New urban governance in SEiSMiC countries

In the spring of 2015 the first thematic national workshops were held in each of the 10 SEiSMiC countries. Discussions addressed different challenges, expectations and hopes as societies strive for new, more socially innovative forms of urban governance. Some of the most pressing topics in five selected countries are described below.

**Hungary and the Czech Republic**

Gender politics drove discussions in both countries. Hungary focused on the theme of new urban governance shaped by a gender perspective. Participants at the country’s first national workshop noted that “civic engagement” processes often reflect existing power structures and inequalities and ignore gender differences and society’s diversity. The SEiSMiC Gender Action Plan and Toolkit, released in November 2014, underlined the need for women’s civil society in its multiple forms to be represented in local participatory processes and social innovation networks. This is to ensure that gender equality is recognised within
urban governance and social innovation policies. The Hungarian Women’s Civil Society Network, which is represented in the Hungarian SEiSMiC NaNet, constitutes a “shadow” government in Hungary. Each member shadows a counterpart in the government’s cabinet and provides critical feedback on national policy debates, pointing out the exclusion of women’s needs and interests in a male-dominated political scene. The Czech NaNet also works to link social innovation with gender equality issues. An emerging proposal is to use the tool of gender budgeting, meaning a gender-balanced approach to policy making as well as resource distribution. The Czech NaNet believes this would improve accountability and transparency in policy design and ensure a more equitable use of public resources.

Austria

Multi-level governance topped the agenda at Austria’s first national workshop in Graz. A crucial notion when discussing new forms of urban governance is better involvement of citizens in urban development and decision making. New models of participation are needed and the consequences for urban administration, economy and governance have to be understood. Because urban policy makers are embedded in regional, national and European policy processes, the impacts and limitations of new urban governance approaches need to be investigated in the context of these larger systems. This might imply a shift of values, the better consideration of local actors along the entire decision chain, a new way of aligning different policy processes, or the re-definition of regional governance.

Sweden

Members of the Swedish NaNet gathered near Gothenburg to reflect on transformative processes in urban governance. As in other SEiSMiC national contexts, this refers to the long-debated shift from “government” to “governance”. The latter involves a more multi-level approach to public administration, endeavouring to establish modes of communication and collaboration that break out of vertical “silos”. In this context, the specific issues discussed ranged from the need for advanced and developed knowledge and new methods for transdisciplinary process management, to the challenge of creating a governmental system that can adjust better to local, grassroots and small-scale incentives.

Italy

SEiSMiC delegates met in Naples to discuss innovative multi-level governance in cities. The need to increase partnerships among different urban stakeholders and to improve cross-sector communication was discussed in the context of collaborative mapping, new urban economies and civic hacking activities. The ultimate goal is for local authorities and citizens to collaborate in the monitoring of policy implementation.

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The SEiSMiC project helps tackle Europe’s biggest urban problems by engaging citizens, identifying social innovation needs, and contributing to future urban policies and research strategies. SEiSMiC has received funding from the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 644223.