
Advancing Urban Transformation Towards Sustainability through Decision-Making Processes

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Synopsis

This document presents the research findings and recommendations to assist policymakers and stakeholders involved in urban decision-making processes regarding policies, plans, and programs aimed at transforming urban systems toward sustainability.

Problem

There is an urgent need to accelerate the transformation of urban systems towards sustainability. However, local governance, particularly through urban decision-making processes, frequently reinforces unsustainable urban development models, deepening ecological crises and social inequalities.

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About the study

This study employs an integrative literature review in the fields of urban sustainability transition and transformation research. A total of one hundred and six scientific peer-reviewed articles with high impact from the SCOPUS database were analyzed using in-depth content analysis. The primary goal was to identify and examine the key agency features that emerge from the interactions and linkages among various actors involved in urban decision-making processes related to policies, plans, and programs aimed at urban sustainability transformation. These features shed light on how actors influence or shape these decision-making processes, either facilitating or obstructing the desired transformation toward urban sustainability. The identified key agency features include awareness, collaboration and partnership, legitimacy and trust, leadership, learning, information and knowledge, place, power, resources, shared vision, and willingness and commitment.

Context

There is a common consensus that cities play a crucial role in addressing sustainability and resilience challenges at both local and global levels. An urgent transformation toward sustainable urban systems is necessary (von Wirth et al. 2019). This reality pressures local governance as conventional models continue to create and perpetuate unsustainable urban development paths, struggling to address the seriousness and urgency of sustainability issues (Bai et al., 2022).

Additionally, new local governance arrangements should include a variety of interconnected actors, practices, cultures, and places in the decision-making processes of policies, plans, and programs to effectively advance the urban transformation toward sustainability (Wolfram, Borgström, and Farrelly 2019).

The growing complexity of urban decision-making processes requires a clearer understanding of the roles played by the different actors involved. City governments are just one of many actors that interact in these processes. Furthermore, there is a knowledge gap concerning which agency features—actors' form, ability, and capacity to connect, organize, engage, act, and influence urban decision-making processes—are most relevant for advancing a transformation toward sustainability in urban systems.

Results

The following agency features are key factors for advancing a transformation toward sustainability in urban systems through decision-making processes, providing the foundation for policy recommendations:

Awareness

Actors must recognize the urgent need for urban transformation toward sustainability, fully acknowledging the environmental and social issues at stake. Equally important is their belief in their capacity to influence decision-making processes. This approach can encourage greater citizen engagement, foster active participation, and increase societal support for urban sustainability.

Collaboration and Partnership

Collaboration and partnership are crucial for securing endorsement and ensuring the effective implementation of decisions. Local government and citizen collaboration can improve citizen engagement, helping to disrupt unsustainable urban development. Strong and effective collaboration among decision-makers, developers, and local communities promotes sustainability through learning and translation.

Leadership

Transformative leadership plays a pivotal role in mobilizing resources and integrating diverse visions and narratives, balancing deficiency and leading to synergies that help to overcome barriers.

Learning, information, and knowledge

Building knowledge needs a learning process facilitated by a continuous flow of information and ideas among various actors. However, improving access to information does not ensure progress in urban sustainability. A transformation towards sustainability requires a flexible learning approach and knowledge co-creation that facilitates sharing insights among actors. For knowledge to effectively enhance public engagement and informed decision-making, it must be relevant and understandable to all involved.

Legitimacy and Trust

Lack of trust can hinder support and resource allocation due to unresolved disagreements on sustainability perspectives, creating barriers to decision-making and raising transparency concerns.

Place

Place shapes a community's characteristics and needs, encompassing institutional thickness, leadership, and a shared vision. It catalyzes transformation by facilitating engagement among diverse groups and linking a shared sustainability vision to an actual location. This fosters new relationships and meanings develop, enabling learning and leading to new narratives and knowledge.

Power

It is essential to understand how power is utilized, distributed, and influenced by both internal and external factors in decision-making processes, and how these affect outcomes.

Resources

The lack of adequate resources is a significant barrier to community inclusion and empowerment. A significant resource increase will enhance relationships among actors and advance their skills and knowledge.

Shared vision

Sustainability transformation relies on a long-term shared vision for a city, requiring collaboration among diverse viewpoints, interests, time frames, investments, and goals.

Willingness and Commitment

Public and political commitment is crucial for integrating sustainability into decision-making. Effectively translating participative decision-making into action is essential for maintaining both short and long-term commitment.

Policy recommendations

In decision-making processes aimed at a transformation toward sustainability in urban systems, local governments, and other responsible stakeholders should consider the following recommendations:

1. Raise awareness

Promote workshops or discussion sessions to enhance actors' awareness about the importance of sustainability and the capacity of the decision-making process to address local environmental and social issues. These initiatives must empower actors, including citizens, to recognize their potential to influence decision-making.

2. Foster collaboration and partnership

Foster and establish channels for collaboration and partnership between local government, organizations, community groups, educational institutions, developers, and other stakeholders, strengthening ties among actors involved in decision-making.

3. Advance leadership

Advance leadership by empowering key individuals as change agents, encouraging open dialogue, providing leadership training and support, and recognizing diversity and innovative ideas.

4. Develop knowledge through a learning process and information flow

Establish a continuous flow of information and enhance capacity through flexible learning methods, such as interactive and inclusive workshops, seminars, and platforms where citizens can share their views while encouraging interactions among diverse actors to develop and share knowledge.

5. Build legitimacy and trust

Involve diverse local actors and consider community needs and ideas in the early decision-making stages. Also, decisions and justifications should be clearly communicated to the actors involved, ensuring public access to relevant information and documents and providing regular feedback through multiple channels.

6. Recognize place

Recognize the characteristics and needs of specific places by actively working and engaging in decision-making with initiatives, communities, businesses, and diverse groups rooted in those places.

7. Understand and balance power

Empower citizens and practitioners to counteract power imbalances in decision-making by valuing diverse opinions and including individuals from various backgrounds, expertise, and perspectives to reduce the dominance of any single group. Also, it is crucial to educate decision-makers about unconscious biases in power relations to promote equitable decision-making practices.

8. Provide resources

Provide tailored and purposeful resources, including skills, expertise, and organizational, technological, and financial support, to address the specific needs of various actors involved in decision-making processes.

9. Create a shared vision

Create a long-term shared vision among actors involved by organizing comprehensive visioning workshops and brainstorming sessions to collectively define urban sustainability goals and prioritize relevant policies early in decision-making processes.

10. Ensure willingness and commitment

Make participatory processes meaningful by effectively incorporating diverse views and opinions into decision-making and translating them into action. Also, ensure a long-term commitment from all actors, regardless of changes in local government.

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Original study

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More information can be found on our website: <http://envision.web.ua.pt/>

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