



SMART CITY VIENNA

Conference Ambassador Report by Merle Schulken on:

Dialogue Session 598: Making transitions happen – the Viennese experience: Smart City Vienna. (20th of August 2020, 17.30-19.00)

Panelists: Thomas Madreiter, Judith Borsboom-van Beureden, Harald Rohracher, Verena Madner and Colleen Schneider

Few cities have received as much international recognition for their implementation of the popular Smart City framework strategy as has Vienna. *Smart City Wien* focuses on providing a “high quality of life” for its citizens while “fulfilling its obligations to the world” by preserving natural resources “through social and technological innovation” (smartcity.wien.gov.at). Special focus areas are social inclusion and high life satisfaction as well as reducing GHG emissions, energy consumption and the city’s material footprint. All these efforts are to be facilitated or enhanced by wide-spread investments in digitalization. First adopted by Vienna’s municipal council in 2014, the framework strategy was last updated in 2019 and spans the time horizon until 2050.

The Smart City Vienna dialogue session at IST2020 featured a highly interesting panel discussion that successfully conveyed lessons learned from Vienna’s experience as a *Smart City* leader. At the same time, the session engaged critical perspectives – on the Viennese case and on the *Smart City* concept more broadly. It brought together Thomas Madreiter, the Director of Planning, City of Vienna, Verena Madner, IST2020 conference-co chair and member of its Scientific Advisory board, Judith Borsboom-van Beurden as an expert of *Smart City* implementations internationally, Harald Rohracher, who presented critical perspectives on the *Smart City* concept and Colleen Schneider (WU Vienna) for questions on the governance of financial systems.

A central issue during the discussion was how to govern the *Smart City*. Madreiter explained that instead of setting up a new *Smart City* department, the focus in Vienna was on including Civil Servants in implementing *Smart City* objectives throughout all departments – from mobility to building. He also argued that concerns about selling out democratic control in exchange for private sector investments in e.g. digital infrastructure, a frequent point of critique to the general *Smart City framework*, are unfounded in the case of Vienna, a city that has a long-standing legacy of a strong public sector. A point of contention between the panelists remained the question of how *Smart Cities* can enable bottom-up forms of governance to avoid early lock-in effects and foster transformative change while at the same time providing effective top-down coordination. In this context, Borsboom-van Beurden’s metaphor painting the city government as a powerful conductor of the orchestra of citizen-, private- and public sector actors was most memorable. Disagreement on governance issues

among the panelists also mirrored their different stances on the role of academic research in the *Smart City*. Are we needed most as a space for critical societal reflection on the change processes already happening or should we primarily aim to support local government decision-making e.g. by modelling potential synergies and trade-offs?

The panelists agreed that *smart* does not automatically mean *just* or *sustainable*. Issues around *Smart City* governmentality, social exclusion and data security stressed by Rohracher require vigilance. In the coming years, Vienna will revise its environmental policy goals to align better with the Paris Agreement. In this context, trade-offs between different policy objectives of the *Smart City* become apparent e.g. in the case of mobility: While public transport in Vienna is excellent, the year 2020 also marks the commencement of building a new major motorway – despite ecological concerns and protests. Madreiter argued that such infrastructure projects are the necessary by-product of Vienna's economic and population growth. Yet, he also stressed the need for better city-hinterland coordination on issues such as how to deal with commuting traffic. Federal oversight of land-use planning, which is absent in Austria, may thus play a crucial role in urban mobility transitions.

A final question was how to finance the transition towards a *Smart City*. Here, the panelists agreed that apart from public investments, more efforts are needed to circulate the value created in cities back into domestic investments. Borsboom-van Beurden stressed the need to align financial flows across sectors and areas of public administration with "Smart City" policy objectives rather than relying exclusively on dedicated *Smart City* funds, e.g. from EU Horizon 2020 projects.

In conclusion, the political mobilization potential of the *Smart City* framework strategy is undeniable. Moreover, the Viennese case with its strong public sector and special focus on sustainability and enhanced life satisfaction is a positive example of its implementation. Nevertheless, unresolved issues remain including trade-offs between bottom-up emancipation vs top-down governance and between different economic, political and ecological interests in city development. Finally, even the smartest of cities is still embedded in greater political and economic systems and must find or create spaces in these systems to pursue its policy objectives.