Urban policy development: Mobilising citizens

The SEiSMiC project tackles Europe’s biggest urban challenges by improving research and helping citizens get more out of it. SEiSMiC is a mutual learning action plan — with city residents on one side, urban researchers on the other, and a shared goal of healthy, vibrant, inclusive cities at its heart.

Its objectives and ambitions are to:
- create a platform for dialogue and mutual learning between citizens and leaders in social innovation;
- mobilise a wide range of urban actors, especially in civil society;
- stimulate projects between stakeholders in the SEiSMiC networks; and
- introduce a social dimension to the research and innovation agenda of the Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) Urban Europe and to European urban policies.

It’s all in the mix

SEiSMiC is about connecting urban populations to research and policy making. To forge these connections, the project has set up civil society networks in 10 countries, creating opportunities for 400 activists, artists, academics, policy makers, social workers and...
community initiative leaders to learn from and inspire one another. Many participants had never met before, much less worked together. A teacher from a technical high school swapped stories with a city neighbourhood manager; an innovator in sharing-economy experiments traded ideas with an architect; a civil servant working on urban regeneration gained new insights from a street performer. The mix of SEISMIC network participants is unique.

Smart, sustainable, inclusive

Each national SEISMIC network has identified common urban problems and possible solutions. Participants want better cities for themselves, their children and their neighbours, and are determined to put ideas into action.

Over the next two years, the national networks will split into smaller working groups to implement projects. Consortium partners will regularly consolidate results and pass on recommendations to European researchers and policy makers.

Experiments in urban governance

In most of the SEISMIC networks, participants seek new ways to cooperate and new rules to link participatory and traditional democratic networks. Civil society’s input must be better exploited. This can translate into know-how that improves policy and fosters social innovation in city governance. Experimentation is vital, but can flourish only with reduced regulation. Participants have suggested using policy labs and have proposed earmarking 5 to 10 percent of public budgets for promising social innovations. Greater access to open data would stimulate the applications that use it.

Accelerating neighbourhood transformation

The impacts of the recession require a transformation of disused public spaces and empty office buildings and business parks. Communities and civil society can take part in local planning through collaborative mapping. One of the more promising solutions is urban food production. Policies should encourage this by freeing space and promoting social initiatives. An inspiring example presented at a SEISMIC network gathering was “Park(ing) Day”, an annual event in which parking places are temporarily converted into public greens. Another case study, this one from SEISMIC participants in Italy, is City-Hound, a social network that spreads information about abandoned buildings in Rome to encourage their revitalisation.

Towards a new urban economy

Some SEISMIC national networks explore projects related to the sharing economy. These initiatives stimulate the economy and social cohesion, but some argue they pose unfair competition to traditional business. Citizens from all the project countries worry about unemployment; the difficulties in getting social initiatives onto an equal footing in public procurement; and the desire to create more self-sufficient, resilient local economies. The examples of social impact bonds and payment by results in the UK and the Netherlands demonstrate that social innovations and social values can be financed with private money.