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A citizen-oriented, sustainable urban planning: introducing NESSIE

We are delighted to present the Final publication of NESSIE, a transformative initiative inspired by the potential of town-twinnings and the promotion of civic and democratic engagement, in the light of environmental sustainability in urban planning and development. The project action, of which Qala Local Council, Malta is Applicant, seeks to continue exploring the profound importance and impact of the participation of citizens in the decision-making processes and the social cohesion it creates in the optics of active citizenship.

At its core, NESSIE is a path of discussion that intertwines two crucial themes: citizens' participation in the decision-making processes of the EU and environmental sustainability of urban planning through a bottom-up approach.

NESSIE has risen from a careful analysis of urban development approach and from several debates and confrontations that the Qala Local Council had in the context of its participation to previous citizens initiatives and projects in the context of the EU for Citizens Programme 2014-2020. During these talks, the participants expressed their concerns about the excessive urbanization and unruled exploitation of the territory and the damage done to urbanistic and naturalistic heritage, as well as to the social tissue of the small communities.

Within the project rationale, one of the priorities has been empowering citizens of the participating municipalities to take part in the decision-making processes of urban development.

This publication thus serves as a comprehensive compilation of visionary texts that align with the goals and aspirations of the NESSIE Project. Addressing topics such as climate change, environmental sustainability, democratic participation, social inclusion, green infrastructure, and global partnerships, these texts resonate with the values and aims of NESSIE.

Just as NESSIE seeks to analyse the developments of the urban planning phenomenon throughout the years, the texts presented here explore the dynamic landscape of the EU's priorities in the coming decade. They emphasize the importance of collaboration, inclusivity, and sustainability in shaping a prosperous and interconnected future for Europe and its citizens.



The aims of NESSIE parallel the objectives outlined in these texts, striving to foster transnational democratic participation, improve green infrastructures, and promote the recognition of citizens' voices within the decision-making processes. NESSIE envisions nurturing a sense of European citizenship, intercultural engagement, and societal participation, echoing the values advocated in the CERV programme.

As we begin this exciting voyage of collaboration and conversation, we encourage readers to explore the various viewpoints shared in this publication. The partnership established under NESSIE intends to create a lasting impact and effect positive change in the EU, gathering suggestions and proposals for a better and more resilient future.

NESSIE, much like the initiatives explored throughout this publication, embodies the spirit of solidarity and the commitment to creating a Europe that embraces diversity, nurtures inclusivity and leverages global partnerships. The objectives are building bridges of cooperation, recognizing that the future of Europe relies on the collective efforts of its citizens, inspired by the power of citizens and the pursuit of common goals.



Chapter 2: Tackling the urban development from different perspectives to overcome challenges

Urban planning: introduction

Urban planning and development are pivotal aspects of shaping the future of our cities. Traditionally, these processes have been dominated by expert opinions and bureaucratic decisions. However, a growing realization of the need for inclusivity and sustainability has led to a paradigm shift. Today, there is a strong push for citizen empowerment in the decision-making processes surrounding urban planning and development. Not only this shift ensures a more democratic approach but also results in cities that better reflect the needs, aspirations, and values of their residents.

Urban planning: context analysis

In the past, urban design and planning were primarily driven by a top-down approach. However, it is now evident that trying to apply a one-size-fits-all model in various settings is not feasible. In today's globalized urban landscape, the influence of private equity, in conjunction with government entities, plays a noticeable role in shaping cities. The ascent of property finance has given corporations a significant stake in urban development, affecting both housing affordability and public spaces. The current task of urban planning involves the ability to adapt appropriately to the unique conditions of different landscapes. What should be consistent is the awareness and sensitivity to these situations, rather than relying on a single, uniform response.

The concept of top-down urban planning is frequently linked to prominent individuals and governing entities with the power to influence the direction in which a city develops. This approach has the potential to introduce efficiency, modernization, and unity into urban areas. Nevertheless, it may also fall short in capturing the unique character of local neighborhoods and their intricate requirements.

On the contrary, bottom-up approaches are led by community empowerment and grassroots initiatives. Drawing attention to their unique cultural, social, and economic dynamics, communities are placed at the heart of this method. A bottom-up approach allows citizens to take charge of their environmental conditions, fostering a strong sense of ownership and identity within neighborhoods.

In this sense, NESSIE has approached the citizen-oriented, sustainable urban planning and development from different perspectives, fostering the emancipation of citizens and the importance of living green infrastructures and working to establish such bottom-up approach in the European communities. The perspectives through which NESSIE has tackled a citizen-driven, green urban planning are:

**Inclusivity and Diversity:**

Empowering citizens in urban planning development means involving a diverse range of voices. People from different backgrounds, age groups, and socioeconomic statuses should have the opportunity to contribute to the planning process. This diversity of perspectives enriches decision-making by taking into account the varied needs and desires of the community.

Community Engagement:

Successful urban planning development involves active community engagement. This can take the form of public hearings, town hall meetings, surveys, and workshops. When citizens have a say in the planning process, they become more invested in the outcomes and take greater pride in their communities.

Transparency and Access to Information:

To empower citizens, it's essential to provide transparent access to information related to urban planning and development. Citizens should have easy access to data, proposals, and the rationale behind decisions. This transparency fosters trust and helps residents make informed contributions.

Co-creation of Solutions:

Citizen empowerment in urban planning extends beyond merely seeking opinions; it involves co-creating solutions. Citizens, along with urban planners and officials, work collaboratively to design and implement projects. This approach not only leads to more effective solutions but also fosters a sense of ownership among residents.

Empowering the vulnerables:

Inclusive urban planning development must also empower marginalized and vulnerable communities. These groups often face disproportionate impacts from development projects and may not have the same access to decision-making processes. Special efforts should be made to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

Long-term Sustainability:

Empowering citizens in urban planning encourages a focus on long-term sustainability. When residents have a stake in decisions, there is a greater likelihood of prioritizing environmentally friendly and socially responsible development practices.

Accountability:

A key aspect of citizen empowerment is holding decision-makers accountable for their actions. Citizens can play a vital role in monitoring the implementation of urban development projects, ensuring they align with the agreed-upon plans and benefit the community as a whole.

Conclusion

Citizen empowerment in urban planning development is a transformative shift toward more democratic, sustainable, and community-driven cities. By involving citizens in decision-making processes, cities can create spaces that not only meet the needs of their residents but also reflect the vibrant tapestry of their communities. Ultimately, this approach leads to more inclusive, resilient, and thriving urban environments that benefit everyone.



Chapter 3: Obstacles to a bottom-up approach of sustainable urban development

Working on the bottom-up approach to sustainable urban development has produced many positive outcomes; on the other hand, NESSIE has met several threats and challenges that had to face to prove the effectiveness of the bottom-up approach. Some of these threats included:

Lack of Resources: Grassroots initiatives often have limited financial and human resources, making it difficult to implement sustainable projects on a larger scale. Funding constraints can restrict the ability to carry out comprehensive development plans.

Inequality and Exclusion: Bottom-up initiatives may inadvertently exclude marginalized or vulnerable populations, as those with more resources and access to decision-making processes tend to be more actively involved. This can exacerbate social inequalities within communities.

Fragmentation: A proliferation of small-scale, localized initiatives can lead to a lack of coordination and cohesion in urban development efforts. This fragmentation may result in a disjointed and inefficient approach to sustainability.

Resistance from Established Interests: Bottom-up initiatives can face resistance from established institutions, political interests, and influential stakeholders who may be resistant to change or view grassroots efforts as a threat to their power or influence.

Short-Term Focus: Grassroots efforts may prioritize short-term gains and immediate community needs over long-term sustainability goals. This can lead to a focus on quick fixes rather than comprehensive, enduring solutions.

Limited Technical Expertise: Local community groups may lack the technical expertise required for complex urban planning and sustainability projects, which can lead to suboptimal outcomes.

Gentrification and Displacement: In some cases, bottom-up revitalization efforts can inadvertently contribute to gentrification, leading to the displacement of long-time residents as property values rise.

Inadequate Regulation and Enforcement: Without effective regulation and enforcement mechanisms, grassroots initiatives may struggle to ensure compliance with sustainability standards and environmental protections.



Political Interference: Bottom-up approaches can be susceptible to political interference or changes in leadership that may undermine the continuity of sustainability efforts.

Limited Scalability: While grassroots initiatives can be successful at the community level, scaling up these efforts to address broader urban challenges can be challenging, as they may lack the necessary institutional support and scalability.

Institutional Resistance: Traditional urban planning institutions may resist or be slow to adapt to bottom-up approaches, hindering collaboration and integration of community-driven initiatives into broader planning frameworks.

Public Apathy: In some cases, there may be apathy or disinterest among the general public, making it difficult to mobilize community participation in sustainable urban development efforts.

NESSIE has addressed these threats with careful planning, collaboration of partners, and by triggering the development of supportive policies and institutions that can bridge the gap between bottom-up initiatives and top-down urban planning efforts. The objective of NESSIE was finding a balance between grassroots innovation and established urban governance structures, as the key to a successful and inclusive approach to sustainable urban development.



Chapter 4: Future topics: recommendations

Sustainable urban development is an evolving field with ongoing challenges and opportunities. During talks and debates at the International Workshop, future topics relating to sustainable urban planning were discussed among delegations, participants, administration, PAs representatives and stakeholders, illustrating what recommendations have been gathered upon the next actions of the partnership.

The topics and the opinions/recommendations which rose during these confrontations and which could be the subjects of future proposals are:

Climate Resilience: As climate change continues to impact cities, there will be a growing need to design and retrofit urban areas to withstand extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and temperature increases.

Circular Economy: Urban areas will need to transition to circular economy models, focusing on reducing waste, reusing materials, and recycling to minimize the environmental footprint of cities.

Smart Cities: The integration of advanced technologies and data analytics, will play a crucial role in optimizing resource use, transportation, and infrastructure management.

Urban Biodiversity: Preserving and enhancing urban biodiversity will be essential for maintaining ecosystems, improving air quality, and promoting the well-being of urban residents.

Affordable Housing: Finding innovative and sustainable solutions to address the housing affordability crisis in many cities will remain a pressing concern.

Green Infrastructure: Expanding green spaces, green roofs, and green transportation corridors to improve urban air quality, reduce heat islands, and enhance the overall quality of life for residents.

Equity and Inclusion: Ensuring that sustainable development benefits all urban residents, with a focus on addressing social disparities, promoting social justice, and reducing inequalities.

Energy Efficiency: Continued efforts to reduce energy consumption in buildings, transportation, and industry through improved energy-efficient technologies and renewable energy sources.

Transportation and Mobility: Encouraging sustainable and low-carbon transportation options, such as public transit, cycling, and walking, while also exploring the integration of electric and autonomous vehicles.



Resilient Infrastructure: Developing infrastructure that can withstand natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes, to minimize disruptions and protect urban populations.

Urban Agriculture: Promoting urban agriculture and local food production to reduce the environmental impact of food transportation and increase food security.

Community Engagement: Enhancing citizen participation in urban planning and development decisions to ensure that sustainable solutions align with community needs and desires.

Waste Reduction: Implementing strategies to reduce waste generation and encourage responsible waste disposal and recycling.

Green Finance: Exploring innovative financing mechanisms and incentives to support sustainable urban development projects.

Cultural Preservation: Balancing urban development with the preservation of cultural heritage and historical sites to maintain the unique character of cities.

Health and Well-being: Designing cities that prioritize the physical and mental well-being of residents through access to green spaces, active transportation options, and healthy living environments.

Water Management: Sustainable water management practices, including rainwater harvesting, efficient water use, and flood prevention, will become increasingly important in urban planning.

Sustainable Tourism: Developing sustainable tourism strategies that balance economic benefits with the preservation of natural and cultural resources.

Post-Pandemic Resilience: Considering how the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic can inform future urban planning, including flexible workspace design, public health infrastructure, and resilient supply chains.

Regenerative Design: Moving beyond sustainability to regenerative design principles that aim to restore and enhance natural systems while meeting the needs of urban populations.

These future topics, ideas and recommendations reflect the complex and evolving nature of sustainable urban development within the solidarity tissue of the European Union, and the need of citizens to take part in the decision-making processes that have to do with their living spaces. Future proposals will strive to trigger more change so to make cities more and more environmentally friendly, socially equitable, livable and economically vibrant.



Chapter 5: Towards future cooperation - conclusions

As we look to the future of Europe, there is a shared commitment among the partners of our town-twinning relationship to build upon our successes and embrace new opportunities for cooperation.

Our town-twinning partnership has already enriched the cultural fabric of our communities through exchanges of art, music, cuisine, and traditions during this town-twinning and during previous projects. In the future, we aspire to expand these cultural interactions, facilitating more immersive experiences for our residents. This could involve joint cultural festivals, artistic collaborations, and Erasmus+ Youth programs, ensuring that our towns continue to learn from and inspire one another. We particularly intend to focus more and more on youth engagement, by promoting educational exchanges, internships, and youth forums. By nurturing the talents and aspirations of our young citizens in fact, we build a dynamic and forward-looking partnership.

Complying with European policies that promote democracy, solidarity and values, we will continue to celebrate and promote the wonderful diversity of the European heritage, that we all share. We will strive for inclusivity in all our projects and endeavours, ensuring that the benefits of our partnership are accessible to all members of our communities, regardless of background or identity.

The sharing of best practices that is possible with town-twinning fosters growth in various sectors, from tourism to technology. We envision a future where our partnership catalyses innovation, attracts investments, and creates job opportunities that benefit our communities.

The urgency of environmental challenges, as we have seen during this project, requires collective action. We are committed to leveraging our town-twinning partnership to address other sustainability issues. This may involve knowledge sharing on renewable energy solutions or waste reduction strategies that prioritize environmental preservation. Together, we can contribute to a greener future for our towns and the planet.

Naturally, our partnership is not immune to challenges and crisis, whether they be economic, health-related, or environmental. In the future, we will work to enhance our resilience by sharing knowledge and resources. This includes developing joint contingency plans and crisis response mechanisms that can benefit both communities in times of need.

Our partnership fosters the effective communication and the use of technology, in an increasingly digital world where these are essential. For future projects, we will invest in modern communication platforms and tools to facilitate seamless collaboration, ensuring that our towns remain connected and engaged, even when physical distances separate us.



As we envision the future of our town-twinning partnership, it is clear that our cooperation holds immense potential for growth, resilience, and mutual enrichment. By building on our European shared values, history, and aspirations, we can create a thriving and sustainable future for Europe, our towns and their residents. Together, we will continue to strengthen the bonds that unite us and look forward to the exciting possibilities that lie ahead in our journey of partnership and collaboration.



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