

Urban Europe Policy Brief

Municipalities and Urban Living Labs

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Introduction

European cities face a pressing challenge – how to provide economic prosperity and social cohesion while achieving environmental sustainability? In response, new collaborations are emerging in the form of urban living labs – sites devised to design, test and learn from social and technical innovation in real time.

Funded by JPI Urban Europe, the aim of the GUST project is to examine, inform and advance the governance of sustainability transitions through urban living labs, which are proliferating across Europe as a means for testing innovations in buildings, transport and energy systems. Despite the experimentation taking place on the ground, there is a lack of systematic learning across urban and national contexts.

The role of municipalities in Urban Living Labs

Urban living labs are collaborative forms of urban sustainability governance. Urban living labs are sites which enable us to design, test and learn from our efforts at social and technical innovation. Municipalities are important

actors in facilitating urban living labs as a form of experimental governance.

An analysis of the role of municipalities in 50 snapshots of European urban living labs shows various ways that municipal actors can get involved in urban living labs and boost innovation in their cities. Three functional roles for municipalities – promoter, enabler and partner – have been identified. The findings can help municipalities make more informed decisions about when and how to get involved in urban living labs.

At the outset of the study we expected minimal involvement of municipalities due to the market liberalization of the public sector and different policy systems in the countries studied. We expected that municipalities would mainly have the role of enabler.

These hypotheses were refuted. Municipalities as well as other public actors were highly involved in urban living labs. Municipalities in Austria, the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden are part of different types of policy systems, yet this had no apparent effect on what role

Key Message

- Urban living labs are sites devised to design, test and learn from social and technical innovation in real time.
- Municipalities are playing an active role in the design and development of urban living labs and urban sustainability governance.
- Municipalities take different roles as promoter, enabler or partner in urban living labs. The roles and their indica-

tors demonstrate what municipalities can do to further experimental governance.

- The roles are generic and they are not dependent on the formal policy systems of the countries studied.
- The roles played by municipalities can change over the life of an urban living lab, for example, from promoter to enabler.



municipalities had in the 50 snapshots. Municipalities were involved in different roles and these roles could differ across the timespan of urban living labs. When examining the roles municipalities can play, it is important to define what constitutes different roles. In brief, roles are activities and attitudes that an actor uses to address a particular task or situation and they were derived by combining theories on transition and sustainability governance with theories on local and collaborative government. The role can be determined with the help of indicators.

Promoters of Urban Living Labs

The role of promoter refers to when a municipality initiates, finances and implements an urban living lab, or when a municipality plays a leading role in the design and development of an urban living lab. In our cases, the role of promoter is often related to larger processes of urban regeneration which is central to most of the urban living labs where the municipality is a promoter. This does not mean that it orchestrates every activity but normally gives space to new and innovative ways of implementing such goals such as the Maastricht-LAB that was established by the municipality to “give an impulse to urban (re-) development of the city of Maastricht”.

Enablers of Urban Living Labs

The role of enabler refers to when a municipality has an interest in facilitating an urban living lab. Municipalities as enablers can facilitate collaboration and bring actors

together, to generate the supportive conditions for urban living labs to develop new ideas, projects or experiments, the Malmö Innovation Platform is an example. Municipalities can act as very effective enablers to bring actors together and create space and platforms for collaboration.

Partners of Urban Living Labs

The role of partner refers to when a municipality engages in an urban living lab in partnership on fairly equal terms with other stakeholders. This often means shared leadership and participation, but where the municipality has an explicit function. An example is the Newcastle Science Centre, where the municipality has a joint leadership, and Newcastle City Council is a “lead partner” together with Newcastle University. Joint leadership can help create legitimacy and momentum for innovation.

Who are GUST?

The GUST project brings together leading European research partners and practitioners from Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands and Austria to investigate urban living labs.

More information about the project
www.urbanlivinglabs.net

Indicators for Promoter

- Municipal leadership
- Related to mandatory urban municipal policies (urban planning, education)
- Initiation, calling upon other actors to participate
- Active participation in funding support
- Main or only applicant for state funding

Indicators for Enabler

- Partnership between actors
- Create action space and conditions for action
- Create a meeting place, a collaborative platform, or framework as point of departure
- Support via provision of buildings

Indicators for Partner

- Shared leadership
- Participation on equal terms
- Collaboration emphasized
- Municipality has specific function
- Partners are named