

## Learning Cities: Catalysts for Sustainable Urban Development through Collaborative Partnerships

### Learning Cities: Veicoli di sviluppo urbano sostenibile tramite partnership collaborative

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#### Abstract

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This study explores the central role of learning cities in promoting sustainable urban development through collaborative partnerships. Based on the learning city model, this study emphasizes the importance of integrated strategies to improve community well-being. It examines the role of partnerships in addressing sustainability challenges, echoing the objectives of the Jean-Monnet SSIASDG network. Furthermore, it addresses the theme of social innovation and the interconnection between economic, political, and social spheres to foster change in cities. Despite persistent challenges such as institutional constraints and limited coordination, this study advocates a paradigm shift towards prioritizing the collective good. By promoting partnerships and embracing holistic problem solving, cities can become sustainable and resilient drivers, contributing to a more equitable future.

**Keywords:** Learning cities; sustainable urban development; collaborative partnerships; Jean Monnet SSIASDG Network; social innovation.

#### Sintesi

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Il contributo esplora il ruolo centrale delle città che apprendono nel promuovere lo sviluppo urbano sostenibile attraverso partenariati collaborativi. Basandosi sul modello della learning city, il saggio sottolinea l'importanza delle strategie integrate per migliorare il benessere della comunità. Esamina il ruolo dei partenariati nell'affrontare le sfide della sostenibilità, facendo eco agli obiettivi della rete Jean Monnet SSIASDG. Inoltre, si sofferma sul concetto di innovazione sociale e dell'interconnessione tra sfera economica, politica e sociale per favorire il cambiamento nelle città. Nonostante le sfide persistenti, come i vincoli istituzionali e il coordinamento limitato, il documento sostiene la necessità del cambiamento di paradigma che dia priorità al bene collettivo. Promuovendo le partnership e abbracciando la soluzione olistica dei problemi, le città possono diventare motori sostenibili e resilienti, contribuendo a un futuro più equo.

**Parole chiave:** Learning city; sviluppo sostenibile urbano; partenariati collaborativi; Jean Monnet SSIASDG Network; innovazione sociale.

## 1. Fostering Learning Cities for Resilient Futures

The interconnection between global sustainability and the future trajectories of cities is indisputable. With urban areas accommodating more than half of the world's population, their pivotal role in driving social and economic advancement as the primary engines of national and regional economies cannot be overstated. However, this prominence comes at a cost, as cities account for over 70% of global carbon dioxide emissions and are increasingly susceptible to the ramifications of extreme weather events, particularly because of their frequent proximity to coasts, floodplains, and arid regions. Nevertheless, the United Nations Population Division underscores that cities hold a central position in tackling the myriad global challenges of the 21st century, encompassing poverty, inequality, unemployment, and the imperative of climate change mitigation and adaptation to facilitate resident flourishing (UN Habitat, 2022).

While the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 – *Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable* – explicitly addresses the multifaceted role of cities in fostering inclusivity and sustainability, other SDGs, such as SDG 3 (health), SDG 8 (economic development), SDG 16 (peace), and SDG 13 (climate change mitigation) also emphasize the importance of cities. Additionally, SDG 4 (*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*) highlights lifelong learning as essential for building sustainable cities and achieving the 2030 Agenda. This urgency underscores the need for sustainability research and practice that focuses on the transformative potential of cities and regions (Wolfram, Borgström, & Farrelly, 2019).

Addressing sustainability challenges such as climate change requires innovative systemic solutions that transcend disciplines and institutions, often unfolding gradually (Edmondson, Kern, & Rogge, 2019). Adopting a sectoral approach, as advocated by Oksanen (2000), involving various levels of government and engaging diverse stakeholders and civil society is essential to adequately respond to communities' economic and social security needs while meeting the learning requirements of all citizens. Cities' sustainable development strategies focus on delineating tangible actions to bolster lifelong learning within communities, aiming to enhance skills and knowledge transfer for community well-being. The economic, social, and cultural progress of cities relies on integrated actions to fortify their capacity to respond to and adapt to continuous change (Unesco, 2016). Studies on city resilience indicate that those promoting inclusive learning and innovation processes tend to make more progress than their counterparts do (Tibitt, 2014). Engaging city stakeholders maximizes the benefits of resilience-building processes by promoting local capacities and pooling available resources (Gimenez, Labaka, & Hernantes, 2018).

City governments endeavor to address multifaceted climate and energy challenges by crafting sustainability and resilience agendas, which are typically reflected in planning documents, civic mandates, and associated policy and programmatic actions (Keeler et al., 2019). However, tackling intricate sustainability and resilience challenges demands transformative shifts and presents formidable hurdles to attainment (Fazey et al., 2018). Municipal efforts are often hindered by institutional constraints, organizational frameworks, limited cross-jurisdictional coordination, and a lack of expertise and capacity to navigate the unpredictable landscape of sustainability and resilience challenges (Polk, 2015; Norström et al., 2020). Overcoming these challenges requires cross-sectoral and inter-institutional partnerships and collaborations, enabling the realization of innovative and holistic solutions (Lozano, Barreiro-Gen, & Zafar, 2021). Partnerships with institutions such as universities are increasingly vital, aiding cities and municipal governments in addressing multifaceted challenges, devising innovative solutions, and bolstering capacity

for sustainability problem solving (Caughman, Withycombe Keeler, & Beaudoin, 2023; Groulx, Nowak, Levy, & Booth, 2021).

Emphasizing the imperative for greater transdisciplinarity and applied research in sustainability science and related fields, scholars advocate for accelerating the pace and real-world impact of discoveries aimed at enhancing urban sustainability and resilience (Keeler et al., 2019; Caughman et al., 2020). This emphasizes the need for deeper collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, particularly at the intersection of cities and climate change, to co-create knowledge and solutions (Hamdan, Andersen, & De Boer, 2021). For instance, adopting approaches such as the Whole Institution Approach (e.g., Schopp, Bornemann, & Potthast, 2020; Holst, 2023) allows a focus on organizational change to create more authentic learning environments. These collaborative actions play a pivotal role in fostering learning, innovation, and transformation at the local level with active community involvement and contribute to the global dissemination and scalability of solutions. Recognizing the significance of local stakeholders is crucial in ensuring the integration of SDG objectives and targets within local communities, as they offer invaluable insights into specific issues and obstacles given their direct involvement and proximity to local realities (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2022). Collaboration, partnership, and co-learning are foundational elements of learning cities, wherein learning occupies a central position in strategies, a facet that should not be overlooked amidst political actions primarily focused on economic development (Pavlova, 2018; Yang, 2012).

## **2. Learning Cities: Catalysts for Sustainable Urban Development**

An examination of various urban models developed globally reveals a common concern: the need to address challenges arising from urban development strategies that lack sensitivity to social and environmental sustainability. Urban models such as the Green City (OECD, 2011), Smart City, Healthy City (Kearns, 2012a, 2012b), EcCowell City, and Resilient City (OECD, 2018) each show distinct specializations, emphasizing technological aspects, public health, or creativity. Notably, initiatives such as the Learning City, Health City, and Green City often share common objectives, promoting city benefits through integrated strategies that recognize shared interests. For example, EcCoWell Cities, nurtured within the PASCAL observatory, are described as “cities that promote community, shared identity, and the well-being of all citizens” (Kearns, 2012a, p. 11), aiming for integrated development encompassing ecology, culture, community, and well-being within the framework of lifelong learning objectives.

The concept of a Learning City enjoys international recognition (Longworth & Osborne, 2010; Thummaphan & Sripa, 2022; UIL, 2015), tracing its roots to initiatives launched by the OECD in the early 1990s (OECD, 1992). These cities epitomize a developmental model aimed at integrating the economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions to enhance the talent of all citizens. Learning, central to the city’s ethos within the lifelong learning paradigm, is crucial for local and regional regeneration. As articulated by Norman Longworth, a pioneer of the Learning City concept, “a learning city provides both a structural and a mental framework that allows its citizens to understand and positively respond to change” (1999, p. 110). Consequently, it embodies a community committed to navigating global and local transformations, aspiring to prosperity, inclusivity, and sustainability (Faris & Peterson, 2000; Pavlova, 2018; Yang, 2012).

The concept of a Learning City transcends traditional educational settings, embodying a collective culture among a region's actors to design and implement social and economic innovations. This approach necessitates new strategies and the cultivation of novel relations across the economic, social, and cultural domains (Borkowska & Osborne, 2018). In constructing a Learning City, the focus shifts to supporting individuals of all ages in acquiring new skills and knowledge, fostering a lifelong learning culture in which learning is seen as a continuous journey rather than an isolated event (Piazza, 2015). A Learning City encourages individuals to chart their learning paths, promoting a sense of autonomy and self-regulation. However, when viewed through a social constructivist lens (Vygotskii & Kozulin, 1986), learning in the Learning City goes beyond individual agency and situational factors, intertwining with the broader social context that either stimulates transformative change or facilitates learning activities (Broek et al., 2023; 2024).

Simultaneously, the Learning City model challenges institutions to adopt a new vision of cities, fostering communities that recognize the value of learning as a tool to address economic, social, and environmental challenges and to plan for the future. Recognizing the significance of the Learning City model, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) initiated the development of the International Learning Cities Platform in 2012. This platform mobilizes cities and effectively harnesses their resources across sectors to unleash human potential. Objectives include fostering lifelong learning, promoting equality and social justice, sustaining social cohesion, and fostering sustainable prosperity (UNESCO, 2013; 2017).

The PASCAL Observatory (Place And Social Capital And Learning)<sup>1</sup>, established in 2002, plays a pivotal role in fostering learning cities and regions internationally. Through activities such as the Learning Cities Network (LCN), observatories facilitate knowledge exchange and innovation among stakeholder groups within cities to effectively address urban challenges. The LCN, building on the success of programs such as Pascal International Exchanges (PIE), engages local administrators, academics, and associations to network regional and national administrations, businesses, and work organizations, fostering collaboration and addressing diverse priorities, including integrated urban development, rural-urban learning initiatives, the role of cultural policies in city building, addressing disadvantages and fostering inclusion, relationship-based learning cities, and faith-based learning city development.

The Learning City model serves as a vital resource for national and local governments committed to fostering sustainable cities, prioritizing social dimensions over economic ones, and envisioning a society in which economic and social security contribute to overall sustainability. Social sustainability, integral to community processes, emphasizes equity in access to essential services, supportive cultural relations, political participation, and community-driven action, focusing on present and future societal improvements and maintenance for future generations.

### **3. Collaborative Partnerships in Learning Cities for Sustainable Development**

Learning cities worldwide face a common imperative of enhancing collaborative efforts and stakeholder coordination within specific partnership domains (Atchoarena & Howells,

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<sup>1</sup> PASCAL International Observatory: <http://pascalobservatory.org/>.

2021; UNESCO, 2020). This necessity arises from the complex educational challenges they encounter, which require projects that consider prevailing interconnections and dynamics.

Since the early 1990s, there has been international consensus on fostering partnerships to strengthen lifelong learning systems. Initially, a 1992 OECD Report advocated agreements among public and private stakeholders to coordinate learning activities, support citizen development, enhance workforce capability across different age groups, and raise awareness about available learning opportunities. This report also promoted the proliferation of Learning City models, fostering collective and collaborative learning for future transformations (OECD, 1992).

To establish lifelong learning societies, subsequent documents emphasize enhancing collaboration among diverse partners, with citizens playing central roles. Regional or local management of learning highlights the need for customized decision-making processes and services. Mobilizing regional and local authorities, civil society organizations, and advocates establishing partnerships is crucial for promoting lifelong learning principles and practices, which are seen as key for driving territorial rejuvenation (EC, 2000; EC, 2001).

The strategic components ensuring continual access to learning opportunities require a partnership approach for both formal and informal systems. These partnerships, aimed at yielding effective outcomes at the grassroots level, differ from previous systems characterized by competition and limited interaction among different stakeholders. These are the findings of several studies on learning cities, which indicate that the success factors illustrated in the cases of Thailand, Colombia, Germany, and South Korea include strong leadership, a clear vision and strategy, stakeholder involvement, cooperation across all sectors, and sufficient support resources (Thummaphan and Sripa, 2022). Examining learning cities in South Korea, local governance and partnership approaches are essential for building effective learning environments (Chang and Cha, 2008). Successful learning cities in South Korea have established networks involving the central government, local organizations, and private companies, all sharing similar goals and visions within their communities (Byun and Ryu, 2012). Adult educators play a crucial role in engaging with target groups and acting as agents of change (Broek et al., 2024). In addition to the partnership dimension, there is a need for collaborative governance that encompasses several conditions, including processes, structures, relationships, a common purpose, principled commitment, shared motivation, institutional design of basic protocols and ground rules, facilitative leadership, involvement of public agencies and non-state stakeholders, modeling, and a culture of learning (Piazza & Rizzari, 2022; Ofei-Manu et al., 2018).

Over the last two decades, multi-stakeholder partnership models have emerged as instrumental mechanisms for addressing societal issues, necessitating joint action across domains (Clarke & MacDonald, 2016; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Wheeler et al., 2018). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically Goal 17, emphasizes the importance of partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society for successful sustainable development (UN, 2015). Such collaborations can engender *hypercollective action*, offering a more inclusive coalition approach towards resolving the complex challenges targeted by the SDGs (Severino, 2010). Collaborative effort facilitates mutual learning among participating actors (Gray & Stites, 2013), with the risks and benefits shared among partnering entities (Banerjee et al., 2020).

Although partnerships hold promise, they do not automatically ensure coherence. Inclusive solutions have not materialized invariably, and territorial disparities may persist. There is a risk that learning subjects' interests may be sidelined if primary stakeholders prioritize



shared interests. Advocating local learning partnerships, particularly focusing on adult education, is imperative to prioritize individual and collective learning needs.

Learning cities, recognizing individual learning needs, and the efficacy of addressing these needs locally, view learning as a catalyst for generating new knowledge and innovation through stakeholder interaction (Longworth, 2007; Piazza, 2013). This collective effort underscores the shared responsibility of all societal members, including citizens, to contribute to the success of community-based learning initiatives.

Recognizing citizens as active participants in value co-creation processes emphasizes their involvement in designing quality learning programmes for sustainability. This engagement fosters manifold benefits, including citizen-oriented services, enhanced transparency, public trust in the administration, and bolstering social cohesion.

Quality education for sustainable development is vital for developing capacities for sustainability transformations by supporting higher-order learning and lifelong acquisition of skills for analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating complex information in decision-making, planning, and problem-solving (Piazza & Guevara, 2023). Cooperative learning relationships can strengthen group learning, partnerships, and collective knowledge generation, contributing to the reflexive and inclusive building of trust to develop solutions and innovations (Ofei-Manu et al., 2018).

In the current societal landscape, characterized by reinforced and emergent inequalities, bottom-up and top-down policies and practices involving all partners are indispensable to ensure learning opportunities for all ages. Therefore, for a learning city to explicitly promote lifelong learning, local institutions must intensify stakeholder involvement and foster a governance framework characterized by a culture of learning (Broek et al., 2024).

#### **4. Rethinking Social Innovation in the cities: the SSIASDG Network**

The European Union (EU) has played a seminal role in advancing global sustainability endeavors, notably by spearheading the formulation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and investing significantly in research and innovation through initiatives such as Horizon 2020. Within the framework of the EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020, the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) emerged as a cornerstone for regional development, marking a departure from conventional sector-based policies (European Commission, 2012). Unlike traditional cluster-centric approaches, S3 underscores a place-based innovation policy that accentuates regional strengths and potential. Through the entrepreneurial discovery process, regions delineate their distinctive research, innovation, and entrepreneurial assets (Foray et al., 2011), thereby strategically diversifying their economies in domains that exhibit the greatest socio-economic potential.

The implementation of S3 within EU regions has yielded promising outcomes, showcasing the transformative capacity of science and technology innovation to address regional challenges. Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) in isolation when tackling multifaceted societal issues.

A noteworthy paradigm shift is the growing recognition of the pivotal role of socio-ecological innovation in regional development. This paradigmatic evolution underscores the EU's commitment to fostering holistic approaches that integrate environmental, social, and economic dimensions, as evidenced by quadruple and quintuple helix models (Borkowska & Osborne, 2018).

In recent years, the EU has continually refined its regional and urban policies by embracing increasingly diverse approaches to promote economic and social cohesion. The EU's Smart Specialisation Platform emphasizes the indispensable role of civil society in translating research into innovation and fostering mutual learning (Foray, 2015)<sup>2</sup>. Despite the promising prospects of S3 for regional development, these challenges persist. Critics contend that this approach may inadvertently overlook certain sectors or marginalized communities (Weller & Rainnie, 2022). Hence, it is imperative to address these concerns and ensure that S3 initiatives are characterized by inclusivity and equity. Although S3 holds considerable potential for contributing to sustainable regional and urban development within and beyond the EU, transformative impacts remain constrained, as highlighted by Biermann et al. (2022). Achieving the UN's ambitious goals of eradicating poverty and safeguarding the planet necessitates more radical transformations than those currently offered by the SDG implementation frameworks.

The inception of The Social and Scientific Innovation to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SSIASDG) Network, funded by the Jean Monnet Foundation (2020-2023), builds upon prior discussions on S3 and its significance in advancing regional development and innovation. Led by the European Union Centre of Excellence at RMIT University, this interdisciplinary network brings together researchers and educators from various countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, the UK, and Italy. Its primary objective is to explore how S3, as a product of European integration and alignment with Horizon Europe and the SDGs, can serve as a catalyst for addressing global societal challenges.

By examining the nexus between scientific and social innovation, the SSIASDG Network aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how S3 can mobilize diverse voices and expertise to propel efforts towards achieving SDGs. By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange, the network endeavors to chart new pathways for sustainable development and societal progress. The project contends that addressing the multifaceted challenges facing our world requires more than technical resources alone (Wilson & Shortis, 2020). Obtaining the requisite funding for interventions across various domains, particularly universal and essential services, is equally pivotal. However, the predominant emphasis on market-based approaches prioritizes economic objectives over social and environmental imperatives. This underscores the significance of values and the imperative to recognize the intricate human dimensions underlying the issue (Holmes et al., 2020).

The Jean Monnet SDGs Network team advocates for a focus on the types of partnerships required for advancing progress, drawing on Sachs' (2019) seminal work as a foundational reference point. Building on the 'Propeller Model' developed during a preceding Jean Monnet Research Network project on the SDGs<sup>3</sup>, the propeller model offers a holistic lens through which to perceive the SDGs as interconnected and integrated rather than discrete targets (Guevara et al., 2020; Wilson & Guevara, 2020). Addressing the intricate, *wicked problems* intrinsic to the SDGs necessitates a departure from purely technical solutions towards a recognition of their political and moral dimensions (Auld et al., 2021).

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Smart Specialisation Platform see: <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/sonl> [accessed 19 April 2024].

<sup>3</sup>For more information on the Jean Monnet Sustainable Development Goals Network's projects, please refer to <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/schools-colleges/global-urban-and-social-studies/research/european-union-centre-of-excellence/projects/eu-role-implementation-sdgs-asiapacific>

Acknowledging the transformative potential of SDGs, it is imperative for advocates to undergo personal and systemic transformations.

Moreover, the implementation and conceptualization of SDGs must inherently embody transformative principles. Traditional measurement frameworks pose challenges to social equity, often privileging economic goals over social and environmental imperatives (Cashore & Bernstein, 2020). Indicators should endeavor to establish causal links between interventions and impacts, acknowledging the diverse ways in which individuals perceive and value progress. Enhancing partnerships and local decision-making processes are of paramount importance in translating SDGs into tangible outcomes. A place-based approach facilitates a nuanced analysis of local conditions and fosters community engagement in goal-setting and evaluation. Ultimately, achieving the SDGs necessitates not only systemic transformations, but also a profound commitment to inclusive and locally grounded approaches to development.

One strand of research focuses on creating Learning Partnerships for Social Innovation. Its objective is to explore, illuminate, and advance the dimensions of learning within the partnership and bottom-up approach of smart specialization, which brings together local authorities, academia, businesses, and civil society, working towards the implementation of long-term growth strategies aligned with the SDGs. However, learning endeavors have often centered on the content of sustainability, overlooking the process of 'doing' sustainability, which is inherently partnership-based. The goal is to offer a consolidated overview and analysis of EU learning regarding place-based innovation and its significance in addressing societal challenges. A key emphasis lies in researching the strengthening of partnerships across formal and non-formal education, central to achieving SDG 4, by utilizing the learning cities/regions model.

The University of Catania, a participant in the project, investigated the role of partnerships in addressing a pressing challenge related to school dropouts in the city, with Catania exhibiting the highest dropout rate nationally at 25%. This critical phenomenon correlates closely with juvenile crimes, underscoring the urgency of targeted interventions involving various stakeholders in the locale. To address this issue, the Metropolitan Observatory for the Prevention and Combat of Educational Poverty, School Dropout, and Juvenile Deviance (Di Profio, 2020; Saraceno et al., 2022) was established in 2021, under the coordination of the Prefect of Catania<sup>4</sup>. Beyond mere analysis, the Observatory intervenes with concrete measures to support the minors and their families. It operates based on effective synergy among diverse actors, including the Juvenile Court, Public Prosecutor's Office, Police Force, Catania City School Supervision, Social Services of the Municipality, Local Health Board, University of Catania, the Diocese of Catania, and numerous social and economic entities.

The analysis reveals that early school leaving is particularly prevalent in suburban and historically central areas of Catania, representing 'new suburbs' within the city and impacting a significant number of children and adolescents, positioning Catania nationally at the forefront in terms of dropout rates relative to its population. The constituent institutions of the Observatory underscore the genuine risk posed by this phenomenon, fueling informal employment, and serving as a recruitment pool for criminal enterprises. The Observatory has established three working groups. The first convenes institutions,

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/catania-e-operativo-losservatorio-metropolitano-i-minori-rischio>



trade unions, parishes, and third-sector entities to analyze the context of educational poverty. The second focuses on the socio-cultural, economic, and territorial vulnerabilities of neighborhoods, with the aim of implementing urban regeneration initiatives. Presently, a digital mapping of the city has been developed, culminating in an index of social vulnerability. The third group primarily engages police forces and juvenile and regular judiciary bodies in deviance and urban security. Based on the data collected and the activities carried out by the thematic groups, targeted initiatives are promoted for the construction of 'proximity infrastructures,' intended as a network of actions and services with - in some urban areas with a high index of social fragility - five schools identified as 'pilot schools'.

Insights gleaned from these groups inform youth deviation prevention and urban regeneration endeavors in collaboration with schools. Collaborative efforts have facilitated the reintegration of numerous minors into the educational system. In September 2023, the Observatory garnered recognition from the Ministry of the Interior as one of five Italian exemplars implemented within a Prefecture. Through cultural and educational outreach initiatives, the Observatory underscores the intrinsic importance of compulsory schooling and civic participation as future citizens of the city's life. The establishment of a synergistic partnership among institutions constitutes a virtuous communication circuit, complementing established practices and setting a noteworthy precedent. The University of Catania actively participates in these initiatives, acknowledging its social responsibility and offering a replicable model for other Italian contexts.

## **5. Some conclusions**

The concept of learning cities and collaborative partnerships for sustainability presents a promising framework to address the multifaceted challenges of urban development. By prioritizing lifelong learning and inclusive education, these initiatives empower individuals and communities to actively participate in shaping their future. Moreover, emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration fosters innovation and resilience, enabling cities to develop holistic solutions to complex problems.

However, despite their potential benefits, learning cities and their partnerships face several challenges. Institutional constraints, limited resources, and lack of expertise often hinder municipal efforts to promote sustainability and resilience. Moreover, ensuring equity and inclusion remains a persistent obstacle, as marginalized communities may be overlooked in the planning and implementation of initiatives. Additionally, achieving transformative shifts in policy and practice requires overcoming deep-rooted mindset.

To overcome the identified constraints faced by local governments and NGOs in developing learning cities, several recommendations can be proposed. Firstly, it is essential to ensure continuous political support by engaging city leaders, particularly mayors, in sustainability initiatives. Their active involvement can significantly influence the success of learning city projects. Regular evaluations should be conducted to maintain authenticity and avoid greenwashing or politically motivated actions.

Furthermore, the participation of a diverse range of stakeholders – including political leaders, bureaucrats, businesses, academia, civil society, and target groups – should be encouraged. This inclusive approach helps in effectively identifying and addressing needs, as demonstrated in various learning cities cases (Ofei-Manu et al., 2018; Facer & Buchczyk, 2019). Identifying specific needs within the community is pivotal, and

establishing spaces for collaboration where all stakeholders can contribute to problem-solving is essential.

It is also important to develop and sustain collaborative governance frameworks that facilitate cooperative learning relationships. This includes implementing clear decision-making processes, coordination mechanisms, and spaces for deliberative engagement. Integrating local institutions and policies under broader plans can create opportunities for interaction among participants, thereby supporting the learning initiatives. Adopting a holistic approach to coordinate initiatives – by involving various stakeholders from different fields – ensures the comprehensive implementation of sustainability projects.

Moreover, developing long-term plans that incorporate lessons from previous initiatives is crucial. Utilizing robust evaluation tools to measure the impact of learning initiatives is also necessary. Monitoring surveys, for example, can inform policy and improve project outcomes through continuous assessment. Implementing regular monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track progress and make necessary adjustments provides a framework for transparency and continuous improvement.

What emerges from the experience of the J. Monnet network is that sustainable urban development necessitates a paradigm shift towards recognizing the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental goals, prioritizing the collective good over individual interests. Partnerships play a pivotal role in navigating the complexities of urban sustainability (Sachs, 2015). By bringing together stakeholders with diverse expertise and perspectives, partnerships can foster innovation and holistic problem solving. However, it is essential to acknowledge that addressing urban sustainability is not merely a technical challenge but also a moral imperative (Wilson & Shortis, 2020). Decision-making processes must prioritize the well-being of communities and the environment over short-term economic gains.

Despite these challenges, the momentum behind learning about cities and collaborative partnerships continues to grow. Although many successful learning city initiatives have been documented, there is a need for greater dissemination and scalability of best practices. Future research should focus on identifying strategies for replicating successful models in diverse urban contexts, both within and beyond national borders.

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