



POLICY BRIEF

How the logic of EU-funded projects limits justice in urban sustainability

March 2021

Introduction

Exclusionary urban sustainability

Urban planning can contribute to sustainable environments by engaging in climate mitigation and adaptation interventions. However, social injustices are often neglected in sustainability planning and implementation. For example, some greening projects that contribute to the ecological sustainability of neighbourhoods may sustain or worsen social injustices through a side-effect known as green gentrification. By often prioritising the environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability, urban planners might neglect the social pillar of sustainability, resulting in exclusionary forms of urban sustainability.

EU projects on just and sustainable cities

To achieve greater inclusion of justice and equity in sustainability planning, the EU has funded research through the FP7 and Horizon 2020 research schemes. Between 2007 and 2020, the EU funded 125 projects at the intersection of urban development, sustainability, justice which examine manifestations of injustice as well as opportunities and solutions for bringing justice at the forefront of sustainability.

Barriers to just and sustainable development

Recent research on these 125 projects finds that they often engage with justice in a rather superficial and tokenistic manner. This is especially the case for consortium projects, as opposed to single-institution or single-researcher projects, where justice was often operationalised as improving 'stakeholder participation' in urban sustainability interventions. The logic of EU projects and the way knowledge is produced around urban sustainability planning might prevent deeper considerations on how inequalities are (re)produced and what type of urban interventions can best address them.



Key observations

Solutions developed for reaching the goal of just and sustainable urban development are often based on **trickle-down** and **tokenistic conceptualisations of justice**.

A narrow focus on justice

In many consortium projects, justice figures *tokenistically* —the concept is only partially or selectively considered in relation to urban sustainability. Justice and other concepts that allude to justice, such as social cohesion or equality, are used without adequate elaborations or contextualisations on how or why the project's actions or outcomes are addressing (in)justice.

In other cases, the social justice or equality benefits of sustainable development are assumed to automatically follow, or *trickle down* from sustainability interventions into local contexts, without taking into account the already operating and experienced exclusions, inequalities and injustice.

Contrastingly, a minority of EU-funded projects, especially those single-institution or individual research projects, are engaging in a more meaningful manner with the concept of justice by looking at drivers of injustice such as material inequalities, racialised urbanisation, or institutional dysfunctions.

Priority for stakeholder participation

Research projects tend to emphasise on *stakeholder participation* as a general signifier for justice, inclusion, and democracy. Participation is translated as engaging with “all” stakeholders from different sectors and backgrounds, from citizens to businesses, NGOs and governments. However, projects struggle to put participation into practice or to look critically into participation processes studied. Few projects are transparent about the types, processes, and levels of participation they research or implement, who is included and why, and how the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable groups (i.e. racialised or gender minorities, working class residents) can be strengthened.

In addition, few projects look deeper into other types of injustice, including distributional inequities in view of environmental risks or amenities, poor recognition of alternative forms of knowledge, or lack of promotion of different values, identities and needs.



Constraints for Consortium Projects

External funding structure

Consortiums receive funding on the basis of specified calls for which groups of researchers can apply. In contrast, single-institution or individual grants, tend to fund proposals written and submitted more freely across many themes and fields of research. Consequentially, in writing up consortiums' proposals limited space exists to include ideas, arguments, or topics not preliminarily specified in calls. **As a result, alternative and bolder visions for achieving just and sustainable development are often excluded from funding.** Moreover, although a focus on justice is proclaimed as important, there is little guidance from the side of the funders on how to integrate questions of justice in the proposed research projects.

Siloed research environments

Research on justice within consortiums is often performed in siloed, discipline-based, and single “work package” research environments, limiting the extent to which justice is integrally and transversally taken up across a project. Research partners are assigned to work packages, often with separate disciplinary goals and tasks, and while interdisciplinarity is a guiding principle for consortiums, different teams of researchers in practice scarcely seem to interact in the different tasks of a project. While it is possible that sufficient expertise exists on environmental and social justice within consortiums, **a lack of horizontal debate and exchange between researchers often prevents justice from being sufficiently integrated in the project's outputs.**

Research pressure

Researchers in consortiums are often under pressure to perform and deliver timely productivity- and number-driven deliverables and outputs. This limits the possibility for in-depth research on justice-related issues, which needs more time to conduct and synthesise. Furthermore, the **increasing competition for EU projects and pressured research environments also seems to explain the limited “room” for deeper considerations of justice** in projects that end up being primarily focused on the more “technical” side of urban sustainability.



Recommendations for Policy-Makers

Diversify tools for just & sustainable cities

EU research funders should encourage new research objectives, tools, and pathways to fully understand the extent to which historically marginalised groups are exposed to longstanding institutional and individual exclusion or inequality due to their race, ethnicity, gender, class or age, among others. Funding schemes for consortium projects should give space for exploring bolder pathways to just and sustainable cities, including alternative economic models, land arrangements, or urban development strategies.

Renew visions for participation

Engaged and empowering participation for groups who are generally excluded from planning and decision processes is essential for achieving just and sustainable cities. EU funders should encourage consortium projects to move beyond the existing focus on multi-stakeholder participation to ensure that researchers dedicate enough time and funding for meaningful inclusion of alternative voices, identities, and knowledges. Co-creative design and implementation is often not easy to plan for process and requires more fluid frameworks of research and practice. Here, for example, a long-term focus on a place or community could make more sense than limited engagement with a large number of “cases”.

Safeguard interdisciplinarity and promote transdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity has long been a strong requirement for EU-wide consortiums. To overcome the gap between interdisciplinarity on paper and in practice, the European Commission should require that part of consortium project budgets are reserved to safeguard and coordinate the very process of conducting interdisciplinary research. Moreover, an effort for transdisciplinarity –a research paradigm that involves non-academic participants as (equal) participants in sustainability research– would open up more opportunities for justice to be enacted through the research process.



Objectives of research

- (I) How is justice operationalized and communicated in EU-funded research projects focused on justice and sustainability in cities?
- (II) How and to what extent is this operationalization and communication of justice geared towards addressing the gap of justice in planning for urban sustainability?

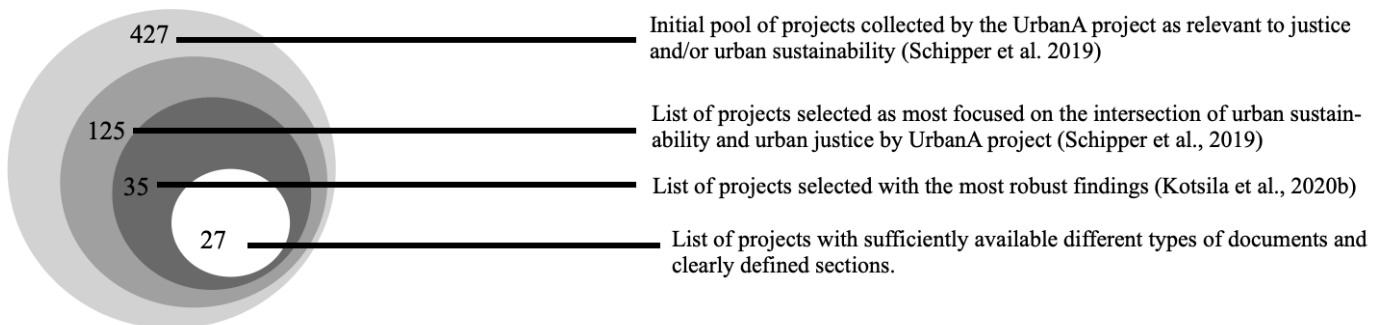
Scientific approach/ Methodology

This project was grounded in around the wider theoretical frameworks of urban political ecology and environmental justice. Our methodology combined EU project documents and qualitative interviews.

In a first stage, the UrbanA project identified 427 EU-funded projects as relevant to justice and/or urban sustainability. Of those, we found that 125 projects were most closely focused on the intersection of justice, sustainability, and cities. For this specific project, the dataset was brought down to 27 projects (22 consortiums vs 5 single-institution/-researcher).

Our analysis draws on policy briefs, deliverables, academic articles, project reports, website pages delivered by these projects. It is also built on 6 interviews we conducted with the leaders of these projects in 2019 and 2020.

Figure: Schematic explanation of data organisation and selection.



Project identity

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

Consortium

- Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) (<https://iclei-europe.org/>)
- Albert-Ludwigs-Universitaet Freiburg, Germany (<https://uni-freiburg.de/>)
- Dutch Research Institute for Transitions, The Netherlands (<https://drift.eur.nl/>)
- Közép-Európai Egyetem, Central European University, Hungary (<https://www.ceu.edu/hu/kee>)
- Institute for Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain (<http://icta.uab.cat/>)
- European Network for Community-led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability (ECOLISE), Belgium (<http://www.ecolise.eu/>)
- FCIências.ID - Associação para a Investigação e Desenvolvimento de Ciências, Portugal (<http://www.fciencias-id.pt/>)

Duration January 2019 — December 2021

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

More resources:

- The UrbanA series of 10 videos on the 10 drivers of injustice related to sustainability: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjbNPZqbaFXxg-RG_wYebOPp-MFhoGgLc



- A summary of UrbanA's in-depth study on the drivers of injustice in the context of urban sustainability: https://urban-arena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Booklet-of-summaries_Arena_with-contacts.pdf

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