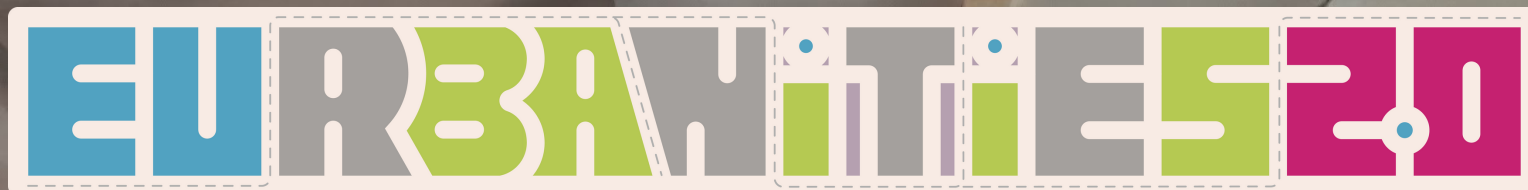




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GOOD PRACTICES ON LOCAL PARTICIPATION DURING THE COVID-19 LOCK DOWN



Comparative Research Network

Aims – People – Projects – Methods – Results

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eBook edited in the frame of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership
URBANITIES 2.0®

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INTRODUCTION

The Eurbanities 2.0 project started in autumn 2019. Some months later, just as with many European projects, it had to go online for an undetermined amount of time. It was a difficult and challenging period for every partner organisation, as they had to find innovative solutions for their everyday activities, starting from internal work within their teams to the running of their local and transnational projects.

For a couple of weeks after the COVID outbreak Eurbanities 2.0, just as any other projects and processes, everything had stopped. The consortium partners, including the lead partner Comparative Research Network, had to find new solutions and new ways to keep project activities running. Some meetings had to be cancelled, and others held online in order to discuss and test the possible ways that platforms could continue working together. Between April 2020 and September 2021 the project went completely online. Regular short online meetings, longer online transnational meetings, and one online hackathon were held during this period. The project continued smoothly, and went through a rich learning and co-creation process; something that the partners had never experienced before.

Besides these activities, Eurbanities partners also had to tackle their own individual local challenges. For example, they had to keep running their own different projects, many of them linked to community development and citizen participation. Those who were engaged with local communities had to maintain a connection with them, and those who were less focussed on specific locations and instead worked on an international level continued to observe and analyse the different solutions that other organisations had found in their countries/cities.

The following Handbook will focus on six stories illustrating how citizen participation and community development were maintained during the lock-down period. These stories describe will the tools and methods that were used or observed by each partner in their country or city; tools and methods that might also be useful for the communities of Eurbanities in case of a future emergency lock down – which, of course, we hope will never happen again.

ACTIONBOUND: Participatory walks during lock-down in Berlin

Comparative Research Network, Germany

Context

In 2019–2020 Comparative Research Network was engaged in a community building project in the Pankstrasse area in Wedding, Berlin. The Kiez(t)raum project had been launched and was supported by the local Quartiers management of Pankstrasse. The project was dedicated to facilitating a one and a half year-long participatory process to improve the area. In 2020, the project had to go online, due to Covid restrictions. In Germany, the lock-down imposed the closure of the majority of commercial units, restaurants, public and community spaces. However, citizens could keep moving around the city without any formal restrictions.

One of the main elements of the Kiez(t)raum project was the collection of citizens' perspectives and ideas about the Pankstraße area in Berlin-Wedding. The process included the collection of places with positive emotions, as well as some stories and insights from local citizens on what makes them happy and sad in their neighbourhood with the help of guided walks in the area.

Due to the pandemic lockdown, those stories could not be collected face-to-face and the planned guided walks became impossible.

The urge to move the whole project to a digital platform presented the opportunity to use a free web service called Actionbound[1].

[1] <https://en.actionbound.com>

Actionbound – a digital tool for enhancing community dialogue

Actionbound is an app for playing digitally interactive scavenger hunts, which helps to lead its users on a path of discovery. These multimedia-based hunts are called 'Bounds'.

The program quite literally augments our reality by enhancing peoples' real-life interaction whilst using their smartphones and tablets, with the use of GPS coordinates. The bound guided the participants to visit the top five favourite places in the neighbourhood. At each of these stops, users had to fulfil a task, such as commenting on what kind of change would be needed in one of the squares, posting a video of a thing on the spot they didn't like, and recounting their story of moving into the neighbourhood. The data was collected and uploaded to a database, which can be used for further input for the project.

The bound can be played anytime by individuals or groups, the data is uploaded in real time. In the case of the Kiez(t)raum project, it made it possible to keep a dialogue going with the citizens. Even during the lockdown, it also providing citizens with an interactive, fun walk, when no other activities were allowed and it unintentionally helped to increase the sustainability and visibility of the project.



Strength

The tool combines offline and online experiences in a creative, easily accessible way through mobile phones, whilst still providing real time feedback. The tool itself does not need any specific IT skills and can be easily created, adapted and monitored through the website.

Weakness

There are some limitations on possible activities using the tool. The service also depends on an external provider. The level of digital literacy to use the tools is not high, but some explanations and QR-codes are needed. A bound requires a permanent internet connection in public spaces.

Opportunities

Due to the easy creation and adaptability of the Actionbounds, the areas and topics where the tool can be used are wide. It also provides flexibility in timing, as people can decide themselves at what time to go through the tasks. Thanks to this wide adaptability, the tool has been particularly useful in attracting people of different social backgrounds of all ages to the participatory processes, even when social distancing was no longer compulsory. For example, flexible timing can ensure the participation of people who have greater time constraints (parents of small children, employees, etc) or who have limited physical capacities to go through the walk in one time (elderly, people with light disabilities).

Threats

The biggest threats are the dependency on external devices which could raise concerns about the digital skills needed by learners, the language used and administrative issues, such as data and intellectual property protection.



©COMPARATIVE RESEARCH NETWORK

Which aspects are transferable?

All the components of this practice are transferable. The walks with the gamification elements can be adapted to any relevant social topic in any public area. Collecting insights, discussing change and creating a debate can be transferred to many areas, countries, target groups or topics.

The Actionbound tool itself is highly adaptable too. Besides walks, it is possible to create quizzes, scavenger hunts in real time, and finally mini lessons with instant feedback from the learners. Still, while the actionbound can be adapted easily free of charge on the website, complete ownership of a bound requires a license.

What kind of change is created?

Those who went on the tour learnt about places that people liked and would think are worth protecting. This increased the feeling identity in a social-economic backward district in the city of Berlin. At the same time the walks helped to start conversations on how life in the neighbourhood could be improved. Live footage of places with trash, abandoned cars or places where people would love to make flower beds made this conversation more concrete and gave the local authority through the Quartiersmanagement Pankstraße a better understanding of which things and places should be changed.

Due to the lockdown people felt isolated and disconnected from even thinking about any changes they could make. The bound helped them to feel involved and to become part of a wider discussion.

COVID walks and neighbourhood engagement

At the beginning it was difficult to motivate people to take the walk. Many citizens felt sceptical when facing yet another digital tool. So, our team was happy to see the first person taking the tour. The person who took the tour was really touched. He had been living in the neighbourhood for many years but had not even been aware of many of the places he was shown. In the discussion and his contribution, it became clear that the walk stimulated many thoughts and reflections on gentrification, traffic, integration, urban design and environmental protection. The feedback and reflection was exclusive to this one man, as he did the tour alone, however all of his reflections had been made visible to the project team through Actionbound. It helped to start many other conversations with the citizens and was finally included in the action plan designed as the main outcome of the Kiez(t)raum project.

Conclusions

The bound combines collecting insights with educative moments in a playful way and is thus innovative – making both on- and offline insights visible in a new way. Without the pandemic, the tool would not have been used, but already now in 2022 we can say that Actionbound will become a regular option for this work.

The visibility of internal individual reflections of the learner/citizens, have helped to co-design and co-create public services and spaces, closer to the needs of the concerned.

Having this process online makes it flexible to use, for both individuals on walks and for groups, with a stronger gamification element, and even for learning in- and outside the training room.

The Actionbound can be adapted to any location or topic, providing a great tool for blended education and in the case of further lockdowns, a tool to reach out to the community.



Urban Hackathons during Covid lock-down in Bucharest



Association for Urban Transitions, Romania

The context

In **Romania**, a state of emergency was introduced mid-March 2020 with lockdown measures that included a curfew between 10 pm and 6 am. Any person leaving home at night had to carry a document attesting their valid reasons for doing so. Breaches of this rule were punishable by a fine.

In **Bucharest**, the lockdown experience was difficult for several reasons. As the capital city (with more than 2 million inhabitants), it has a high population density in areas built as large housing ensembles with tiny apartments and with very small balconies. These apartments are often used by three generations of a family: the couple who received it in the 70s or 80s, their children who are now adults and their grandchildren. It was difficult when the adults could not leave the house; but it was also risky, as those who left the house by filling in the declaration, could contaminate other family members, often from the most vulnerable age groups, on returning home. The population was allowed to take short walks around their buildings, but the restriction of using parks meant that the only places to walk were on the streets. The poor quality and quantity of public spaces throughout Bucharest became obvious to many inhabitants who had previously used the large city parks or green areas outside the city. Areas outside the city were now more inaccessible and difficult, since one had to give an official reason for doing travelling there. Several cities were even completely closed, although not Bucharest.

The situation also had several advantages. For example pollution levels from transportation decreased greatly despite increased mobility from cars (very few people dared to use public transportation), because the majority of people had to stay at home.

Although there is no quantitative data, it can be stated from several interviews that there was an increase in solidarity among neighbourhood community members. The neighbours were helping the elderly or people with bad health conditions living in the same building. Another positive effect was the use of the internet for everyday bureaucratic activities of citizens involving municipalities, tax agencies, or other public institutions.

Participatory project during the lockdown: Urban Education Live

Since ATU had given up paying office rents and utilities in 2018, their teams were already used to using online tools for their project work. Hence the lockdown did not cause major disruption to the association's day-to-day activities.

However, it affected the Urban Education Live (UEL) project where ATU, as a member of an international consortium had to redesign several activities, among others, a social hackathon planned in one of the project's pilot areas in Bucharest.[1]

The UEL project was about testing models of collaboration between universities/applied research organisations and urban communities for urban capacity building. Both the local communities and the learning processes of the students benefited from this collaboration model. Drawing on earlier lessons learned, the UEL developed a set of innovative approaches for inclusive, vibrant and accessible urban communities. In the case of Bucharest, the UEL project meant identifying social mapping tools for local [2]

[2] See more details of this project in the Eurbanities 2 handbook (Our Neighbourhood's Heroes 2) or on: <https://urbedu.live/>

outreach and for building up a local agenda with goals and indicators for neighbourhood improvement. There were two pilot areas:

- Bucurestii Noi, with a mix of collective housing ensembles and residential areas with individual houses placed under a lot of pressure for densification
- Calea Calarasilor – an area in the historical core, with a major mobility challenge (municipality plans for street enlargements), an interesting social diversity, and a high number of buildings of heritage value (but also lots of maintenance issues).

According to the initial plans, two Urboteca Hackathons were to be held in the two areas in order to provide a comparative approach between one area with a pro-active civic initiative group helped by academia (Bucureştii Noi), and another area suffering from a low level of representation of the local community (Calea Calarasilor). The role of the academia was then to be analysed in both cases with specific methods of interactions with the local communities.

The first Urboteca Hackathon was organised in November 2019, before the outbreak of Covid. On the basis of the participatory diagnosis made from face-to-face interviews, the first pilot area benefited from a three days gathering hosted in a space managed by a local NGO, in the heart of the Bucureştii Noi area.

The second Urboteca Hackathon, planned to be held with masters students, was due to be held after the outbreak of COVID, and as such had to be redesigned as an online event. It represented a strong challenge for the ATU. The organisation had keep to the planned activities and results of the international project, so therefore the online Hackathon had to be as effective as the first face-to face event had been in order to ensure an effective comparison between the two pilot areas.

It was difficult to reach out and convince masters students to register for an online experience that they had never seen before. This was also a challenge for the first face to face Hackathon, because of the novelty of the approach, bringing together students from different master programs, and initiating them to work together with neighbourhood community representatives and citizens on a community plan. Besides, for the online version, the targeted masters students were already overwhelmed by online classes where their professors struggled with new challenges in teaching and the ATU team was basically asking them to now spend even more time in front of their screens.

**REABILITAREA
FAÇADELOR ÎN
ZONE ISTORICE**

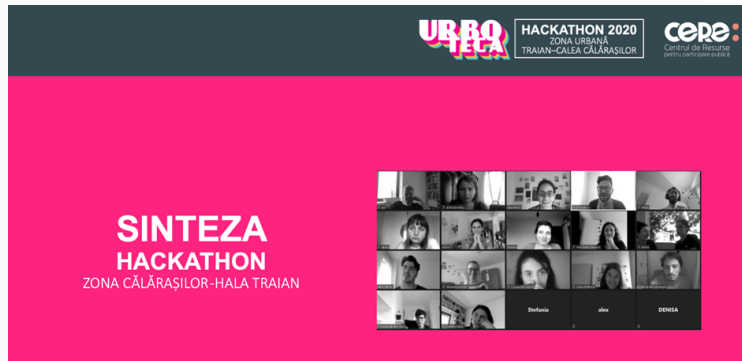
**SPAȚIUL VERDE ȘI
ÎNGRIJIREA
SPAȚIULUI PUBLIC**

**TRAFIC ȘI
MOBILITATE**



The three topics of the second Urboteca Hackathon: rehabilitation of historic areas buildings, green spaces and public space management, traffic and mobility
©ATU

For the Hackathon, a Zoom platform, a Miro board, and Google Drive PowerPoint presentations were used as the technical tools of the meeting.



© ATU

Learnings and transferable aspects

Better time management was required: because the time spent online was supposed to be shorter than that for the face-to-face hackathon, the designers for this second hackathon had to plan the sequences more precisely – in terms of specific objectives and activities. This is always a useful approach for the design of any event/workshop, be it on- or offline.

Better use of online information: since each participant was in front of a screen, desk research on specific questions was an important side activity that greatly influenced the quality of the conversations. This aspect could also be maintained in offline workshops as well as the electronic tools connected to the internet, which are always available.

Real time cooperation for producing an online presentation: the use of Miro or of Gdrive facilities or any other technical tools which allow live collaboration can be embedded into offline workshops. When people are in the same room, the discourse is naturally easier, but the results of these conversations can always be captured with tools that were mainly used for online events before the pandemic

Conclusions:

Lockdown conditions imposed a comparative approach not only as intended in the project implementation plan, but also in terms of comparing an online to an offline Hackathon. The objectives in both cases were to work together in several teams (defined by the topics of concern for both local communities that were previously identified through social mapping tools) in order to produce a simple, illustrated document presenting these concerns, but also some ideas on how to take steps in order to address them (a basic neighbourhood improvement action plan).



© ATU



COVID-19 community experiences in Gothenburg



Changemaker, Sweden

Compared to other countries, Covid-19 restrictions in Sweden were limited. The Swedish health authority used a holistic approach, considering the factor that an imposed isolation would lead to more mental diseases. In Sweden, there were no real restrictions but rather a recommendation to work from home, avoid using public transport, and limit the number of people in closed and open spaces at the same time. The real restrictions affected elderly people living in retirement homes, where relatives were not admitted. In general, elderly people were the most affected group, since they were advised to keep themselves isolated from their relatives and closest contacts.

The community reacted to this by creating spontaneous groups (mainly using Facebook), where people offered their time to help the elderly and people in isolation with the purchase of groceries, medicines and other necessary items. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/689025571839843/>

In addition to daily needs, some groups of people decided to organise entertainment events for people in solitary confinement. One example was the Norrlandsoperan, which performed music and dance in front of retirement homes and also by appointment for people in solitary confinement. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=510740832931931>.

A number of cultural actors, such as dancers, music performers, artists, and theatre companies, performed in gardens, in front of windows and balconies, for nursing home residents, and also individuals. This gave the opportunity to be entertained and to somehow break the isolation and feel less lonely.

The response was significant for the people who offered their time, and for the people who requested the services and booked entertainment performances. The initiative was a big success and was extended for a period of time, after the restrictions had been lifted. These kinds of actions can be replicated easily with many types of cultural performances, allowing people with mobility problems to continue participating in cultural events.



Experiences with participation processes during COVID in Austria



Stadtlabor, Austria

The impact of Covid on participatory activities in Graz

In Austria the first hard Covid lockdown lasted eight weeks, from mid-March to mid-May 2020. During this time nearly everything was closed down apart from essential facilities like supermarkets, pharmacies, etc. People were generally scared due to the uncertainty of the situation. The fact that Graz is close to Italy, where many fatalities occurred during the beginning of the first wave of Covid, added to this fear.

The company StadtLABOR had to reduce working hours (part-time work) and accordingly, they also reduced the scope of the social services provided. The neighbourhood offices were also closed due to regulations. The main challenge was therefore that employees were no longer present in the neighbourhoods, and could not support people who had been used to visiting the neighbourhood office and talking face-to-face.

So StadtLABOR tried other ways to get important information to the people. Different online platforms (Facebook, websites, WhatsApp groups) were used to distribute their regular newsletters in several languages. StadtLABOR gathered stories on how communities and neighbours could help each other during the lockdown (for example, help with shopping, telephone chains etc.) and also distributed them through their channels. It was heartening for StadtLABOR and its team to realise that some people took their advice and even came up with great ideas themselves to support each other.

Online consultation hours were also offered (for example via Skype), but these were not very common. However, people used the opportunity to call StadtLABOR and more phone calls than usual were received.

Safety was naturally the main need of the community. However, for many people, especially those living alone, the need for direct contact and exchange with others was very high during the lockdown. Through telephone contact and WhatsApp groups, this need was somewhat met. Several people who had joined together digitally during the lockdown also met physically when restrictions were lifted.

After the lockdown, several events continued to be held outdoors, by keeping the necessary physical distance (swap meets, bicycle service days, gossip cafés). These were very well attended, and it was noticed that many people had a great need to talk. Nevertheless, only a fraction of the planned activities and events could be held in all the facilities.

Even now it can be noticed that people do not like to go to events, especially not indoors, and that due to the extended use compulsory masks, less people come to the offices.

In summary, it can be said that many things can be organized in the digital space, but there is no substitute for direct interpersonal contact.

Participatory processes online: the case of the Ideas Workshop

Besides their neighbourhood offices, Stadtlabor also works on different participatory projects in Graz. Before the Covid outbreak a big project had commenced together with urban developers to build a so-called climate resilient neighbourhood in Graz. Stadtlabor's first task was to organize and moderate an Ideas Workshop, bringing together planners, experts and stakeholders.

The corona-related ban on events made it necessary to move the Ideas Workshop to the virtual space and to work with digital co-creation tools (Zoom, Axis, Wordcloud). The first challenge was that back then, not many people yet had much experience of using online tools yet, including the organisers of the event. So, an intensive testing of the digital tools was performed. Once the best suited tools had been selected, Stadtlabor documented how to use them and sent those instructions with an invitation to the participants. Since the whole workshop was online, invitations were sent by regular mail with a chocolate bar added to the envelope. It was sent as a little pleasantry, as a support for people to calm down in case any frustrations occurred during their online initiation. The workshop needed a lot of preparation since there were over 40 participants. A script had been prepared where every minute of the 3-hour workshop was planned. Five people were involved in the running of the workshop: one for general moderation, one for technical support, one for answering questions in chat and two more for documentation. All five were also involved in the moderation of the break out rooms. During the preparation, moderators were co-trained on how to talk in more detail and with more clarity with the participants than usual, due to the limited interactions.

The introductions round, moderated in a way that everybody knew exactly when they should speak, was followed by a collection of thoughts on how a climate resilient neighbourhood should look like. The collected ideas were presented as a Word Cloud Image, developed parallel to the discussion, in the background. Following that there was some input from planners and developers.



WORD CLOUD ON IDEAS

©STADTLABOR

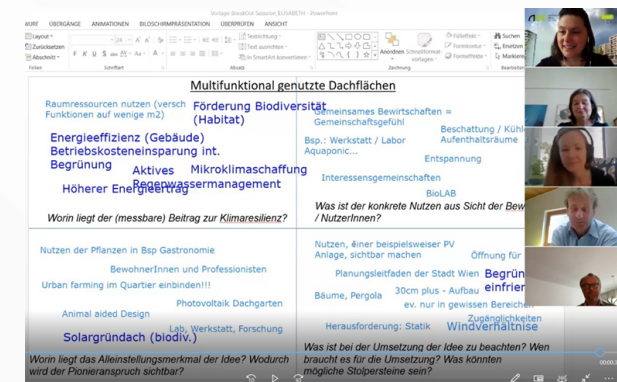
Following this, ideas and solutions for climate resilience were collected within the categories GREEN, BLUE and SOCIAL with the help of the AXIS tool.

©STADTLABOR

In the next step, ideas were evaluated by means of a "dot voting" – a total of 15 points were available to each participant, which could be divided amongst one or more of the ideas. A total of 107 ideas were collected, which were then combined into thematic clusters and ranked.

©STADTLABOR

The participants of the Ideas workshop were then split into five breakout rooms in order to deepen the selected ideas and to discuss them intensively in a smaller setting. At the end of the discussions participants came back into the plenary session, presented the results of their discussions and shared the results of their group's work. At the end, a feedback evaluation round was held where participants could give their feedback on the workshop's results.



©STADTLABOR

According to the feedback, the participants and organisers were quite impressed by the results of the workshop. They highly appreciated the richness of the ideation's results, in spite of the fact that no one among them had had similar experiences before. The careful preparation of the meeting was revealed to be extremely useful, although it was still very challenging to guide that many participants between Zoom and the Axis-Tool. It was a great learning experience for all; Stadtlabor has continued using these tools even after the lockdown period as it helps to outreach different people, for example, to participants living far from each other or having only limited time or physical capacities for a personal meeting.



Public consultations during COVID lock-down in Krakow

Jagellonian University, Poland



Context

In Poland, a state of epidemiological emergency was in effect from March 2020. Due to increasing cases of danger to the life and health of citizens, an epidemic state was then introduced. During the Covid-19 pandemic, all residents were ordered to wear masks, and to comply with current restrictions, orders and prohibitions. During this period the city of Krakow conducted a consultation process deciding the future of "Wesola".

Public Consultations in Wesola

The consultations covered the area of " Wesola " district in Krakow and concerned methods of land development. The area concerned by the consultation is located between Kopernika and Sniadeckich streets. The area has high historical, cultural and architectural values, and is part of the urban layout entered in the register of monuments.

As part of the consultations, which were divided into two parts and lasted from 5 November 2020 to 26 February 2021, a number of forms involving residents were carried out. A series of participatory planning workshops were held, an online survey was conducted, consultation forms were collected, an expert panel was held, which was broadcast online, and questions were collected from the participants of the consultation on Wesola to representatives of UMK and ARMK (Kraków City Hall and the Agency Development of the City of Krakow sp. z o.o., which is a municipal company whose basic tasks include the implementation of strategic projects for the city of Krakow, in accordance with the adopted Krakow Development Strategy – "This is where I want to live. Krakow 2030"). There was also a panel discussion, where those interested could comment, as well as a public discussion with the participation of City Authorities. Additionally, a series of individual interviews was conducted.

Prior to the participatory activities, a review of good practices in the development areas located in the historical city centre was conducted. A special website was launched on which the most important information about both the consulted area and the course of consultations were placed, to which everyone interested had access. The website significantly supported consultation activities carried out in Krakow by making it possible for the residents to familiarize themselves with the available materials at home. This activity also provided an opportunity for a quicker and wider presentation of the area, including footage from the documentation of the consultation area with a photographic drone. Anyone interested could visit the consulted area without risking their lives and health and familiarize themselves with the located buildings via their location and detailed photos. The website also included guides for people participating in the workshops – how to prepare for them, what to expect from them and, most importantly, sets of materials from which one could learn more about the consulted area, its conditions, inspirations and the consultations themselves. This form gives an opportunity for a matter-of-fact discussion during the workshops. It is worth noting that the workshops themselves, due to the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic, were also carried out through the Zoom application, which allowed the maintenance of a social distance, but at the same time permitted social relationships. The excellent practice of preparing a guide for participants on how to prepare for this form of workshop was also followed here. Detailed reports on the course and the results of consultations (including the postulates submitted and the responses to them) are also available to site visitors.

It is also worth mentioning that the implementation of the results of social consultations regarding the development of the Wesola area formed the project "Let's talk about Wesola". After the consultations, the city authorities decided to launch an information and consultation project and continue the discussion about the development of the area.

Such openness to the possibilities of the internet exemplified the importance of this type of activity as it allows access to a variety of sources of information for those who are interested. Residents feel informed and appreciated that they are contributing to the improvement of common areas.

Conclusions:

The practice that was undertaken during the public consultations of the "Wesola" area also can be adapted to the time after Covid-19. First of all, particular attention should be paid to the information processes that were widely published for a broader audience, which made it possible to better inform residents and encourage them to engage in the participatory process. The use of multiple sources of information also provided an opportunity to engage different social and age groups.



A POSTER ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION IN THE CONSULTATION, POSTED ON NEWS PORTALS WITH A DETAILED SCHEDULE OF THE PROCESS.

SOURCE: [HTTPS://OBYWATELSKI.KRAKOW.PL/AKTUALNOSCI/244663,2144.KOMUNIKAT.W.ESOLA...REJON.ULICY.KOPERNIKA--KONSULTACJE.SPOLECZNE.HTML](https://obywatelski.krakow.pl/aktualnosci/244663,2144.komunikat.w.esola...rejon.ulicy.kopernika--konsultacje.spoeczne.html)



Civic participation experiences during COVID-19 situation in Italy: FARE MILANO



Mine Vaganti NGO, Italy

Context

Italy was the first European country to be heavily hit by the pandemic situation. In March 2020, the Italian Government declared the first lockdown in order to try to reduce the spread of the infection. People living in Italy had to change their lifestyle suddenly, in relation to their jobs, social and private lives. The pandemic situation also affected the civic participation of citizens in public life. During this period during which people could not physically meet, discuss, and exchange ideas, different methods and tools enabling citizens to be involved in their social contexts were created and tested.

The consequences of the pandemic situation, and the continuous imposition of work and social restrictions aimed at protecting people from COVID-19 have contributed to transforming the approach through which people can be reached, as well as fostering their civic engagement. This has facilitated the creation of different civic participation experiences; both bottom-down, where citizens join movements and groups with the aim of helping, sustaining and supporting people who are in social or economic trouble within their own neighbourhoods, communicating mainly through social media channels; and bottom-up, where local entities (associations, municipalities) create the basis for fostering the participation of people in the public and social lives of their own cities, towns or villages.

Fare Milano initiative

Using the context described above, the initiative “Fare Milano”^[3], launched by the Municipality of Milan in 2020 can be taken as a successful example of civic participation. The local City Government sent out a call in April, asking Milanese citizens to contribute to the writing of a program document “Milan 2020”, with the objective of rethinking and reshaping the city following the pandemic period. Between April and June 2020, almost 3000 replies were received by the Municipality. The main topics concerned environmental sustainability, urban regeneration, entrepreneurship, and local transportation. After having received the citizens’ contribution, the local government launched “Fare Milano” in October 2020. The main aspect of the initiative was to enable the people’s participation in reshaping of the city. The initiative was structured as a big forum through which local organizations, associations, and stakeholders together with political institutions could contribute to re-designing Milan over the following years. From the replies that had been received during the previous months, seven main topics were selected: 1) the role of the neighbourhoods in the city of Milan (public transport, services, green spaces); 2) “A healthy city”, thinking about tools to help people be healthier; 3) “Milan’s Need”, with the aim of finding solutions to reduce social gaps between the citizens of Milan; 4) “A city that knows, creates and educates”, reflecting upon the cultural role of the city; 5) “Environmental transition”, calling stakeholders upon the formulation of new methodologies to protect the environment and fostering the green development of Milan; 6) “Smart and working”, based on the rethinking of the relationship between the job market and local services; 7) “To be born, to grow up and to live in Milan” with the aim of organizing events, social and cultural moments during the year, addressing children, youngsters and adults.

[3] <https://www.faremilano.it/>



OFFICIAL LOGO OF THE INITIATIVE

Different entities such as organizations, foundations and universities were entrusted to develop solutions for each topic. The process was divided into two phases. During phase one, 700 people from different backgrounds and situations discussed each topic, producing different solutions. In phase two, seven online meetings were held inviting citizens to participate and discuss the created solutions. Everyone had the possibility to express their ideas, thoughts, and comments through the platform “faremilano.it”, created for the event.

Conclusions

The initiative represents an unusual case of an Italian city where the Public Administration entrusts the reshaping of the city to a participatory practice. “Fare Milano” contributed to enabling citizens to participate in the social, public, and political lives of their city during difficult times nationally. This is a practice that can definitely be replicate in different cities (both in Italy and other countries), that enables people to participate and to contribute to the improvement of the social, economic, environmental situation, as well as public life. It also has positive effects on the private spheres of citizens.

Despite the initiative being launched and the actions carried out in exceptional circumstances, namely the pandemic situation, the methods and tools created can also be used in normal circumstances. Indeed, it would be interesting if the “Fare Milano” initiative could be adopted also by other cities and towns, as well as by small villages (regardless of the size of each location), not as an exceptional measure but as an institutionalized practice. This would be possible if local entities, both public and private, included in their organization chart a specific and tailored office with the aim of receiving citizens’ co-creative proposals about the present and future of the locality where they live. In this framework, the office in charge could evaluate, summarize, and present the proposals to the public as well as to experts who would be able to create a proposal, pending approval. Moreover, the use of social media channels and of digital tools, as a platform or blog could be fundamental for the inclusion of most of the population. Nevertheless, once the normal situation were fully restored, citizens could meet in “neighbourhood committees” (a practice already used in several realities), proposing initiatives, new ideas and presenting them to the general office of the city. In this way, starting from a smaller context, it would be possible to raise awareness among the citizens, and to stimulate their participation (even those who usually have no interest in active participation).

Conclusory reflections



Eurbanities 2.0 went back to “normal” functioning in September 2021. It was already the last year of the project, run by a consortium well accustomed to collaboration. However, at the first meeting in September in Graz, it was realised that some of the participants had never met before in person.

As was recounted above, many of the tools used during the lock-down continued to be used in offline meetings as well. The lock-down period showed the partners how to continue their interactions during periods between face-to-face meetings, and how to involve any participants in the meetings who for different reasons could not be present in person. It also provided a rich set of online tools, and platforms that could be maintained as the main co-creation tools, such as MIRO.

As observed with the small Eurbanities 2.0 community, participatory experiences under the Covid lockdown also provided some important learnings and positive impacts to local communities.

The obligatory use of digital tools during the lockdown period opened up new perspectives for citizen participation. The possibility to involve people at a distance showed a new way to enlarge the outreach of any participatory processes towards people who for some personal, family or health related issues could be present in person at the participatory meetings or events.

However, it also showed how vulnerable the use of digital tools could make people with few or no digital skills. It made clearer more than ever that digital literacy and the use of digital tools needed to be a high priority for any learning communities and educational policies. Fortunately, Eurbanities 2.0 is strongly engaged to contribute towards this objective.

Lock-down experiences also showed that even in the case of participants with strong digital skills, online meetings needed to be prepared with much more care and precision than face-to-face ones, and the discussions needed to be facilitated with more attention and patience than in a face-to-face set up. In the digital space people could lose track due to technical reasons or simply because of getting tired more easily and dropping out of the conversation without being noticed by the others. Once they had dropped out, they might feel discouraged, or even more isolated and abandoned than before. The above stories also gave some hints on how to introduce a personal touch, some type of physical experience into the process, even during the periods of social distancing and online meetings.

In spite of all the positive and interesting learnings of participatory processes, we know that for a large number of people, this period was too challenging and brought disastrous changes to their health, their economic situation, or their personal relations. It is clear that going back to the “normal” way of life, including face-to-face meetings and trainings was a relief for everyone. The tools and methods learned during social distancing will however stay with us and will be incorporated in different ways in our everyday work. The analysis of how it will happen is an interesting task for the future.



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