



URBAN LIVING LABS AS A WAY TO RE-THINK THE CITY

Conference Ambassador Report by Javier Delgado on:

Dialogue Session 47: Post-Projectification: Anticipating “the new normal” in urban experimentation and urban living labs 2.0 (20th of August 2020, 10.45-12.15)

Presenters: Jonas Bylund, Johannes Riegler, Caroline Wrangsten

Full Paper Session with full papers 44, 249: Urban Transformations and Transitions (UTT Track) (19th of August 2020, 09.00-10.00)

Presenters: Franzsika Ehnert, Harald Rohrer

Full Paper Session with full papers 15, 206, 88, 484: Urban Transition/Actors and Rationalities (19th of August 2020, 17.00 – 18.30)

Presenters: Yayha Soliman, Olga Koretskaya, George Kiambuthi Wainaina, Elisabeth Marie Cassidy Svennevik

Jonas Bylund, researcher from Urban Europe (an EU Joint Programming Initiative specialized on innovation through urban living labs) says: “Experimentation is a need.” This idea, which he elaborated on during a dialogue session on co-creation and stakeholder engagement, gives a precise image of how innovation comes together in the urban space. In a nutshell, innovation means acquiring knowledge and becoming an agent of transformative change. Especially when making sustainability transitions happen. Acting differently requires a not-always-easy learning process, but it is necessary step to get closer to the shift towards sustainability. Further, collaboration is an absolute must, when talking about sustainability. In this report, I will look at how Urban Living Labs could be catalysts of urban sustainability transitions. In that sense, they represent the actor that can bring together academia, policy-makers, organizations and communities.

The city is the perfect example of the unsustainable status quo. The majority of the global population lives in urban areas and this number is further increasing. The cities of the world represent high shares of the food and energy demand and the global production patterns are articulated around the existence of these nodes. However, the conflictual and ever-expanding nature of the urban environment does not only produce problems – it also offers solutions. This is why cities become the perfect space for a learning process and the breeding ground for testing ideas. Urban experimentation can set the basis of significant changes. Ideally, these innovations and changes in the urban enclaves can lead to a re-scaling and reconfiguration of the current socio-technical regimes.

In the city, the relations between the myriad of actors and processes become less evident due to their manifold interactions and interconnections. In urban experimentation that is located at the niche level, the social or technological innovations are evoked by different actors and evolve in different directions. Franziska Ehnert explained in the morning of the 19th August the ways in which experimentation happens and how it has been studied so far: top-down, bottom-up and through combined interactions. However, it has been stated that only the combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches brings significant change to the socio-technical regimes. During a session on urban development, several scholars such as George Wainaina highlighted the importance of introducing collaboration culture in the governance structures. This collaboration culture would mix the bottom-up and top-down actions and would link the stakeholders in the process of decision-making.

Urban Living Labs have consistently been discussed as one of the spaces for key stakeholders to set such collaboration structures. Often, such Urban Living Labs are characterized by processes like learning-by-doing, co-creating actions on the spot and mediating actors. Further, Urban Living Labs are known for redefining the problems, the solutions and their essence. It is important to note that new governance structures and processes can foster urban sustainability transformations. Here, it is where new stakeholders such as Urban Living Labs become crucial, as an intersection between space, policy-makers and citizens. Several presenters highlighted the importance of redefining the city and its functions. In this context, Urban Living Labs become the ground for testing new ideas and trying out this redefinition.

Experimentation as the process and Urban Living Labs as the entities. In the context of urbanization, innovation is indeed necessary, as in a sustainable future there is no room for business-as-usual. The unsustainable status quo in the urban context showcases the lack of collaboration among actors and top-down managerial approaches to decision-making. However, it is encouraging to see new interesting ideas coming from both academia and policy-makers. In any case, there is not only room for optimism, as the momentum must be broken in order to open a window for change. Yet, such windows can only be open with resources and political will. Further, Urban Living Labs are also criticized (see, for example Levenda, 2019) for keeping neoliberal agendas, especially in the context of smart cities projects. This line of thought puts in contrast the visions and reality of the projects, as growth-oriented agendas undercut the ecological and participatory potential of urban experimentation.

The theme of IST2020, "Making transitions happen" is tightly linked to the actions of Urban Living Labs. In the session on post-projectification related to Urban Living Labs, Enza Lisandrello elaborated on actions carried out in one of her projects: In one mediation project, they gathered the communities of the territory so they could interpret together the collected data. Afterwards, they were invited to voice their needs and to co-create the actions that were necessary to meet them. Such participation and decision-making structures are necessary to bring transitions to the city. Urban transitions depend on entities that are present on the ground, next to the users, understanding their needs and involving them in the process of decision-making. Another key theme in IST2020 has been the importance of pushing for just transitions that leave no one behind. Urban Living Labs give us examples on how to do that and how to bridge academia, decision-makers and communities. Collaboration is necessary to bring change to the contested urban spaces, and only through this change will we reach sustainability.

References

Anthony M. Levenda (2019) Thinking critically about smart city experimentation: entrepreneurialism and responsabilization in urban living labs, *Local Environment*, 24:7, 565-579, DOI: 10.1080/13549839.2019.1598957 .