

Innovative approaches in governance management in the time of COVID-19: Learnings from the Danube Region and other European cities

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Abstract

In the last two years of the pandemic era, there is a growing awareness that cities need to change their governance management to provide sustainable functioning in the future. As cities around Europe try to ease pandemic restrictions and move to a 'new normality', institutional learnings and knowledge generated from the COVID-19 crisis are even more relevant to building sustainable, resilient, and socially inclusive cities.

The paper aims to explore approaches and solutions of the AGORA and European cities to overcome the barriers of restrictions caused by the COVID-19. The paper addresses the question of the continuity and changes in public administration processes under pandemic conditions and how they have changed practices from the pre-covid times. Two tools were used for the research, the cross-comparison survey of the AGORA cities and online webinars with European cities. The results have shown that there is a need to improve management processes and develop innovative policy instruments and governance models to better respond to future challenges and through activities of the local government structures promote social and solidarity economy activities and social cohesion policies to reduce the impact of the current and to better respond to future crises.

Keywords

governance management, urban governance, policy instruments, Covid-19, Danube Region, Europe

1. Introduction

In 2022, two years after the coronavirus epidemic was declared a global pandemic by the WHO, we are beginning to see the first - perhaps permanent - signs of the changes brought to our daily lives due to the COVID-19 crisis. One of the biggest changes in the post-pandemic world is certainly the way people perceive the natural and the built environment (Honey-Rosés, et al., 2020). The pandemic has been seen as an accelerator for the processes of public services and economic activities digitalization to escape the economic and organisational collapse and revolutionising the way "digitality" is understood (Agostino, Arnaboldi & Diaz Lema, 2021; Soto Acosta, 2020).

Cities as big urban agglomerations with the highest density population were at the heart of the COVID-19 challenges. City authorities were on the frontline (Acuto, 2020) and as key leaders they had a great role in finding effective solutions to minimise the negative consequences of the COVID-19 virus. Governing the processes during the pandemic time was triggering innovative approaches in multiple fields, social, economic, environmental, and technological. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 experiences implied searching for new skills, capacities, agendas, and values from controlling, profitability, caring and mutuality (McGuirk *et al.*, 2021). The capacity of urban governance was seen as an important factor in preventing and controlling the COVID-19 situation, especially in the later stage of the pandemic time (Chu, Cheng and Song, 2021).

“Urban management” was initially coined by the Urban Management Program of the World Bank and United Nations without a precise definition (Stren, 1993), to deal with urban and economic development in developing countries (World Bank *et al.*, 1991), proposing urban management as a business-like approach to government (Mattingly, 1994). Since this first document, the debate on city government, management, and governance has become richer. At the turn of the century, with an inquiry into managerial studies, Chakrabarty (1998) proposed to organise urban management around the five essential functions of management - planning, organising, staffing, leading, and controlling - to adopt an integrated vision of urban management. Nowadays, the more comprehensive term of “governance” is preferred as it refers to the way local, regional, and national governments and stakeholders determine plans, financing, and management for urban areas: in urban governance, collective goals are formed and pursued at a local level (Peters & Pierre 2012, Tihanyi *et al.*, 2014). In addition to these definitions, contemporary conceptualisations of governance place emphasis on the interdependence between governmental and non-governmental bodies (Lovan, Murray, Shaffer, 2017), highlighting the increasingly relevant role assumed by citizen participation in urban development processes.

The work presented here aims to precisely investigate those challenging aspects that emerge from the above presented reconstruction of urban governance at the local level: management, participation, and spatial planning. In this paper the governance management is coined as a task performed by the authority in pursuing the urban development. Based on scientific research conducted within a European project, the article aims to contribute to bridging the gap between academic research and the needs of local administrators and contribute to the discussion of current issues and future directions of urban governance as stressed by da Cruz *et al.* (2019).

The main aim of the AGORA project (Advanced cogeneration options for reintegrating local assets. (<https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/agora>), co-financed by the INTERREG Danube Region Programme, is to support the change in the process and workflow of the public administration (PA) on the local and regional level by enhancing their capacities to become credible and active leaders of the local regeneration processes through the development, testing, and embedding of innovative and operational policy instruments for urban assets revalorization and recovery and return them into the productive value chain of cities to plan safer and more resilient urban places. Since the project started already in the time of the COVID-19 restrictions (July 2020), cities additionally needed to adapt to the new situation quickly. Especially the questions how to govern, manage and adapt their processes in line with the COVID-19 restrictions affected by the limitation of physical contacts were topical.

This paper explores the pandemic-related challenges, approaches, solutions, and learnings in urban governance management of 10 AGORA territorial partners in the Danube Region (DR).

The results revealed that the AGORA cities adapted to new fast-changing circumstances and their creativity in developing approaches and solutions to overcome the barriers of the COVID restrictions. The research findings provide insights into the level of adaptability, variety of the approaches, and solutions to minimise the negative impact on the cities' functionalities.

2. Methodology

This paper addresses the aspect of governance management - it reveals how cities adopted their regular decision-making processes, public administration processes and how they integrated various stakeholders into these processes under the circumstances of COVID-19 pandemic situation.

To get in-depth knowledge and insights into different approaches' cities developed, two tools were used for the needs of the survey. The first one was the qualitative cross-comparison survey on innovative solutions of the 10 AGORA territorial partners developed during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic era. The second tool were webinar series where experts and activists coming from the AGORA and other European cities shared their experiences and knowledge on governance management regarding the pandemic situation.



Figure 1. Ten participating pilot-area partners in the AGORA project. Source: Eutopian (2022).

2.1. Cross-comparison survey of the AGORA cities

Within the AGORA project, the data were gathered within one of the project's working packages titled Operational Analysis (UIRS, 2021) via a questionnaire divided in three main topics: governance management, public participation, and urban planning. These data represented a valuable input for the qualitative cross-comparison study developed by the AGORA scientific partners under the supervision of the Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia.

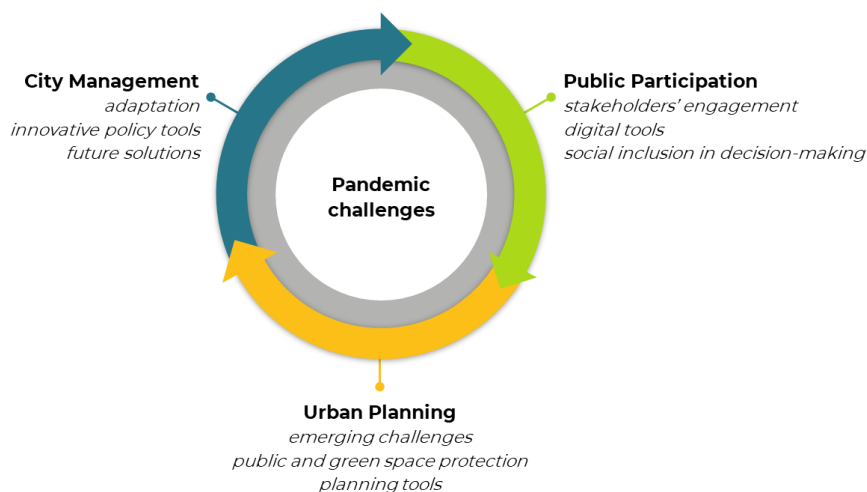


Figure 2. Pandemic Challenges: areas surveyed by the Operational Analysis. Source: Eutropian (2022)

The main aim of the survey was to get in-depth knowledge on the state of the art in the AGORA cities and their challenges on the pandemic situation in the first wave of the COVID-19 to support them in the process of seeking and developing new approaches, and on the other side to share their experiences and solutions among cities themselves within the AGORA consortium.

2.2. Webinars on pandemic experiences and learnings from European cities

The analysis on the pandemic experience and learnings throughout Europe has been done through a series of webinars by Eutropian (Polyak, 2020) with the aim to share stories and experiences of adaptation and solutions of cities during the pandemic time. A series of public weekly meetings, called “cooperative city in quarantine” (henceforth CCQ), organised between March and July 2020 with activists and urban planning experts from different countries and backgrounds provided a better understanding of the situation and activities in different contexts, and the most pressing issues they were and are still facing. Special attention was given to civic initiatives and collaborative urban development processes since they played an important role in addressing the economic crisis of 2008 and ensured a sustainable resilience of the economic and social system. The Eutropian, as the moderator of the process, felt the need to investigate more deeply how the various initiatives were helping to respond to the pandemic emergency. Each webinar focused on a specific theme pertaining to the urban emergencies, of particular interest for a comparison with the work of the AGORA and the Operational Analysis, thus the webinars addressed the topics such as community centres, urban commons, mobility, public life, and social inclusion.

Pursuing the process further in line with the AGORA project aims, an international exchange on how to develop urban regeneration with the social economy in times of the pandemic was organised where representatives from the partner cities of Cluj-Napoca, Prague, and Szarvas who shared their experience with an expert from Lisbon.

The results of these webinars proved to be useful for a better understanding of the issues covered in AGORA’s Operational Analysis as explained in the next section.

3. Results

This section reports the main themes that have been revealed through the cross-comparison survey among AGORA cities and the webinars addressing the wider European context. The presentation of the results is

structured along the framework used in the AGORA survey. The results reveal that the pandemic situation was challenging for all cities and other stakeholders, as well as that some of them were able to pinpoint the issues in greater detail than the others.

3.1. Pandemic challenges in the management of cities

Adaptation of management processes was a big challenge for the AGORA cities. The shift from regular procedural habits to fast and more flexible decision making was the necessity for the efficient city management. Constantly monitoring the epidemiologic situation and communicating with sharing information on the course of the pandemic as well as providing guidance to citizens was recognised as an important factor by the AGORA cities.

Several measures and policy instruments for the needs of efficient management of internal and external processes were implemented. Internally, city authorities organised the work of their employees from home full-time or part-time, except the ones working in emergency services. For the needs of improving the safety of employees in the PA, some cities equipped offices and their employees with disinfectants and masks.

In some cases, e.g. in Kranj, some regular administrative processes were simplified like temporarily removing administrative barriers and shortening deadlines.

Communication activities were an important part of management processes internally and externally. Due to restrictions affected by minimising physical contacts, several measures and digital tools were developed or implemented. In all AGORA cities communication activities among employees, partners, and customers moved from physical space to the virtual environment supported by existing online communication tools.

In Chisinau, the multifunctional platform with interactive maps was used during the time of the pandemic. Aside from information of public interest, it was used also for educational activities for students and supported the digital registration system for COVID-19 patients who were treated at home. For Cluj-Napoca, the pandemic initiated the improvement of the accessibility to public services and the development of new digital instruments. Prague and Koprivnica started to use more digital platforms for their communication activities.

Since the business sector was one of the most affected and to support business activities, some AGORA cities implemented financial policy instruments. For example, Koprivnica implemented the “Anti-corona” economic fund with the aim to financially support companies, crafts, and jobs in industries whose business and liquidity have been greatly disrupted by the emerging crisis. In the case of Zenica, the procurement for basic groceries for vulnerable groups was implemented and as a result, food packages have been delivered to 3.000 households. They also temporarily reduced the fee for the use of public spaces, increased the investments in infrastructure to support the local economy, increased incentives for agriculture, offered subsidised credit lines for local firms, deferred payments for investors, and expanded the bike-sharing system. To support vulnerable groups and the ones involved in the pandemic emergency activities (e.g., health, civil protection, etc.), Koprivnica covered expenses for kindergartens for a few months for parents who have lost their jobs due to covid restrictions and the ones with the minimum wage.

Some innovative governance and organisational models were implemented in some cities too. In Zenica, the city upgraded the pre-existing structures and chain of command, established already in 2014 when they faced the consequences of floods. In addition, volunteers were working on the disinfection of hallways

in apartment buildings and the ones from the Red Cross were helping to provide services for elderly people who were not allowed to go outside.

Urban governance faced a major challenge as social inequality increased in the aftermath of the pandemic. The City of Lisbon was therefore asked to share its work with the AGORA cities, and in a CCQ webinar (Eutropian, 2020a). Founded in 2010, the Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Program promotes strategic partnerships within priority intervention neighbourhoods, areas with critical social inequalities, infrastructure problems, and environmental issues. Through its long experience, the program developed an efficient ecosystem in which communities are making their voices heard, influencing political decisions, and contributing to a better distribution of funds for inclusive projects, and proving that local communities, disadvantaged groups and NGOs empowerment are crucial to face socio-economic crises.

3.2. Public participation in decision-making processes

Engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes was one of the biggest challenges of the AGORA cities during the pandemic. All government bodies, local PAs, civil society, private sector, and foreign organisations had never worked so close as during the pandemic times. To overcome the barriers of social distance in pandemic situations and to strengthen the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making processes, a constant and transparent dialogue was crucial. Moreover, a clear feedback between all parties proved to be very important for providing solutions based on solving problems and meeting the needs of citizens. The AGORA PAs followed such principles by being in close and constant contact with the representatives of civil society, NGOs, local volunteer organisations, and private companies. Existing digital tools (e.g., social media, video conference platforms, etc.) were the key main instruments for communication in a moment of forced social distance. The engagement of stakeholders was also improved through a clear communication strategy as well as precisely defined responsibilities of each stakeholder.

At the beginning of the first pandemic wave in the spring of 2020, the AGORA cities engaged mainly stakeholders from health, educational institutions, utilities, and other sectors in decision-making processes, later also other stakeholders depending on the city's needs were engaged, mostly via civil operational protection forces. Zenica also engaged the private sector, especially small entrepreneurs as the most affected in the lockdown period.

During the first wave of the pandemics, mostly mobile phones and emails were used to support the inclusive communication activities and decision-making processes, later also other online communication platforms were used. In Koprivnica and Kranj, at an early stage the stakeholders were not keen on online meetings because in some cases the online communication cannot adequately replace the physical communication due to difficulties of misinterpretation and technical difficulties, mostly internet disruption. For the needs of more efficient engagement of citizens and stakeholders in decision-making processes, many cities needed to find new solutions. For example, Cluj-Napoca used a mechanism called "A single Cluj" conducted by the most important NGOs, private and public entities which acted as a social catalyst during the first wave of the COVID-19. A tool was used to engage stakeholders to support solving specific issues related to the COVID-19 emergencies like providing medical help or organising support for vulnerable groups, reducing social barriers and inequalities. To ensure the continuation of developing the city development strategy "Cluj-Napoca's 2030 strategy", the city used the Civic Innovation and Imagination Center of Cluj-Napoca which acted as an important factor in supporting the efficient digital decision-making process. Kranj used two tools to support citizens of different age groups, a special telephone number just for citizens to help them to solve their emergency issues and an existing tool, the "KrPovej" communication system accessible via the municipal website. To improve communication in both

directions, some surveys among citizens were developed. Slavonski Brod developed an online tool to support civil protection activities, the web GIS maps allowing easy and interactive access to all vital information needed for quick actions, especially pandemics and the risk of new natural disasters to which the city area is exposed (earthquake). The city developed some other customised services like e-Market for local farmers, they supported cultural institutions in organising online performances and exhibitions, etc.

The data collected in this research pointed out the increased relevance of communing during and in the post-covid times. The Urban Commons were studied under the CCQ research (Eutropean, 2020b) and tackled as all those spaces, services and resources that are directly managed by local communities for their well-being. During the first wave of COVID-19, commons proved to be essential in providing essential welfare services to the marginalised members of local communities, calling, and strengthening citizen participation. The webinar featured some inspiring case studies, including the Plateau Urbain, which illustrates such solidarity and participation clearly. Contacted by the Municipality of Paris, the Plateau Urbain was asked to help with food distribution, as the initiative runs its activities in empty and/or abandoned buildings. By having established participation and volunteering mechanisms among commoners, the Plateau Urbain was reactive to the situation and could contribute to the work against the crisis.

3.3. Urban planning and pandemic challenges

One of the greatest challenges at the time of the first lockdown in spring 2020 was for citizens of not only the AGORA cities to quickly change their habits and lifestyles, especially in urban areas. As a result, many cities acknowledge that they need to improve their existing environment, especially in high-density urban areas and change their regular urban planning approaches and goals and devote more attention to environmental issues in the future and to find new ways of integrating the aspect of the pandemic into the urban regeneration processes.

Local strategic development documents (e.g., Urban Development Strategy, Smart City Strategy, etc.), adaptation strategies and city planning guidelines were recognised as an important supporting tool for urban planners in future planning by cities Chisinau, Koprivnica, and Slavonski Brod. For Cluj-Napoca, the pandemic has been a turning point to focus their vision in a more resilient urban future as the main development goal of the Integrated Development Strategy Cluj 2030.

The most common issues that the AGORA territorial partners recognised as relevant for urban planning in relation to the pandemic challenges are sustainable mobility, green and open spaces, social infrastructure, and data (see Figure 3).

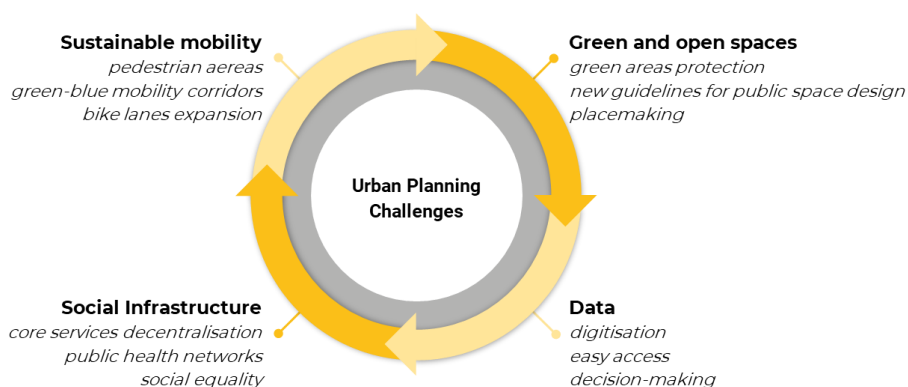


Figure 3. Major urban planning topics in the pandemic time. Source: Eutropean (2022)

Sustainable mobility and green open spaces were the leading topics in the time of pandemic. The AGORA cities recognised that they need to improve their mobility infrastructure because the pandemic situation affected and changed the mobility patterns, the use of the public transport was limited and alternative modes of the transport like bike infrastructure were preferred. At the same time, outdoor activities like hiking, trekking, and cycling became more popular in the AGORA cities. Aside from the inadequate mobility infrastructure, also a network of green and open spaces needed to be addressed in the planning agendas of many AGORA cities.

As the pandemic affected all sectors of society, the AGORA cities were considering the possible future changes in the planning concepts, procedures, and approaches in addressing the pandemic issues relating to spatial, social, demographic, economic and information aspects of spatial planning. Greater attention in these endeavours was given to the needs of citizens and improvements of the social infrastructure and services network(s).

Data gathering and sharing are very important factors in better managing the pandemic processes. Any statistical data can serve as an important input for responsive future urban planning. The possible availability of more tailored information on the needs of various groups of people, especially vulnerable groups, was recognised as an important planning asset by many AGORA cities.

Another stressed topic was the role of public spaces and placemaking, i.e. creating community around a place through the design. The pandemics opened many new questions such as the relation between public and private/commercial/community uses of spaces. The webinar on "Public Life" (Eutropan, 2020c) brought together urban planners and activists offering relevant learnings from the City of Vienna, where the public administration was very collaborative and made experimentation possible. Many pop-up bike lanes were designed and used with a low bureaucratic procedure. This approach fits Vienna's goal of being a polycentric walkable city: a redistributing strategy bringing positive change while taking environmental, social, and infrastructure issues into account.

4. Discussion

There were several lessons learned from the pandemic crisis in the Danube Region and in other European cities.

Fast and efficient adaptation to new circumstances required different approaches in **governance management and the PAs processes**. Cities were prompted to develop and implement innovative measures and policy instruments to mitigate the effects of the pandemic by themselves instead of relying on national guidelines, which were lacking during the first wave of the pandemic. However, to effectively manage the pro-corona activities, **clear guidelines and protocols** were needed. Even though the strategies weren't perfect, they presented the basic framework for governing actions. Based on the testing era in the second wave there is an opportunity to reframe and improve them because anticipatory governance frameworks are important for providing directions in future emergency situations (Garavaglia, Sancino and Trivellato, 2021, p. 76).

The pandemic experience showed that the governance needed to proact and adapt to future challenges and not rely just on executive role (Gao and Yu, 2020, p. 178). The pandemic implied on emerging **new innovative governance models** which have a potential to reframe politics and decision-making processes, develop new institutional settings and invoke new forms of power (McGuirk *et al.*, 2021, p. 188).

The **capacity of the governance** of cities played an important role in preventing and controlling the virus (Chu, Cheng and Song, 2021, p. 11), thus it is important to involve local communities, NGOs and volunteers' groups. They don't need to be formulated from scratch, existing **partnerships** can function as an informal extension of providing public services. Different partnerships can function as a catalyst and coordinators for top-down and bottom-up initiatives and support efficient community led development and faster and efficient implementation of solutions. Close cooperation among the city government and local communities is very important and based on this the trust among different parties is built. As a result of this crisis, the relevance of cities and how they are governed needs to be critically examined (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). Since not all jobs could be done remotely, the pandemic crisis has brought attention to social inequalities (Sennett, 2020). It is therefore necessary to capitalise on **governance mechanisms designed to combat social inequality**. As we have seen, this requires appropriate - long-term - policies, resources and timeframes that would also lead to the development of emergency support networks.

A two-way discussion and a constant and transparent dialogue were very important to overcome the barriers of social distance and strengthen the participation of stakeholders in **decision-making processes**, even though the digital environment was used. Nowadays, a hybrid version as a combination of physical and virtual events are used to involve all relevant stakeholders in decision making processes. City authorities, the public and the private sector have acknowledged that **working processes** don't rely necessarily on physical proximity: hybrid work became a mainstream workstyle, both in the private and public sector.

It is necessary to continue with the implementation of **digital transition** of cities to achieve openness and efficiency of PA's work and to facilitate the availability of services to residents for the needs of citizen participation. To efficiently facilitate public services, city governments should develop more inclusive mechanisms (Gao and Yu, 2020, p. 192). **Digitalisation of public services** and **simplifications** of the PA processes also in future can support the efficiency of the PA. **Virtual platforms** with multifunctional purposes will likely become the core communication and dissemination channel in future, as a one stop shop with all available information for citizens on one side and as a supporting tool for decision making processes where citizens can share their voice on important city development projects and initiatives. In addition, safe and trusted platforms for knowledge sharing among mayors and stakeholders are important (Garavaglia, Sancino and Trivellato, 2021, p. 76).

Participation can be also enhanced by **dedicated physical spaces**. Cities where residents have already engaged in community asset management, or commoning practices, a developed sense of cooperation helped the local communities to readily readapt their activities to respond to emergencies. As a result, spaces where citizens can participate and develop civic initiatives beyond crises are necessary. Whether it be urban commons, public facilities, or other forms of public-community partnership, it is precisely in these forms of collaborations, combining institutional resources with social energies, that the cities' resilience lies (Nel-lo et al, 2022).

For cities, the pandemic has been a turning point to get in depth knowledge on the state of the art of **physical conditions for living and working** in cities. The adaptation to a new life and working style patterns identified new values which imply on changing and reframing priority development axis in the future development of cities where the environmental aspect became even more important. Cities also acknowledged that they need to improve and expand **mobility and green and open space networks** to improve the quality of life in cities.

The pandemic situation led cities to reframe their development concepts leading toward more resilient and walkable cities. Thus, more emphasis will be needed to be invested in reframing existing physical conditions in cities to ensure resilience in cities through urban planning processes. **Local strategic documents** are an important supporting tool for future planners because they can plan long term interventions - resilience. For urban planners, it is important to support the analysis and the development of measures and policy instruments on the city level.

COVID-19, as other pandemics in the past, may give us the chance to set new standards and planning models (Martínez, Short, 2021). Planning for safer, more sustainable cities by applying a better distribution of services, population, and resources maintaining a sustainable density seems to be the new trend in Europe and Danube Region Cities are also adapting to these new paradigms. The situation highlighted the need for faster and more efficient implementation of the **sustainable solutions** which imply the reprioritisation of city investments and finding new funding or models for implementation.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic situation was one of the greatest challenges for the society in the last two years. There were some greatest lessons learned from the pandemic era where cities represented the living lab arenas where innovative approaches and solutions were tested. It was an experimental time for governance from the national to the local level on how to tackle and adapt to the situation as soon as possible with the least negative impact on the society.

The AGORA survey and the webinars revealed that the stakeholders' engagement needs to be an ongoing commitment to understanding the best solutions to the challenges brought up by the unexpected events such as pandemics - not only in the short term where immediate action is needed but also in the longer period where the right urban planning concepts are considered. Considering the various views of a broad variety of stakeholders can help cities become more resilient to the unexpected events by engaging different actors with their diverse abilities, resources, ideas, and commitments which can help reaching the relevant decisions with a broader consensus and thus a greater capacity to act quickly and orchestrated.

In the present case, finding the effective ways to build relationships with different social and interest groups was more important than ever and the IT platforms and other solutions played an important role to ensure the continuation of the communication channels. However, the experiences revealed by contributing parties also showed the importance of giving attention to practices of social activities or volunteering organisations that acted in a timely manner during the pandemic. This reveals and points out the importance of the role of social cohesion in such emergency situations. Therefore, as we return to inhabit our cities in a post-covid world, we must not forget to promote such practices of urban justice in our cities. Based on the lessons learnt the planning profession must rethink its bitten tracks of practice too and make room for the increased attention to urban justice. So, beyond the digitalisation of services, soft mobility, and public space design, one of the most striking impacts of the COVID-19 emergency is the need to acknowledge social and solidarity economy activities and social cohesion policies to reduce the impact on the current and to better respond to future crises.

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