

Toward a more inclusive and affordable neighbourhood change: the role of community-based actions

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In and beyond Europe today we witness strengthened structural spatial divisions within city neighbourhoods, with increased inequality and sharper lines of division. Continuing immigration and increasing socio-spatial polarization question social cohesion in local societies worldwide.

In Europe, high rates of unemployment, austerity and poverty make diverse neighbourhoods and local societies increasingly complex and contested. The polarisation of urban space exacerbates and ethnic concentration in neighbourhoods overlaps with situations of social exclusion and deprivation.

Against this backdrop, we witness a stalled urban regeneration investment as well as the welfare state provisions across many European cities and disadvantaged neighbourhoods, with finance enormously inhibited outside core economic areas following the 2007 financial crisis; dissimilar top-down revitalisation strategies have resulted in new urban dynamics and urban tensions, gentrification processes and social exclusion.

Urban neighbourhoods have become a privileged unit of policy intervention where community-based initiatives have been experimented with the aim to produce social cohesion and transforming power relations and socio-spatial inequalities. But the efficacy of community-based initiatives inspired by a social innovative approach needs to be further assessed in a condition when the State is constantly retreating.

Citizen-driven innovation increases the possibilities for a broader range of people to become directly involved in all stages of social action, but social and spatial barriers are strongly preventing community participation of most vulnerable groups. In some particular neighbourhoods diversity, affordability, and social inclusion are increasingly at risk due to gentrification and real estate speculation. The capacity of community based responses in mitigating the effects of negative neighbourhood change needs to be further assessed particularly in a condition when the State is constantly retreating.

The planning practice is today confronted with the necessity to re-consider its role: citizens are engaged and mobilized to demonstrate their ability in creating innovative solutions for important social issues, urban action is more and more a co-creation process that is changing the urban planning practices as well as the role (and expertise) of urban planners.

The Paper, thanks to the analysis of different European case study, will try to discuss to what extent a more inclusive and affordable neighbourhood change can be promoted through a complex set of path-dependent and contextual community development strategies instead of pure state-led or market driven approaches and top down approaches that have in many cases resulted in new urban dynamics and urban tensions, gentrification processes and social exclusion.