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Strengthening Capabilities

Generating Trust in Inclusive Planning Processes

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Introduction

While participatory practices like placemaking initiatives, co-creation, and community engagement are not new to city-making, they are still frequently criticized. Scholars often report participatory practices that are not inclusive of the affected communities, that lack meaningful decision-making opportunities, or that remain merely tokenistic¹. Additionally, influenced by NIMBYism², urban professionals do not always value direct citizen participation and view it as a risk for delays in development projects.³

Behind the numerous discussions on how participation is practically organized in city planning lies a fundamental question: what is needed to establish meaningful relationships between professionals and citizens, especially when young, marginalized people are involved? In this contribution, we approach this question by embarking on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (CA) that helps to specify the fundamental means and ends of participatory practices in spatial planning.

In the following, we first discuss the theoretical contribution of the Capability Approach to spatial planning. We then discuss how we applied the CA in a Horizon 2020 participatory research project, and its relationship with trust-building. The project applies a set of strategies promoting capacity and trust-building before actual co-creation can take place. We conclude the contribution by emphasizing that trust is a foundational precondition for inclusive participatory planning practices

inspired by the Capability Approach, and simultaneously, that enhanced trust can be seen as a positive capability outcome that enlarges young people's agency in spatial decision-making processes.

A Capability Approach to Social Justice in Spatial Planning

The Capability Approach is a well-known normative framework that articulates a vision of social justice, focusing on a person's freedom to live a worthy and dignified life⁴. Originating from political economics, human development, and political philosophy, it has influenced various disciplines, including recent urban debates that advocate for more just, inclusive, and human-centred cities⁵. Furthermore, Susan Fainstein⁶ identifies the Capability Approach as a valuable tool for addressing her three dimensions of The Just City — diversity, democracy, and equity — and for devising rules that can guide the evaluation of urban policy.

Ideas on social justice in urban discourses are generously fuelled via critical urban theory on for example the Right to the City developed by Henri Lefebvre⁷ and David Harvey⁸, and further urban debates on spatial justice⁹, yet the Capability Approach puts a slightly different emphasis to the question of justice. While Harvey's discourse moved towards the existence of a collective 'right to the city' and focuses on how the suppressed can undertake collective action to reclaim power in society¹⁰, the Capability Approach focuses

on what principles or rules of coexistence in society could ensure equal capabilities of different individual persons. It is needed to look at real-life situations, Sen argues, because formally distributed goods, rights and liberties do not necessarily do anything yet for what people experience in real life¹¹. For example: a person is formally entitled to vote but does not exercise this right because she believes that her vote will not lead to any impact. As a result, this person may experience less opportunity to be heard and to feel part of society than others. In line with this logic, a researcher or policymaker that operates from a capability-perspective is most concerned with defining whose opportunities are more marginalized than others, what personal, social or structural hindrances cause those inequalities, and how they can be overcome.

Acknowledging Human Diversity, Contextual Structures and Agency

From a spatial justice perspective, impartially distributed spatial resources, — think of public spaces, affordable housing or public amenities such as libraries or schools — that are equally available to everyone may be seen as a way to achieve just outcomes. Paradoxically, however, as contemporary political scientists argue, equal provision of such resources to the collective may, in fact, support inequalities, or in a worse case, repression of certain groups. As pointed out by Nussbaum¹² 'individuals need differing levels of resources if they are to come up to the same level of capability to function'. Recognizing

differences between people rather than seeing civic actors as universal and unified thus implies that certain groups may be treated differently in public policy than others if this leads to more just outcomes.

According to Sen¹³, focusing on resources as evaluative space in assessments would not be fair because equality of resources does not automatically lead to equality of capability. For instance, a disabled person might not have the same access to public transport as an abled person, or two children in the same neighbourhood might not have the same career opportunities because they grow up in different families. Sen¹⁴ argues that each person has a unique set of conversion factors that influence how means lead to ends. Conversion factors can refer to personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives and distribution within the family, or any other structures that a person relates to. Because the Capability Approach incorporates many circumstances from a person's real life, it is therefore sensitive to structures and situations that may produce social injustices in daily life. Finally, the Capability Approach puts a strong emphasis on people's freedom to choose and to act. It is not about what people eventually *do in life*, but about the factual freedoms they have to *choose what to do*. A well-known example that Sen uses to illustrate this, is the situation of two people who do not eat. Whereas the first person may suffer from injustice (and thus capability deprivation) because of starvation, the second may not be deprived at all if they make a deliberate choice to fast for religious or political reasons. The Capability Approach therefore also has a strong account of agency and self-determination. Since human beings are

able to reason for themselves, and even for the collective good, Sen argues, capability does not only refer to a person's level of well-being but also to a person's development towards their own values and goals.

UPLIFT: Capabilities in a Participatory Research Project in Amsterdam

The human centred perspective of the Capability Approach was the theoretical backdrop of UPLIFT, a participatory youth research project carried out between 2020 and 2023¹⁴. UPLIFT aimed to understand the patterns of inequality across Europe, focusing on young people, and to explore how their voices can be put at the centre of youth policy. Our core assumption in the project was that individuals need different levels of resources to achieve the same level of capability. This implies that certain groups may require tailored approaches in public policy to attain more effective and equitable outcomes. Through interviews and focus group discussions with young people, the project initially aimed to explore how they experience inequalities in the housing market, job market, and education system. Following this, young people and institutional stakeholders participated in a co-creation process to formulate policy solutions for the identified inequalities, with careful consideration of the varying capabilities within the target group of young people. The aim was for young people to actively contribute to policies that directly impact their capabilities and life chances. Policies tend to be more effective when they are tailored to the specific needs of the groups they aim to support.

Listening to and actively involving these recipients is essential to designing such policies. In UPLIFT, young people's perspectives are represented through Youth Boards — inclusive and representative groups that are structurally involved in the co-creation process. Together with institutional stakeholders, the Youth Board co-creates and agrees on a shared Reflexive Policy Agenda, which outlines proposed policy interventions under the stakeholders' competencies to address the challenges young people face.

This approach, however, depends on establishing trust among the various actors involved. Our research revealed that young people across the European countries we studied — particularly those who are more socio-economically vulnerable or come from more marginalized communities — tend to have relatively high levels of mistrust in institutions, which they perceive as disconnected from their life experiences. Consequently,



FIGURE 2: Young people in one of the co-creation sessions in Amsterdam (source: UPLIFT)

the policy co-creation processes faced a challenging beginning. Before meaningful discussions about the content could begin, it was essential to establish trust and a safe and respectful space for interaction.

Trust—building Strategies in the UPLIFT Project

This section addresses the strategies that were developed in the UPLIFT project to meet these preconditions for meaningful participation.

1. Establishing trust and building capacity within the Youth Board: A successful Youth Board depends on trust, respect, safety, and cohesion among its members. Without these elements, members may limit themselves to non-controversial opinions, hindering the co-creation process. To build trust and cohesion, icebreakers, excursions, and social events can be organized and tailored to the needs and interests of the members before the co-creation activities begin. Just as trust-building is essential, capacity-building is also key to a successful co-creation process. Youth Board members may need to develop skills in communication, listening, presentation, and reflection, as well as gain a solid understanding of the 'system world' of policies and institutions. Acquiring these skills and knowledge will support them throughout the co-creation process and provide lasting benefits in their personal lives.

2. Trust and capacity building within the group of institutional stakeholders: When multiple institutional stakeholders are involved in the co-creation process, it's important for them to take time to get to know one another's competencies and objectives before the actual co-creation activities begin. This helps build mutual trust among them. Capacity-building activities can run in parallel and contribute to the trust-building process. To make the co-creation process successful, policymakers and professionals may need to change their mindset and become more open to the opinions and ideas of young people, especially if they have always worked in a top-down manner. Training and expectation management sessions may be helpful in this regard.
3. Establishing trust between young people and institutional stakeholders: Managing expectations and clarifying communication between policymakers and young people is essential at the onset of a policy co-creation process, particularly in the capacity-building stage — when Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders meet in separate sessions. Young people should understand what to expect from institutional partners, while institutions must recognize that young participants are there to be heard and to seek solutions to their challenges—not merely to generate innovative ideas for institutional use.

Having a so-called 'youth facilitator' can be beneficial in bridging the gap between the Youth Board and institutional stakeholders, as well as in building trust

among Youth Board members. This facilitator, ideally from the same age group as the Youth Board members, should understand both the language and culture of young people and those of the institutional stakeholders. Youth facilitators can serve as liaisons between the two groups, facilitating communication and collaboration within and outside joint co-creation meetings, throughout all phases of the co-creation process.

Core moments in the co-creation process involve joint sessions where Youth Board members and institutional stakeholders exchange ideas. These interactions can be challenging due to the power imbalance between the groups. To ensure young people's voices are heard, it is important to have neutral moderators who are objective and do not have a direct stake in policymaking or implementation. Additionally, to prevent institutional stakeholders from dominating discussions, moderators can ask them to apply a listening mode, where they simply listen to the Youth Board's experiences and proposals without any immediate reaction. Finally, in their feedback to the Youth Board, institutional stakeholders may cite the difficulty of changing current systems and policies ('the system is like this, these are the rules'). However, this should not be an excuse for inaction. Even small, subtle changes — such as altering professional attitudes or providing better information — can have a significant positive impact on young people's capabilities and overall trust in institutions.

Trust: A Necessary Precondition for Capability-based Participatory Planning

From a capability perspective, participatory practices should recognize and respect the diverse perceptions of citizens in urban areas. The Capability Approach emphasizes the need for a deep, localized understanding of people's personal, social, and environmental situations, while also highlighting each individual's agency to express their needs and engage in urban development processes. Guided by these principles, the ultimate goal of participatory approaches should be to enhance people's capabilities and agency in shaping urban or policy development.

However, a capability approach-inspired participatory process involving both policymakers and policy recipients can only yield fruitful results if there is sufficient trust — both between the policy recipients and policymakers, and within each group. If such trust is lacking, trust-building strategies must be implemented before the actual co-creation process begins, as trust is a necessary precondition if progress is to be made. From the perspective of the Capability Approach, trust can be seen as an important conversion factor, required to transform the resources invested in the participation process into valuable enhancements of capabilities and functionings.

Participatory practices can also function as a means to strengthen trustworthy partnership relations. This is especially so for marginalized youth not familiar with participatory decision-making processes. For them, the

feeling of being recognized, able to trust others, and of experiencing agency can be a significant boost to their personal development. As the UPLIFT project showcased, building trust between youth and institutions may be just as important in a co-creation project as the eventual policy or urban development interventions that come out of it.

We therefore conclude this contribution by stating that successful trust—building processes — that go beyond tokenism and lead to meaningful relationships between institutions, professionals and citizens —, are crucial in youth development and should be considered an inherent goal of participatory practice in spatial planning itself.

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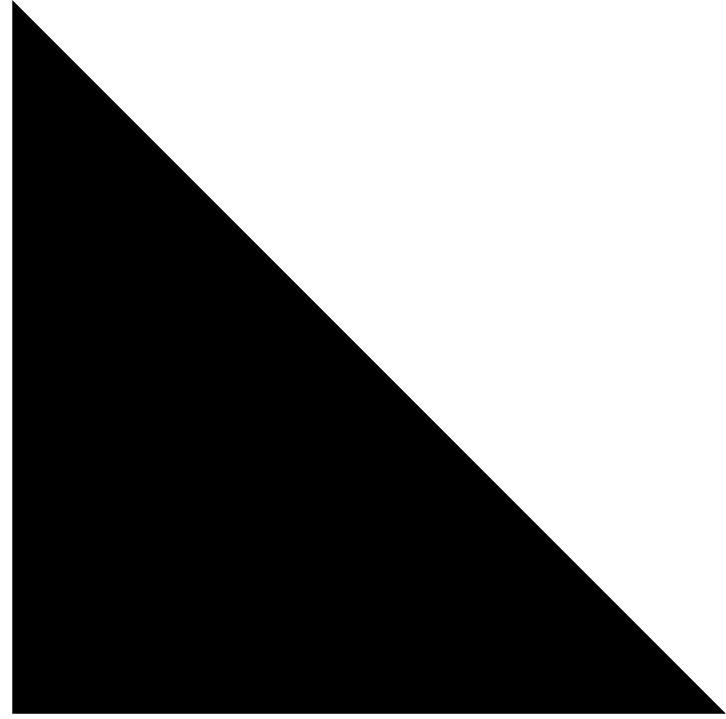
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The project analyzes existing data to identify factors contributing to socio-economic inequality, particularly in housing, education, and employment, across 16 urban areas in Europe. In eight of these areas, partners conduct further research through interviews and workshops with young people to investigate their personal experiences of inequality. In four cities— Amsterdam (The Netherlands), Barakaldo (Spain), Sfântu Gheorghe (Romania) and Tallinn (Estonia)—the project also focuses on policy co-creation, carrying out four parallel participatory processes with young people, each with a different focus – housing, education and NEET youth.

In collaboration with institutional stakeholders, young people in these four cities design potential policy solutions to address their inequality experiences. Through this so-called reflexive policymaking process, UPLIFT aims to create a new, sustainable, and participatory co-creation model where young people actively contribute to policies that directly impact their capabilities and life chances.
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Biographies and Colophon

Paulina Budryte is a researcher and Associate Professor at Kaunas University of Technology. Her academic interests span urban development, spatial planning, and placemaking, with a strong focus on fostering sustainable and vibrant urban environments. She is also actively involved in research on environmental and urban sociology, exploring the social dynamics that shape cities. Paulina's work delves into decision-making processes for implementing sustainable development measures, aiming to bridge policy and practice. Additionally, she investigates questions in risk sociology, utilizing advanced mapping and statistical tools to analyse and visualize complex urban challenges. She is/was a part to the teams contributing to Horizon2020, Horizon Europe, COST Action, DUT, Erasmus+ and several nationally-funded research projects.

Zemartas Budrys is the co-founder of The Critical, a research and design agency, where he assumes the role of Sustainability Lead. He oversees projects focused on sustainability, cultural strategies, place regeneration, and strategic design. His interdisciplinary interests span philosophy, culture, ecology, and urban development. With a robust background in cultural analysis and a profound respect for nature, Zemartas brings a sensitivity to the interconnectedness of life and a commitment to sustainable living. His cultural expertise informs a deep understanding of human and social dynamics, shaping his holistic

approach to coexistence and ecological responsibility.

Brigitte Felderer, curator, head of department "Social Design-Arts as Urban Innovation" and vice rector at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. In her projects as well as in her teaching, Brigitte Felderer pursues trans-disciplinary and cross-topic questions, deals with the culture of everyday life and explores the manifold connections between science and art movements, popular and high cultures. Her research interests are focusing on topics and tactics of societal empowerment as well as on the emancipatory potentials of design and art. Among her last projects is the exhibition "The Fest. Between Representation and Revolt", shown at MAK-Museum of Applied Arts 2022/23.

Veronika Hackl curates, mediates and facilitates works in the field of site- and context-specific art and urbanism. Her focus lies on collaborative processes, anti-discriminatory art practice and community-orientated work. With an anthropologically trained eye and a sense of humour, she encounters people, places and circumstances. She addresses urban matters with a focus on social and ecological sustainability by examining the seemingly everyday, the unquestioned, and the self-evident. She has worked for and collaborated with institutions such as Kulturhaus Brotfabrik Vienna, Lungomare Bolzano, Social Design Studio (University of Applied Arts Vienna) and KunstHausWien, and is a co-founder of the collective Studio Fundus.

Sebastian Hafner has a background in Social Ecology. He works for *forschen planen bauen* - Thomas Romm ZT on planning circular mass strategies as well as focusing on co-creative and participatory approaches in urbanism and ladscape design. In the context of the research project Trustmaking he initiated "Soil Kitchen". As part of the Klima Biennale Vienna he was also involved in the arts-based research project "Reverse Imagining Vienna", tracing back and developing speculative futures for anthropogenic materials in the urban metabolism using scientific and poetic methods.

Martina Gentili (PhD) is a researcher and policy advisor with extensive experience in urban development, territorial analysis and policy analysis. She currently works as a researcher in the Local Development Unit at ARCO - Action Research for CO-Development, a research centre in Prato, Italy. Her research activities focus on the connection of urban issues with sustainable human development, with a particular attention to urban and housing inequalities and participatory methods. Martina's work emphasizes the importance of engaging disadvantaged communities in policy-making to create effective inclusive solutions for urban and social challenges. She is also involved in the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the Agenda 2030, integrating these global priorities into local dynamics to promote more equitable and sustainable development. She has participated in several European research and training projects in Italy and the Netherlands, with a cross-country comparative approach. She holds a Master's degree in "Urbanism" from Delft University of Technology and a PhD in "Urban

Studies and Regional Economy" from the Gran Sasso Science Institute.

Joris Hoekstra (PhD) is an assistant professor of Housing Studies at TU Delft and a visiting professor at the University of Free State, South Africa. He specializes in comparative housing research, housing policy, social housing, resident participation, and youth housing. Joris led a work package in the H2020 UPLIFT project, focusing on improving opportunities for young people. With extensive publishing experience, he has authored around 50 academic articles, many of which are highly cited. Beyond academia, Joris serves on the supervisory board of a Dutch housing association.

Céline Janssen is a postdoctoral researcher in urban development at TU Delft and specializes in collaborative governance, participatory planning practices, social sustainability and social justice theories. Her research position is connected to the Foundation for Knowledge on Area Development (Stichting Kennis Gebiedsontwikkeling), a foundation with over 50 public and private actors in Dutch practice of urban area development. During her PhD, Céline was affiliated as a visiting researcher at The Challenge for Urban Futures Platform at the University of Vienna. She holds a Master's degree in Urbanism from TU Delft and studied temporarily at Istanbul Technical University. Beyond academia, Céline has served several advisory tasks, among which being a member of the advisory committee at the Creative Industries Fund in the Netherlands.