

Citizen engagement: a condition for sustainable, inclusive urban development?

Section: Society and gender

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[World Cities Day](#)

There has been, historically, discourses that equate urban development with urban expansion. In over half of Europe's urban areas, population decline is bound to reshape the way we envision urban development and urban expansion.

Priorities in cities have gone from adapting the space to growing populations to more intricate challenges trying to balance aspects of social inclusion, climate change adaptation, competitiveness in the global market and a sense of improving livability regardless of your socio-economical background. In many other areas of the globe, a very different process of unfolding.

Now, (mega)cities across Africa and South-East Asia are experiencing a demographic boom which will inevitably imply rapid urban expansion. The "impossibility theorem" defends, however, the idea traditionally marginalized economies will never reach Western levels of economic, social and environmental development via the same mechanisms, but is this fair? How are developing cities expected to meet the demands of their citizens? Is there a golden rulebook for urban development?

With emerging economies becoming key players in the international arena, their urban areas will be subjected to structural transformations. How can urban development be achieved without uncontrolled, hazardous, urban expansion? While many challenges will arise, this is also an opportunity to nurture knowledge-sharing between cities across the globe, co-creation and enough leverage to shift towards an economic system that will no longer see the Global South as resource extraction hubs and waste sinks.

Political will is however simply not enough. Studies show how citizen engagement can be embedded throughout the entire decision-making process. Policy-makers concerned with making the urban environment more livable should study and evolve together with the ever-changing perceptions of the citizens. No matter the state of the urban landscape, the city is what each individual's mind creates and perceives, and successful urban policies will be the ones taking it into account.