



POLICY BRIEF

## **How could policy makers support just sustainability transitions?**

January 2022

### **Introduction**

How can policy makers of local and national governments strive for more just and sustainable cities? The answer to this question starts with the basic realization that current social injustices and unsustainabilities are persistent and interconnected. In order to tackle these challenges, we need systemic and transformative change, or in other words transitions. Just sustainability transitions are processes of long-term change in which the societal systems are structurally transformed as to improve the quality of life of present and future generations, and all non-human living beings. As guardians of public well-being, policy makers play a crucial role in such transitions. This policy brief presents 15 policy recommendations on how policy makers on the local and translocal level can take up this role and create more impact for just and sustainable cities.

### **Key observations**

Placing sustainability interventions in the context of broader systemic transformation to just and sustainable cities, is crucial for policy makers as to get an increased sense of direction and a better understanding of the transformative potential of these interventions. The policy recommendations below are based on the following three observations:

- In addressing sustainability challenges in cities there often is a policy tension between ecological sustainability on the one hand and inclusivity, recognition and equity on the other hand. Within urban sustainability policy, justice issues are often neglected, implicit or instrumentalized in favor of ecological improvements or profitability.
- Accelerating just sustainability transitions begs for a diversity of tactics, interventions, and foci by multiple actors on different scales that complement each other. This doesn't mean we should assume that these actors have similar ideas on what a just and sustainable future means and/or looks like.



- In recent years many alternative grassroots, corporate, and government driven initiatives have emerged across European cities that (aim to) transform current systems such as energy, food, housing, social security, and local democracy. After years of pioneering and experimenting, the time has come to build an intersectional movement-of-movements and to institutionalise and mainstream transformative innovations on a more structural level. Anticipating the transition phase of phase-out and break-down is therefore crucial.

### **Policy recommendations and commitments**

The recommendations and commitments below are based on extensive research that covers a variety of time-periods, cases, and regions. Yet, given the complexity of just sustainability transitions we cannot prescribe how policy makers *should* act. The examples below still require adaptation, translation, and enrichment within local and contextual modes of knowledge of transitions-in-the-making.

1. Explore how to address justice and ecological issues together when initiating projects and remind others to do the same. Advocate for social justice when the needs and demands of vulnerable groups are ignored and remind social justice advocates of how their struggle intersects with ecological challenges.
2. Commit to prioritizing the needs of people and the more-than-human world over the needs of the market and the state. Leave the paradigm of infinite economic growth behind and remind yourself: just and sustainable cities for whom?
3. Resist short-term and technocratic solutionism that won't address the underlying drivers of injustice and systems of oppression. Focus on the causes of current inequalities in terms of who is most affected and who is responsible for climate destruction.
4. One of the main pathways for integrating justice as an orienting principle for intervention is to focus on the democratization of policies and decision-making processes and to increase efforts to involve historically marginalized or disadvantaged groups.
5. Allow for different types of solutions (and problem framings) to emerge. This includes opening-up the policy process to perspectives from a variety of disciplines, communities, and backgrounds. Above all, nurture grassroots and commons-based initiatives that center justice and strengthen their resilience.
6. Start all policy interventions with an understanding of the current situation: map and appreciate which transformative innovations and networks already



exist, what are the drivers of unsustainability and how power inequalities manifest in real world experiences.

7. Avoid the projectification of transition processes and create structural funding structures that match the long-term character of transitions and the need for open and adaptive governance interventions. This underscores the need to strategically think of how to keep the legacy of transition-oriented interventions alive.
8. Realise that there are different strategies for change: some more harmonious and constructive, others more conflictual and subversive. Resist the temptation to favor harmonious approaches and embrace struggle as a necessary element of transitions. Create space for in-depth, uncomfortable, and difficult conversations about power struggles and injustices that are ongoing in society. Don't be scared to support counter-hegemonic powers.
9. Create opportunities for people and networks to come together in open collaborative spaces for translocal learning that build a critical mass of both innovative and (non)conformist actors that work on transformative change. Such spaces should allow for the exchange of different experiences, resources of power and modes of knowledge with the aim to inspire transformative action
10. When organizing and participatory processes, don't (solely) invite the so-called 'stakeholders' that will serve their own interests and will try to keep things the way they are. Instead, invite 'future holders' that have a stake in creating a better world for the common good. Include people that share the sense of urgency and/or people that experience injustices. Acknowledge their invisible (emotional) work and don't expect them to show up without giving a fair compensation. Start from their needs, dreams, personal motivation, and the local issues that bother them – and connect those to overarching transition narratives.
11. Complement policy interventions with a reflexive form of monitoring as to deal with and respond to the unintended and perverse consequences these interventions might have and prevent them from reproducing existing inequalities.
12. Become an institutional activist and negotiate for *radical* transitions within your organisation. Do the institutional work of enabling the conditions for changemakers both within and outside your organization to flourish. This includes dismantling those practices, regulations and ideas that hamper change.



13. Support the un-learning and dismantling of (neo)colonial and patriarchal ways of knowing and doing within your organization. Rediscover and restore the ways of knowing and doing that have been erased or forgotten by. Decenter the white/cis gender/male/heteronormative experiences in your policy process.
14. Commit to treating diversity as an ongoing collective effort that is integral to designing policy for just and sustainable cities. Allocate budget if needed. Start by diversifying your organization or team. If you don't create a diverse team in terms of ethnic, racial, religious, or cultural backgrounds, it will be difficult to reach out to a diverse audience as well.
15. Treat the policy process as a matter of care which aims to maintain, continue and repair the web of life.

### **Research methodology**

These recommendations are informed by wider theoretical frameworks on sustainability transitions, transition management and justice. The UrbanA methodology combined desk study of EU project documents, qualitative interviews, and the outputs and evaluation of the transition arena methodology as a tool for co-creation. This policy brief thus draws on the knowledge commons that was co-created during the UrbanA project and builds on previous deliverables (see also: [wiki](#), [deliverable 3.3](#), [deliverable 3.2](#), deliverable 2.3).

In sum, policy makers have a crucial role in striving for more just and sustainable cities. The policy recommendations presented, can support them in taking this role to the next level. A level where justice and sustainability are sides of the same coin and where fundamental systemic change is a prerequisite for tackling historical, current and future injustices.

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**Consortium**

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**Websites**

<https://urban-arena.eu/>, <https://sustainablejustcities.eu/keys> & <https://wiki.urban-arena.eu/>