

PARTNERING UP FOR SUSTAINABLE AND JUST CITIES:

LESSONS *from AND for* LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES

When it comes to making cities more ecologically sustainable and socially just, local governments and community-led initiatives (CLIs*) are better together.

* CLIs are any form of concrete action undertaken by self-organised groups of people towards environmental and social goals. This resource hones in on CLIs instead of generic resident participation because we see them as active, passionate forces contributing to urban development.

CLIs are well-positioned to understand on-the-ground challenges and community members' strengths, while local governments have the ability to support and scale-up their impact. These partnerships enable solutions to our most challenging sustainability and equity issues to be driven by the people who are closest to them. This is democracy in action.

Considering the short timeline available for averting climate breakdown and ensuring good quality of life for all, we need to find better ways of moving forward together. Collaboration is a tricky yet rewarding process of sharing power by working together towards a shared goal. It is the only way to get results that neither CLIs nor local governments could achieve on their own.

This booklet shares first-hand insights from over 40 people in European local governments and CLIs who know the importance of, challenges to, and practical tips for collaborative efforts with one another. It is the culmination of many workshops and conversations through ICLEI Europe's UrbanCommunity for Sustainable Just Cities Project (2022-2024, <https://t.ly/IRKLz>), carried out with support from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.



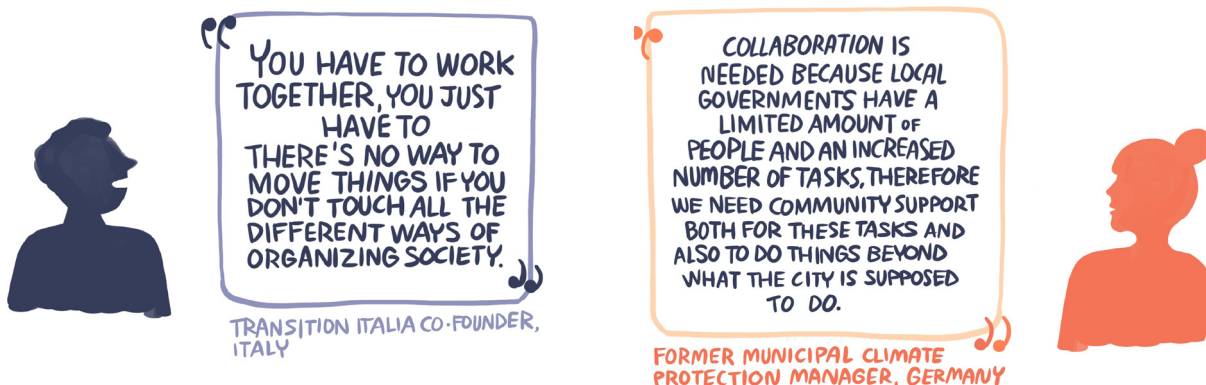
UrbanCommunity
FOR SUSTAINABLE
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Robert Bosch
Stiftung

WHY IS COLLABORATION BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES IMPORTANT FOR SUSTAINABLE AND JUST CITIES?

Collaboration between local governments and CLIs is often a necessity. For example, imagine you are a CLI which needs to carry out activities on municipal property, or a capacity crunched local government staff relying on community support for your increasing task load.



Collaboration is not only a necessity. It also makes cities more socially equitable, and urban governance more democratic. It enables long-term, mutually-beneficial and out-of-the-box change towards sustainable and just cities by:

PROMOTING WIN-WIN SITUATIONS

Both groups stand to gain when CLIs and local governments see their roles as complementary. CLIs offer grassroots knowledge, innovation, and a better chance of local buy-in through their networks. Since they operate outside bureaucracy, CLIs can be more radical and constructively push local governments to think and act differently. Meanwhile, local governments have convening power to facilitate partnerships, physical spaces, and often financial resources to offer. As active collaborators, local governments can assist with some project management tasks and help initiatives mature. When local governments engage openly with CLIs, they sow seeds of enthusiastic and rewarding local engagement.



REINVIGORATING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Collaboration increases civic engagement, accountability, and transparency, while also promoting collective values. Genuine engagement with CLIs may strengthen public faith in local government's power to positively address real-life local priorities. Meeting face-to-face helps humanise each other and recognise the unique constraints each group faces. Trust, the combination of empathy and consistency, is built as people in government and the community develop personal relations and create a positive common narrative of change together. Ideally, these relationships don't only stay with individuals, but also help build long-lasting systems and rules of collaboration.

REACHING MORE PEOPLE

Specific groups of people, usually those facing economic or social vulnerability, are underrepresented in decision-making which affects them. Tokenistic participation in the past, a lack of time, and possibly even general distrust means that these groups are less able or willing to take part in local governments' efforts to engage them. Cities will not become more sustainable and equitable if only the privileged few are a part of the process. Justice-oriented CLIs elevate these hidden voices. Their accessible nature and local networks makes them adept at connecting with a wider array of people so that everyone can enjoy and contribute to their cities.



ENCOURAGING LONG-TERM CONSISTENCY

Collaboration makes progress towards sustainable and just cities more consistent, evening out bumps and lulls in motivation or capacity. Long-term thinking and planning sprouts from needs-based community efforts, contributing to continuity across election cycles. Over time, acting together strengthens ties and sets a good example, inspiring change in other places.

WHAT CHALLENGES EXIST FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES ?

Often, collaboration is not a desired or possible path: for example when a CLI wishes to act as an oppositional force from 'outside' the system, or when either actor does not uphold values of sustainability and justice nor act in interest of the common good.

The likelihood and nature of collaboration also depends on factors like political context and city size. Partnerships between progressive CLIs and local governments are less likely under the rule of a watchful authoritarian national government, for instance. Many lessons from this booklet come from Western Europe, which largely enjoys democratic norms. There are also differences to consider between big and small municipalities. While CLIs and local government staff in big cities might have a harder time building personal relationships, they likely have better access to various resources than those in smaller municipalities. Smaller municipalities, in turn, may have fewer resources, but more personal connections between municipal staff and local CLIs.



☞ IT WAS EYE-OPENING TO LEARN THAT THE TEMPORARY USE OF A FEW PARKING LOTS IN BUDAPEST FOR A HEAT ADAPTATION EXPERIMENT WAS ULTIMATELY DENIED. FOR OUR COMMUNITY'S LIVING STREETS INITIATIVE, WE ARE ALLOWED TO BLOCK AN ENTIRE STREET FOR TWO TO THREE MONTHS. ☺

MUNICIPAL SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT MANAGER, BELGIUM

Challenges for collaboration usually stem from a *lack of something*. This can be a lack of shared interests, trust, time, representation, money, skills, imagination, transparency and political will. CLIs and local governments specifically point out:

INCOMPATIBLE VISIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

When local governments and CLIs have very different visions for the future of their city or town, this opens space for conflict - an integral but challenging part of any political process. Strong lack of common understanding over issues, or vastly different issue prioritisation, makes collaboration difficult. Varying motivations, like re-election, also influence if or how collaboration happens.

DIFFERENT OPERATING MODES

CLIs and local governments operate with different scopes, speeds, levels of flexibility, types of language and interconnectedness. Change-making is usually slower in local governments than in CLIs, since public authorities must follow more rules and predefined procedures. Consequently, CLIs feel that bureaucracy, its accompanying jargon and inflexibility decreases accessibility and increases frustration - especially if paired with poor digitalisation. Meanwhile, with the rise of project management working styles, city staff feel pressured to deliver results on deadlines, which conflicts with the long-term and uncertain nature of relationship and trust building with CLIs. Lack of long-term engagement ensues when local government-CLI relationships depend on one-off projects and on certain individuals rather than being systemically embedded in governance structures. Lastly, local governments tend to work in departmental silos, whereas CLIs tend to have a more holistic focus, which can make collaboration more complicated.



“ THE CLIMATE DEPARTMENT SUPPORTED MY CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP PLAN, BUT JUST BEFORE IT WAS MEANT TO HAPPEN, OTHER DEPARTMENTS CAME FORWARD SAYING IT WASN'T POSSIBLE. THE CLIMATE DEPARTMENT WAS POWERLESS, IT'S PRETTY SYMBOLIC. ”

URBAN HEAT ISLAND SOCIAL INNOVATOR, HUNGARY

UNEVEN POWER DYNAMIC

As explained by many CLIs, it cannot be ignored that their local government holds more power in most situations. Some local government officials are seen as having an immediate 'why can I reject' mindset instead of one that is open to collaboration. Even when a co-creative process happens, the final decision usually rests with the local government, which can be adversarial.

EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Another collaboration challenge requires us to zoom out beyond city limits. External regulatory and financial support for equitable climate action falls short for both local governments and CLIs. Local governments emphasise that a lack of funding from national governments leaves them with only the capacity to carry on 'business-as-usual', while grappling with many issues pushed down from other levels of government. They further indicate that political power depends on where the topic rests - it could be under the province or state's control, which could have conflicting priorities. Some barriers at the national level can hamper action and collaboration by, e.g. blocking informal CLIs from receiving funding. When CLIs are not aware of these external barriers faced by local governments, it can lead to lower levels of trust. Overall, this unsupportive environment partially contributes to insufficient systematic processes and spaces for local government-CLI collaboration.

OTHER DIFFICULTIES LINKED TO MARGINALISATION AND INEQUALITY



“WE TRIED TO GET PEOPLE INVOLVED,
BUT SOMETIMES IT JUST DOESN'T WORK.”

FORMER MUNICIPAL CLIMATE PROTECTION MANAGER, GERMANY

Many communities are disengaged for various reasons. Wealthier people with more time and resources to spare are more likely to be involved in CLIs. People in vulnerable socio-economic situations and minority groups do not have the same luxury, and may have fragile trust in governmental institutions where they do not see themselves represented. Furthermore, neoliberal systems promote individualism and free-market capitalism, which both reduce emphasis on collective solutions and can disincentive personal activism and civic engagement through overwork and non-economic valuation of engagement. Consequently, government collaboration with CLIs must come with other types of engagement and support.

In brief, CLIs and local governments need better awareness of these challenges and of tools for engaging with each other to create more sustainable and equitable futures.

WHAT TIPS ARE THERE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CLIS TO COLLABORATE BETTER?

Fortunately, many local governments and CLIs believe that effective societal change comes only from acting together, and they have tips for those looking to do so.

FOR COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES

COME PREPARED

The way your initiative presents itself to institutions like a local government often determines the quality of the relationship and level of trust that can be developed. Arriving well-prepared and aware of how the local government generally works (e.g. organisationally, key responsibilities, key policy issues etc.) is important for opening a fruitful conversation. Try putting yourself in the perspective of the staff or departments you're contacting: What power do they have? What are their tasks and priorities? Local governments say that they appreciate when CLIs are organised and show how the initiative can contribute to their goals.



“ IN MY EXPERIENCE THE FIRST STAGES OF CONTACT ARE CRUCIAL, IF YOU ARE LABELLED AS THE USUAL COMPLAINERS WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW THE WORLD REALLY WORKS YOU WON'T GET VERY FAR. ”

TRANSITION ITALIA CO-FOUNDER, ITALY

KNOW AND SHOW YOUR VALUE

You likely have topical expertise, capacity and motivation that your local government is looking for. Approaching with a demand is not as effective as opening by showing your value. Emphasise your ability to bring local knowledge and to act as a communicator and multiplier through your networks.



“COLLABORATION IS A WIN FOR OUR DEPARTMENT, BECAUSE WE DON'T HAVE TO LOOK ANYWHERE FOR PEOPLE - HERE THEY ARE WITH THE SAME GOAL AND EXTRA PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE AND NETWORKS. NO AGENCY WOULD HAVE THE NETWORKS THAT THESE CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS HAVE.”

MUNICIPAL CLIMATE PROTECTION MANAGER, GERMANY

WORK WITH SYMPATHETIC INSIDERS

There are individuals within local governments who are open to change and may need support to overcome internal resistance. External impulses from CLIs can be incredibly useful in these cases. You can identify and work with these individuals within the municipal system who are open to innovation and have a forward-thinking mentality for collaborative projects. Without asking for too much commitment right away, build rapport and work step-by-step, eventually getting integrated in other departments as well. This will build resilience in case of personnel changes.

FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

PROVIDE SIMPLE FUNDING WITH ADDED SUPPORT

A little funding and guidance from you, a local government, can help a CLI build themselves up into a proficient partner for achieving your municipal sustainability and equity goals. Examples are plentiful! e.g. “Sustainable Neighbourhoods Facilitator Service” Brussels (Fr/Nl, <https://t.ly/D7yww>), “AdaptCascais Fund” Cascais (Pt, <https://t.ly/YqzKs>), “Participatory voting on citizen-submitted projects” Amsterdam (<https://t.ly/Qhb10>). Regarding the groups you chose to collaborate with, remember that you should be open to a variety of CLIs – not just the better-connected and capacitated ones. Working with more informal CLIs and CLIs representing the needs of marginalised groups encourages equality of opportunity. Some guidance from your side may be helpful here, as more informal CLIs can lack project management skills.

For further findings on money matters, read our summary of how funders can support and empower CLIs (<https://t.ly/hJnse>).





“ TAKE THE TIME TO LISTEN TO WHAT THE CLI WANTS, TO KNOW WHAT YOU WANT, AND TO DISCUSS WHAT THE COLLABORATION FRAMEWORK AND OUTPUTS WILL LOOK LIKE. START WITH SMALL PROJECTS AND KEEP DOORS OPEN FOR GROWTH IN THE FUTURE. ”

MUNICIPAL CLIMATE PROTECTION MANAGER, GERMANY

TRANSPARENCY, CONSISTENCY AND ACCESSIBILITY MATTER

Every collaboration partner naturally values these traits, but CLIs have specifically highlighted them as key for a productive relationship with their local government. This can take shape as regular meetings with follow-ups and moments for honest reflection. Clear presentation of ‘who does what’ on a government website is also seen as useful. Finally, a multi-lingual approach and replacing jargon with commonly-known terms is needed for reaching non-native language speakers and communities more broadly.

TRY REDUCING POWER DIFFERENCES

CLIs indicate that there are few occasions where collaboration between them and local governments can take place free of power imbalances. Although this power difference is persistent, you can try to minimise it so that CLIs feel like an equal partner. For example, try meeting in power-neutral spaces, like informal or third party spaces, where you are not necessarily hosting. Also consider moving up the participation ladder, from consultation towards co-creation, or sidelining majority voting methods and instead experimenting with more inclusive, alternative decision-making methods, like Sociocracy’s consent-based decision making (<https://bit.ly/3ZFfb7h>).

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Connecting as people with a shared passion for making your city a better place encourages deeper connections and more fruitful collaborations. Appointing an accessible contact person in your local government to liaise with CLIs will boost relations (e.g. “Agenda 21 Office” Oberhausen (De, <https://bit.ly/3BIB1fm>)). Investing time and care into dialogue with the people running CLIs likely provides unexpected returns for both of you. In the end, both CLIs and local government staff who contributed to this booklet said that productive and pleasant collaboration is always about the people! They recommend acknowledging each other’s efforts and celebrating wins together.

COLLABORATION STORIES

SYNERGIES BETWEEN FREIBURG'S FOOD POLICY COUNCIL AND THE CITY

In Freiburg, Germany, a community-led food initiative has grown into an important partner for the City to implement projects promoting a sustainable local food system. The Food Policy Council Freiburg & Region (Ernährungsrat, <https://bit.ly/3zw8U3a>) is a grassroots movement that was later given funding and support from the City with the aim to professionalise itself. The Council brings together key players from civil society, agriculture, the food industry, government, and politics. For example, a series of ongoing 'Canteen Talks' have blossomed from collaboration between staff from Freiburg's Environmental Protection department and one of the Council's working groups. The two actors already had similar goals – making Freiburg's mass-cooking sector more environmentally sustainable – and are now working towards it together through the 'Canteen Talks' networking and learning series.

The events cover topics such as plant protein in canteen kitchens, regional and organic food in social care homes, and a regional food trade platform. This format came into being through the motivation, topical expertise, and networks of the Food Policy Council working group, paired with some funding and the collaborative formulation of specific project goals with a City staff member. Running in its third year, the events are well-known and attended. The Talks are furthermore a source of input for the City, a place for sharing their messages, and have even given rise to new collaborative food system projects.

This example shows how community initiative-local government collaboration created a win-win situation with common successes and opened doors for new ideas in the future. Not to be mistaken as a community initiative that has been 'bought' by the City, the Food Policy Council remains an independent citizens' movement that voices its own goals, objectives and also implements independent projects.

"They are formulating political demands and sometimes criticise us for not doing more, but that is good. We find common ground on specific projects to collaborate on, for the rest we stay in dialogue. We need their critical voice." Robert Gundlach, Climate Protection Manager at the City of Freiburg, explains. "Freiburg is proud of its residents because they are active and it makes collaboration easy, especially in the realm of climate protection. Colleagues from other cities report that they have to invest a lot of energy to motivate their citizens to participate in projects, so we consider ourselves quite lucky. As a municipality we are service providers for our citizens, and capable partners from civil society help us achieve our goals faster."



URBANCOMMUNITY COLLABORATION STORIES

In Spring 2024, six CLIs each led a burst of collaboration with their local government through the UrbanCommunity project. Read their stories here:

Training government officials on governance for just transition,
Valsamoggia Italy: <https://bit.ly/4elhXTQ>

Transforming market spaces together,
Yenimahalle Municipality Turkey: <https://bit.ly/4eFzplM>

Cooperating for sustainable neighbourhood heat management,
Ghent Belgium: <https://bit.ly/47H0suq>

Revitalising historic city walls,
Grosseto Italy: <https://bit.ly/3BgJfft>

Partnering up for urban heat resilience,
Erzsébetváros Municipality Hungary: <https://bit.ly/3XZqRAk>

Dialogue of urban development practices,
Rotterdam Netherlands: <https://bit.ly/4gBDhpx>



Illustration by Carlotta Cataldi

LEARNING RESOURCES

A city councillor's guide to community collaboration:

www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Community-collaboration-a-councillors-guide-17-1.pdf?mtime=20200304114502&focal=none

An exploration of how local governments can restore community relations and build trust in the American context:

https://ash.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/grueber_mello_collaborative_governance_and_trust_pae_final_04222022.pdf

OECD analysis report of local governments partnering with citizens and civil society for better public service outcomes:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264118843-en>

Practical guide for local governments delivering climate action with community partners in the UK context:

<https://ashden.org/delivering-climate-action-with-community-partners-a-guide-for-uk-councils>

Review of evidence on third and public sector collaboration in Scotland:

www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-collaboration-between-third-public-sectors-review-current-evidence/documents

Toolbox of Experimental Participatory Methods:

<https://euarenas-toolbox.eu/methods>



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