendations

for research and development policymakers at the European Commission (and in National Governments):

- Integrate better incentives for translocal knowledge sharing from local projects into research and innovation funding schemes.
- Reduce emphasis on strict replication of “best practices”
- Include hard requirements for good translocal learning practices in project calls
- Increase structural support for translocal learning
- Open up non-judgemental spaces for frank knowledge-sharing.

Background

The European Union's approach to urban sustainability governance is strongly linked to innovation, replication, and upscaling. For example, governance that involves transferring lessons learned between initiatives in member states' cities¹. There are high hopes that such translocal learning will result in positive change in different places. However, there is limited evidence that this approach to catalysing sustainability transitions is actually working – in other words, sustainability best practices are rarely implemented outside their original context². To meet targets such as those of the European Green Deal, a more evidence-based approach to translocal knowledge sharing for sustainable and just cities is needed.

This brief summarises work done in the UrbanA project by the University of Freiburg, Germany, to:

- a) Test out tools for translocal learning (i.e. Governance Scenarios and Enabling Governance Arrangements).
- b) Develop a better understanding of what (in)effective translocal learning processes look like.





Results and Policy Recommendations

The work resulted in a **deeper understanding of translocal learning** for sustainable and just cities as summarized in the following results and policy recommendations:

Themes	Results and Policy Recommendations
Learning from other places is important because it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● provides inspiration and motivation (especially for emerging initiatives) ● builds solidarity across places ● enables adaptation of more generic lessons, such as governance arrangements, to new places <p>➤ Integrate better incentives for translocal knowledge sharing from local projects into research and innovation fundings, based on helpful translocal learning practices</p>
Unhelpful translocal learning practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Top-down prescriptions of “best practices” which focus on solutions rather than problems, thus overlooking the specific and diverse needs of local residents ● A culture of rather promotional “sanitized stories” without naming hurdles in EU-funded project documentation <p>➤ Reduce emphasis on strict replication of “best practices”: EU-funded projects need to be documented in a “non-sanitized way”, including detailed yet concise information on enabling governance arrangements, and helpful or detrimental context factors. Click here for a deliverable from an EU-funded project that documents different initiative learnings and important context factors such as “How critical issues have been overcome” in a useful and “non-sanitized” way.</p>
Helpful translocal learning practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fostering personal connections and long-term learning processes e.g. where un-censored discussions about obstacles/failures can occur ● Funding sources designed particularly for partnership maintenance <p>➤ Include hard requirements for good translocal learning practices in project calls which requires a strategy for exchange and learning between those generating and receiving knowledge. Such a strategy should include personal interaction and bottom-up workshops with local stakeholders who ‘receive’ (or reflect upon) lessons/examples from elsewhere to adapt the knowledge to their needs and interests.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Research project funding that allows for longevity, experimentation but also





Support needed for translocal learning

- failure, as these nurture relationships and support the development of partnerships
 - Better knowledge dissemination practices by creating responsibilities and spaces (e.g., UrbanA Arenas) that allow for accessible and honest exchange and learning
 - A change in mindset that appreciates failure as a fertile ground for learning and innovation
- **Increase structural support for translocal learning** by funding learning networks that connect local initiatives and specific project officer positions responsible for liaising and facilitating learning between places. These learning networks and positions should support long-term learning partnerships and **open up non-judgemental spaces for frank knowledge-sharing.**

This work also produced a set of tools with the potential to assist with translocal knowledge sharing for sustainable and just cities such as

- ten **Governance Scenarios** which aim to inspire similar action in other cities and
- six **Enabling Governance Arrangements** which act as guiding principles for the design and implementation of local initiatives (click on this [link](#) to view the tools).

Methods

April 2019  April 2021

Out of a systematically-created list of [125 projects](#), 10 EU-funded initiatives focused on urban sustainability and justice were selected for an in-depth analysis of respective Governance Interventions.

Key aspects of initiatives were summarised into imaginative [Governance Scenarios](#). Patterns of positive governance processes and settings were further synthesized into six [Enabling Governance Arrangements](#). The tools were reviewed by 100+ UrbanA participants.

Desk research and specialist interviews were conducted on translocal learning. Additionally, 40 participants provided insights on (in)effective translocal learning practices at the online “Berlin” Arena for sustainable and just cities (March 2021).

A more detailed description of methods can be found in the [full report to the European Commission](#).

Conclusions

Sharing knowledge between places can be an exciting and fruitful way to catalyse a transition to more sustainable and just cities. However, European innovation policy with its emphasis on replication and upscaling needs to be re-oriented towards a more human-centered and grounded approach to learning. Effective translocal learning experiences rely on open, non-judgemental interactions and continuous



interactions between partners and therefore require tailored support and incentive structures within funding schemes.

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About the UrbanA project

Website: <https://urban-arena.eu/>

Duration: January 2019 — March 2022

Coordinator: ICLEI Europe - Local Governments for Sustainability. (<https://iclei-europe.org/>)

Consortium (Click logo for website links):



References

¹Boulanger, S. O. M., & Nagorny, N. C. (2018). *Replication vs mentoring: Accelerating the spread of good practices for the low-carbon transition*. International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning, 13(02), 316–328. <https://doi.org/10.2495/SDP-V13-N2-316-328>

²Bulkeley, H. (2006). *Urban Sustainability: Learning from Best Practice?* Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 38(6), 1029–1044. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37300>

