Citizens in urban development – intercultural and activist perspectives from the Helsinki Metropolitan Region

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’Just sustainabilities: re-imagining e/quality, living within limits’
SYKE, May 11, 2015
Urban cultures in change

- Helsinki Metropolitan Region follows international trends:
  - Increasing cultural diversity
  - Rise of DIY-urbanism, fourth sector activism – people shape the city by new forms of direct action

- More diverse lifestyles and relationships with the living environment > reconsidering conceptions of ’a good city’

- Changing participation cultures > reconsidering conceptions of agency, participation and ways to support citizens’ involvement in the society and the city making
Figure 1. Proportion of foreign-language residents in the populations of Helsinki, Helsinki Region and the rest of Finland in 2000–2014

Source: Statistics Finland
Figure 5. Trends in the numbers of residents in the ten largest foreign-language resident groups in Helsinki In 2000–2014

Source: Statistics Finland
Research on urban cultures, participation and activism in urban development...

**Urban activism as resource for the metropolis (2015-2016)**
- University of Helsinki Dept. of Social Research & SYKE
- Team: Pasi Mäenpää, Maija Faehnle, Harry Schulman, Maaria Linko
- Interviews, action research with activists including the project partners (cities, ministries, Kuntaliitto, SYKE, ARA)

**Multicultural urban nature (2008-2011)**
- University of Helsinki, SYKE, METLA
- Team: Harry Schulman, Maija Faehnle, Jaana Leikkilä, Anni Karlin, (Michail Galanakis, Liisa Tyrväinen)
- Interviews with 19 immigrants, 13 actors working with immigrants in the Helsinki metropolitan region

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...feeding discussion on just sustainabilities

Urban activism
- Citizens increasingly take in their own hands tasks traditionally seen as responsibility of the public sector. How could government organizations support this constructive activism, so that the actions of citizens and cities contribute synergistically to the cities’ innovation policies and goals on sense of community, involvement and ecological sustainability – while also seeking justness?

Interculturalism
- Citizens’ deeply held values, needs, abilities, interests and action capacities are increasingly diverse. How can the local urban nature and its collaborative planning support positive intercultural development – including just access to ‘good environment’ and to official processes of developing it?
Changing participation cultures

- Activists develop local participation culture, encourage action-focused participation
  - Food circles, recycling of food
  - Local neighborhood movements
  - Alternative urban plans and projects
  - Restaurant Day, Living Room Festival
  - Time banks, tool sharing, ride sharing…

- Cultural differences faced in Finnish collaborative planning processes
  - In some cultures the idea of citizens and government collaborating is weird
  - In hierarchical cultures participation may be seen to belong to specific family members only
Urban activism: Research questions

- What kind of civic activism
  - supports cities’ innovation policies and goals on sense of community, involvement and ecological sustainability?
  - creates income and can carry itself economically, for example in maintaining a community space?
  - can institutionalize and develop itself into a business and how does that happen?
- What kind of spaces and other facilities does activistic action need?
- What kind of practices and types of support would encourage activism that supports cities’ innovation policies and goals on sense of community, involvement and ecological sustainability?
- What can the public sector learn from activists in acting to meet these goals and citizens’ involvement in developing the metropolis?
How do activists and the public sector meet?

- Just access to services?
  - How are P2P services e.g. in time banks related to public services?
  - Could you earn extra public services (social and health care above the basic level) by providing services yourself?

- Just opportunities to develop the city?
  - How should the city consider citizen-led urban development, for example ‘More City for Helsinki’ Facebook group?
  - What are the risks and limitations of using FB groups?
  - Could the city use other FB groups?

https://stadinaikapankki.wordpress.com/

https://www.facebook.com/groups/184085073617/?fref=ts
Immigrants increase diversity of uses and meanings of urban space

- Practices of placemaking enriched by immigrants’ diverse backgrounds, e.g. family picnics, ’exotic’ sports, Russian tradition of using what nature provides
- Social integration of cultural groups supported especially by active forms of use of public space
- Identificational integration supported also by ’passive’ experiencing of local ecological characteristics, e.g. familiar plants help connect previous and current places of residence
- Urban nature attracts many immigrants, but not all – no single type of environment is good for everyone
Perspectives on just sustainabilities

- Seeking **spatial justice can challenge local initiatives**
  - The case of a synergistic service space: city is afraid of increasing costs, as supporting such a space in one area would make other areas require the same
- Activists and officials may have differing views on how inclusive or exclusive a particular initiative is
- Can the city **balance benefits of activism spatially** by ‘encouraging citizen-initiated processes’ in particular areas? How?
- Some immigrants **unsure about their rights to participate** in planning and policy-making, also information on participation opportunities can be difficult to get
Ongoing work – aims for the near future

- **Recommendations for the cities for supporting citizens’ involvement**, considering citizens’ diverse, multiple action capacities, and just access to relevant participation opportunities

- Including suggestions for practices of evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the attempts to support involvement > development of **democratic evaluation models**

- Strengthening the rising view that participants are not ‘only citizens’ but actors with many skills and capacities > increasing **identification and use of synergies**
Literature

Thank you!

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kaupunkiaaktivismi.wordpress.com