

Transformative change: Governing in and through Living Labs¹

In this talk Åsa and Nina presented an analytical take on the H2020 project REGREEN, on which they are performing an analysis of knowledge creation taking place within the urban living labs and its role for transformative change.

Transformative change refers to those systemic changes in society that reorganize consumption and production patterns, provoke new knowledge co-production and establish novel governance arrangements. Transformative change is needed in order to meet today's sustainability and equality challenges. Building transformative capacities requires open, explorative arenas for co-creation in which multiple actors engage in establishing breeding grounds for innovative approaches.

Sustainability transitions

"The emergence of persistent sustainability problems in such sectors as energy, transport, water and food have turned the attention of scholars from various scientific communities to the ways in which society could combine economic and social development with the reduction of its pressure on the environment. A shared idea among these scholars is that due to the specific characteristics of the sustainability problems (ambiguous, complex) incremental change in prevailing systems will not suffice. There is a need for transformative change at the systems level, including major changes in production, consumption that were conceptualized as 'sustainability transitions'." (STRN, 2010)



Overview of the three cases studies location in Europe

Projects aims

Using the research project REGREEN results and looking at three rather different urban living labs in the project as case studies, this project aims to expand our understandings of the knowledge co-creation processes within life labs, as well to understand how knowledge sharing, transfer and impact takes place and how does governing in the sense of "governance" of sustainability transitions develops through urban living labs.

Living Labs as an emergent governance structure for sustainability transitions

Living Labs are "user-centered, open innovation ecosystems based on systematic user co-creation approach, integrating research and innovation processes in real life communities and settings". (The European Network of Living Labs- ENOLL). One of their main characteristics is that living labs bring together actors from different levels of society, who together seek to analyse and reflect on current sustainability challenges in order to propose and experiment on possible solutions. Some of the orienting principles of living labs are seeking transformation through cycles of reflection, experimentation and learning, promoting transdisciplinarity and long term multi-stakeholder engagement and transferability and scalability of the results (Bulkeley et al., 2016; Schöpke et al.,

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2018). Thus, living labs represent an operational social structure but also a spatial medium for co-creation processes.

Living labs as an operational social structure

By joining multiple stakeholders from different levels of society in order to analyse a common issue a Living Lab becomes a new way of governance arrangement, which through processes of joint reflection, experimentation and learning could foster social changes such as shifting the balance of power between actors, privileging alternative worldviews or forms of knowledge and empowering vulnerable groups (Bulkeley et al., 2016; Evans et al, 2016). Hence the project seeks to answer the question of how are co-creation processes organized? And what are the underlying ideas of success taking into account the political context and the current distribution of power?

Living labs as a spatial medium

Living labs also respond to physical and temporal conditions, which might impact on actual practices and socio-spatial arrangements – e.g. by identifying the “reworking the relationships between social and material networks in the context of existing economic, social, and political trajectories.” (Evans et al, 2016:4) In this respect, the project poses interesting questions such as: What is the actual demarcation of the urban living labs? In terms of i.e.: space, time, actors, thematic focus/experimental interest, interventions? And how do these demarcations impact or change urban living labs?

Governing practices in ULL

Urban living labs could spark a change in the way urban sustainability issues have been governed so far, hence analysing the potential for transformative capacity building is paramount.

A governance analytical lens can help scrutinize potential development and adaptation of existing urban living labs as well as how to capture and diffuse lessons learned through iterative and reflexive approaches and co-creation processes. Exploring and analysing these processes, the collaboration between the multiple actors involved, the interrelatedness of organizational structure and spatial medium, and the institutional and political context and potential changes in it, could help bring forward new governance practices that are in a process of emerging through the urban living labs.

REGREEN Project

The H2020 funded REGREEN project promotes urban liveability, through fostering nature-based solutions in Europe and China using evidence-based tools and improved urban governance accelerating the transition towards equitable, green and healthy cities. It has three ULLs in Europe and three in China. More information on: <https://www.regreen-project.eu/>

References

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