Handbook for sustainable and just cities

Can sustainability and justice go hand-in-hand?

Acknowledgements

Sustainable Just Cities platform

Learn more about Sustainable Just Cities at the link below. This platform will be managed by ICLEI Europe's Just Transition team, and seek to continue UrbanA's work aimed at fostering the integration of justice within sustainable development.

sustainablejustcities.eu

URBAN ARENAS
FOR SUSTAINABLE AND JUST CITIES

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Introduction

We believe that environmental sustainability and justice must go hand in hand. Actions for urban sustainability that do not actively integrate social justice run the risk of deepening existing inequalities, leading to the burdens and benefits of sustainability being unfairly shared amongst the urban population.

The handbook provides you with a glimpse into what a sustainable and just city could look like. It is designed for city-makers engaging in urban sustainability (e.g. local policy-makers and government administrators, public servants, project managers, researchers, urban planners, civil society representatives, etc.). We aim to provide you with resources and tools to understand sustainable just cities, to integrate both perspectives in your on-going processes (e.g. services, events, policies), and to inspire you to address a broad spectrum of seemingly hidden perspectives using your local expertise/knowledge.

The resources and tools in this handbook are...

- **17 keys for sustainable and just cities** - cross-thematic and interdependent elements to support the integration of social justice in urban environmental sustainability.

- **Questions** to help you in applying the keys in practice and in evaluating an on-going or past project, policy, plan, or process.

- Ideas for everyday actions, **„Avenues for action.“**

We hope that this handbook will help you to act in your city for a more sustainable and just future!

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What do we mean by justice?

- Distributive justice - Who gets what?

- Procedural justice - Who is involved in decisions and how? Who gets excluded and why?

- Recognition justice - Whose needs (people and communities) are recognised and represented?

We invite you to also be flexible with these terms and adapt them to your context.

#Participation

About the key

Sustainable and just cities are ambitious in their approach to participation, and do not treat it as a mere box-ticking exercise. Instead, they test new approaches that address the historic lack of platform and unequal power given to certain groups.

Opportunities to deliberate on and co-create plans and policies are offered to all. When a city's decisions take account of its citizens' diverse needs and aspirations, outcomes are more inclusive and effective and are genuinely supported by the public.

Questions

How much of your sustainability approach is already decided on before the start of the participatory processes, and how much of it is up for discussion? How much are you willing to change in your plan as a result of the participatory processes?

What are the motivations for people to participate? What kind of incentives could you provide to facilitate deep engagement from a diverse range of stakeholders?

Avenue for action

Improve the settings for participation:

- Ensure the safety, accessibility, and openness of the setting. The space for participation should be free of judgement and sensitive to different opinions, cultures, and social assets.

- Create and support existing enabling community spaces and forums (e.g. sports, clubs, community centres, religious institutions).

- Organise events at accessible times (evenings, weekends etc.).

#CivilSociety

About the key

Sustainable and just cities support spaces and processes that empower civil society and other grassroots organisations to become active participants in shaping their city. Such organisations have a variety of strengths that cities can leverage and learn from.

Sustainable and just cities benefit from pre-existing community trust and networks, have local and practical experience, and a tradition of incorporating social justice concerns within ecological questions. They are often particularly attuned to the demands of local communities and are at the forefront of demands for sustainability and justice.

Questions

How is your sustainability approach including and enabling civil society?

What are the implications of your actions for existing civil society groups (are they heard, excluded, recognized etc)?

Avenue for action

Build capacity within local communities:

- Provide capacity building for participation and care by engaging locals in building skills within their own communities. Make use of existing community skills by employing Citizen Coaches to train their peers.

#Power

About the key

Power relations characterised by inequality, exclusion, and exploitation remain widespread in society. In sustainable and just cities, people are thus given the capacity to challenge, alter, and replace existing power relations.

This citizen empowerment is ensured by combining different approaches of countervailing power (e.g. civil disobedience initiatives) with the provision of using alternative models for organising in a more fair and equitable way (e.g. crowdsourcing, shared spaces, and sharing initiatives).

Questions

How is power distributed in your sustainability approach? Who has the power to shape it (e.g. who makes the decision, who takes action, who is involved)?

What steps can be taken to enable those lacking power?

Avenue for action

Institutionalise critical reflections on power:

- Conduct power audits and transparency reports, start a position for equity (e.g. gender equality officer, diversity officer) with appropriate funding, and organise training activities around topics related to power (e.g. race, class, gender).

- Provide safe spaces for uncomfortable discussions about pre-existing and newly emerging injustices.

#Knowledge

About the key

Creating sustainable and just cities is a learning process. Knowledge is owned and managed by the community and stems from community-level collaboration between policy-makers, planners, residents, and others.

In sustainable and just cities, collaborative forms of knowledge generation, such as co-production, community-based research, and citizen science, are mainstreamed. Thus, ensuring that knowledge generation is understood as an open and collaborative process, rather than a closed, technocratic one. This also enables meaningful participation processes and informed decision-making by the public.

Questions

How is your sustainability approach building on local and context-dependent knowledge from a diversity of actors?

How is the knowledge around your sustainability approach produced, distributed, and continuously evolving?

Avenue for action

Use creative ways of making knowledge accessible:

- Experiment with new, alternative, and accessible ways to create, manage, and share knowledge.

- Use storytelling methods, visualisation and mapping (e.g. GIS), and 1-on-1 discussions as means of communicating knowledge.

#Responsibility

About the key

The successful creation of sustainable and just cities is dependent on everyone playing their part, to the best of their abilities. Responsibility is therefore shared by all actors.

Local authorities in particular recognise the contribution that community-led initiatives make to achieving sustainability and justice goals. They protect all citizens from exposure to pollution and climate risks, investigating claims of harm and assisting victims. They are committed to their immediate responsibilities, while also remaining cognisant of broader systems change.

Questions

How do you ensure the transparency of your sustainability approach (as per how decisions are being prepared, taken, executed, and evaluated)?

What procedures do you have in place to ensure that individuals (and, in particular, decision-makers) will be held accountable for the results of your sustainability approach?

Avenue for action

Create moments and spaces for trust-building and public participation:

- As a local government actor, create and facilitate accessible spaces for different actors to meet, build trust, and discuss common issues (e.g. citizen assemblies and forums, community hearings, etc.).

- Ensure that the local government is aware of, and seeks to address, the concerns that are raised in these spaces. The trust between residents and the local government gets broken when the outcomes of these processes are ignored.

#Diversity

About the key

Inclusion entails embracing diversity. Sustainable and just cities recognise and acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and needs of their inhabitants.

An intersectional approach helps city-makers understand combined inequalities based on the different identities and characteristics of a person or group. Thus, a policy working to make greener areas safer for women would not consider gender-based inequalities in isolation from the influences of race and class. Such analysis is the basis for inclusive local solutions.

Questions

Which groups of people are typically underrepresented in your society? To what extent are these voices included in the development of your sustainability approach? How can you ensure they are more present in the long run?

In what ways does your sustainability approach attempt to uncover, reflect, and recognise the needs of diverse groups?

Avenue for action

Invest in proactive inclusion measures:

- Ensure that environmental planning and decision-making is accessible to all urban residents through concrete measures, e.g. accessible language, translation, and awareness raising campaigns.

- Participate in the work of the people you are working with (e.g. citizen- and community-led initiatives) and proactively approach them, instead of expecting them to approach you first.

- Involve mediators who can understand conflicts and diverging perspectives. Ensure that civil servants receive the necessary training in this regard.

#Accessibility

About the key

Sustainable and just cities ensure that infrastructure and services are equally accessible to all residents, regardless of factors like income, background, and dis/ability.

Accessibility is cross-cutting. It applies to different themes, such as green infrastructure, mobility, employment, housing, food, and energy. It also applies beyond thematic concerns to include considerations such as accessible language, transparent decision-making, etc.

Questions

Who can access, use, and benefit from your sustainability approach and its end product(s), and who does it not reach?

How are you ensuring the financial, cultural, and physical accessibility of your sustainability approach? (e.g. safety for minorities to access green spaces).

Avenue for action

Use planning, regulations, and funding as tools for sustainable and affordable housing:

- Make sustainable housing affordable and accessible using planning measures, regulations, and funding to guide the direction of housing development. For instance, retrofitting social housing, incorporating affordability and accessibility in funding criteria, and using regulations to prevent the green gentrification and privatisation.

- Prioritise and enable innovative housing arrangements, such as multigenerational houses, shared housing, and cooperatives.

#Solidarity

About the key

Sustainable and just cities seek to involve even the most vulnerable and marginalised people in multiple processes that shape their territories. Residents are given adequate time and resources for participation, through redistributive mechanisms and sharing programs that focus on their most important needs.

Social and affordable housing programmes are prioritised, while shared and care-oriented ways of living are supported. Sustainable food networks are strengthened, supporting local farmers and providing a healthy and affordable source of food.

Questions

In what ways does your sustainability approach relate to, and help implement, a culture of care and solidarity (e.g. supporting underrepresented and marginalised groups financially and emotionally)?

Avenue for action

Start and support solidarity-based community groups:

• Start community groups, or support existing ones, which contribute to supporting and sharing in the neighbourhood.

• Provide subsidised and self-managed spaces, "community living rooms", for locals to meet and use the space for their own activities as they wish (e.g. community spaces, urban gardens, access to library rooms after hours).

• Build from success by basing these communities on existing, trusted networks and initiatives. Inspire more actions for solidarity by focusing on uplifting stories - showcasing, celebrating, and rewarding these groups.

#Nature

About the key

Nature-based planning is mainstreamed and recognised as both an ecological and a social good. Urban greening, permaculture, and rewilding initiatives strengthen urban nature, providing benefits to all.

Such natural infrastructure mitigates hazards, like urban heat islands, and can be implemented in a way that supports vulnerable neighbourhoods. Harmful and polluting industries and activities, including private car use, are restricted where possible, creating healthier and more liveable urban environments.

Questions

How is your sustainability approach integrating nature-based solutions (such as green roofs, urban forestry and gardens, pocket parks, sustainable drainage, permeable surfaces) that are accessible to diverse audiences?

How do you integrate ecological, nature-based, low-tech, low-energy, and overall low-carbon elements in your plan, project, or policy?

Avenue for action

Foster urban biodiversity using mapping tools:

• Gather high-quality data by mapping and analysing the distribution, accessibility, and quality of green spaces using GIS tools and participatory mapping techniques.

• Commit to addressing these imbalances and using funding and regulations as tools for fostering urban and biodiverse nature.

#Technology

About the key

In sustainable and just cities, digital technologies are a means to an end - contributing first and foremost to ecological and social wellbeing. They provide a means of increasing public involvement in participatory decision-making processes as well as supporting the adoption of sustainable consumption and production.

Ethical AI, open data, and open source tools and standards can all support digitalisation for sustainable and just cities. Both access to technology and digital literacy guard against a digital divide.

Questions

Are digital tools in your approach needed and, if so, are they user-friendly? Consider both the development of the digital tools (e.g. understanding the needs) and the use of the tool (e.g. feedback process, alternative technologies, training, and support).

What drives the use of your digital tools? Does the use of your digital tools make an explicit effort to foster open, transparent, and ethical forms of technology?

Avenue for action

Provide platforms for citizen-led initiatives:

- Develop and maintain open digital platforms that support citizen-led initiatives and allow them to promote and discover projects and network with other actors.

- Support citizen-led initiatives by making practical advice and resources for implementation easily accessible.

#Art

About the key

Cultural, artistic, and creative activities can contribute to sustainable and just cities. They serve as an important form of self-expression and engagement, overcoming verbal and emotional barriers. They contribute to political expression and education, enabling crucial social dialogue within and between communities, and to the building of shared values.

Such exchange of local knowledge can effectively help promote visions for alternative futures. Moreover, a sense of belonging and shared values can help empower communities for a just transition.

Questions

Does your sustainability approach make use of the arts to deliver a message and raise awareness? If so, how?

How do you make the use of arts inclusive?

Avenue for action

Use art as a tool for participation and system change:

- Make your communication more inclusive, accessible, and fun by using art-based methods. Provide these methods as an alternative or addition to verbal consultations.

- Hold vision sessions on the desired change and prototype alternative futures together with the public by using creative approaches.

- Use art to make your visions more tangible for both the public and decision-makers and help them to imagine the change.

- Hire artists as imagination facilitators and dream-catchers.

#Finance

About the key

New approaches to funding are needed - ones which take a critical and values-led approach to the accumulation, use, and distribution of capital. The public sector in particular contributes to structural changes that facilitate sustainability and justice across society.

A sustainable and just city ensures that, wherever possible, its financial decisions support institutions which contribute to these goals, while also divesting from those which do not. Ethical procurement and accurate certification, such as fair trade and organic, are central tools in this process.

Questions

How is your initiative financed? Does it create decent jobs (e.g. contribute to the social and economic stability of workers)?

What institutions is your sustainability approach (directly/indirectly) financing and from which ones is it divesting from?

How is your sustainability approach making use of certification (e.g. ethical procurement) to look deeper into financing? Which other justice and sustainability related criteria for funding do you have?

Avenue for action

Make wide-ranging funding opportunities visible:

- Make an overview of funding streams across different sectors. This will help initiatives working on justice and sustainability become aware of different funding opportunities.

- Provide support in accessing these fundings (e.g. municipalities providing consulting for local communities in applying these funds).

- Private actors and philanthropic organisations wishing to support specific social groups, can benefit from identifying and working with non-profits that have pre-existing connections with the groups.

#Economy

About the key

A sustainable and just city structures its economy to benefit people and the environment, not *vice versa*. The importance of other forms of value - social, cultural, ecological - is recognised, ensuring that benefits are spread across communities.

Production and consumption are adapted to minimise negative externalities and discourage consumerism and excess consumption. City-makers challenge the economic growth paradigm. This requires an experimental approach prioritising collectivist and ecologically sensitive values.

Questions

How would you describe the central economic logic behind your sustainability approach (e.g. profit-driven, socially-driven, how profits are shared)?

Who economically profits from your sustainability approach? Who takes the loss?

Avenue for action

Enable cross-economic dialogue and knowledge sharing:

- Participate in, support, and encourage dialogue between different, locally grounded businesses, and community and government actors, which seek to incorporate social and ecological concerns into their business practices.

- Include a diversity of economic actors in your projects and institutional processes.

- Include interest-groups who can challenge the dominant approaches on economic development and provide alternative perspectives (e.g. green growth, blue growth, degrowth).

#Translocal

About the key

Residents of sustainable and just cities learn from and with each other as they experiment with new approaches and path-breaking solutions. Though locally-rooted knowledge is vital, translocal learning speaks to the transformative potential of sharing local learnings and translating these to other locations and contexts.

Cities are connected through networks. However, solutions are neither copy-pasted nor imposed top-down; they are shared and then adapted to specific contexts. City-makers are unafraid to share their mistakes, allowing others to learn from them.

Questions

How are you ensuring that your sustainability approach builds on existing knowledge (e.g. nature-based solutions, social inclusion, cycling corridors, food-sharing, etc.) instead of spending time on something that already exist?

How are you sharing your own knowledge and learning with other (governance) actors translocally (e.g. from other cities, from the nearby rural areas etc)?

Avenue for action

Integrate translocal learning into funding schemes:

- Ensure your funding initiatives require projects to include a strategy for translocal learning and practises for translocal knowledge-sharing.

- Increase structural support for translocal learning (e.g. supporting peer-to-peer exchange, recurring events, and platforms).

- Invest in and support personal connections and long-term learning processes where open discussions about obstacles/failures can occur.

#Regional

About the key

Sustainable and just cities have strong, circular, and equitable links with one another in the context of a wider region. Both urban and surrounding rural areas are supported when they prioritise the needs of the region as a whole through decentralised and collaborative economic and planning approaches.

Cities can respond to translocal challenges by reorienting goods and services to their nearby surroundings, decreasing environmental impacts, and increasing resilience to shocks and crises.

Questions

To what extent does your approach take a regional perspective, considering linkages to the wider urban, peri-urban, rural context to maximise effectiveness and extend its reach?

Avenue for action

Think and act beyond municipal and regional borders:

- Adopt a flexible and cross-border ("bioregion") lens in policy-making. Instead of being bounded by administrative and political borders, reconsider the spatial scale based on human and ecosystemic communities.

- Ensure that sustainability efforts do not focus on core urban areas to the exclusion of their greater zones of influence. Services such as public transport need to be provided as broadly as possible.

#Research&Innovation

About the key

Research is conducted and data collected in a manner that allows citymakers to assess questions of justice and inclusion within their environmental sustainability projects. Research always stems from the concerns and needs of inhabitants in urban contexts and does not simply impose external concepts, practices, or blueprints.

Research projects aimed at sustainable urban planning have clear social justice priorities and are responsive to the needs and voices of vulnerable groups, thereby understanding that the discipline is as much a social one as a technical one.

Questions

Which social groups are relevant to and (might be) impacted by your research & innovation project (especially marginalised and vulnerable ones, e.g. lower income, people of colour, women)?

How will you make sure that these groups have a voice in the process and/or access and engage with the project and its results? What safeguarding policies/procedures are in place to avoid negatively affecting marginalised / vulnerable groups? (e.g. policies to protect children, people with disabilities).

Avenue for action

Use projects to promote transdisciplinary learning:

- Recognise and use research and innovation projects (e.g. EU-funded ones) as opportunities to foster transdisciplinary learning and break silos across environmental, social, economic, and political spheres.

- Build on pre-existing projects by taking stock of the pre-existing and planning ways to keep using available project outputs.

#Adaptation

About the key

Sustainable and just cities not only acknowledge, but embrace the growing need for change and flexibility. They have a playful spirit of continuous adaptation and reflexiveness in striving for just transformations. Adaptation is based on emerging opportunities, needs, and ongoing experience.

Disruptive shocks, such as climate change and global pandemics, aggravate systemic inequalities. City-makers stay alert to these, as well as to unintended consequences from their actions, and are prepared to learn from potential failures.

Questions

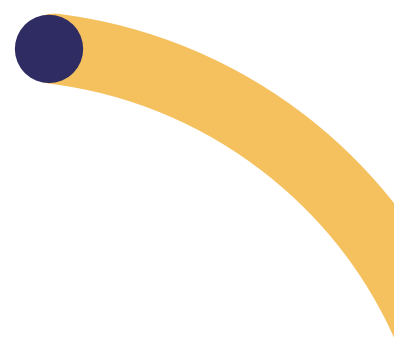How do you make sure that your sustainability approach can adapt to changing circumstances?

How does your sustainability approach monitor the challenges and opportunities that could either hamper or strengthen it over time?

Avenue for action

Experimentation for sustainable and just cities:

- Test and evaluate innovative solutions. Don't be afraid to abandon or adjust the experiment if necessary.

- Ensure that the focus on the project does not hide lessons from the experiment. Processes, challenges, and failures can be important, regardless of the outcome.

- In co-creation processes, find a balance between structure and flexibility. Not everything can be flexible and open to debate, but impactful participation still implies a possibility for change emerging from the participation process.

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