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Article

Strengthening Urban Labs' Democratic Aspirations: Nurturing a Listening Capacity to Engage With the Politics of Social Learning

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Abstract
Urban labs are arenas for fostering urban sustainable transitions, where different actors experiment and learn together how to create inclusive and sustainable cities. A key aspect of these processes is social learning, which is the collaborative learning process through which new understandings and practices emerge from the activities of urban labs. Social learning also includes the process through which these understandings and practices are further anchored and can transform the organizations participating in urban labs. Social learning is seen as key to tackling polarization and creating transformational capacity at different levels. This article explores how social learning can strengthen urban labs' democratic ambitions. Building on the insights emerging from a collaborative learning process with civil servants within an urban lab, it highlights the need for ensuring plurality and challenging privilege in social learning. It also emphasizes the importance of nurturing a listening capacity within urban labs and municipal organizations.

Keywords
listening capacity; pluralism; privilege; social learning; sustainable city planning; sustainable development; urban labs

Issue
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1. Introduction

In the European context, cities are increasingly exploring and driving sustainable transitions (Eales et al., 2021) and striving—in line with UN SDG no. 11—to develop cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (UN, n.d.).

Currently, a key approach to promote urban sustainability transitions is that of urban labs. Grounded in transition management (Köhler et al., 2019; Markard et al., 2012), urban labs come with different names (urban labs, urban living labs, innovation platforms, etc.) but share the same nature; they are arenas that engage different local actors in exploring and learning together how to create sustainable cities (Schöll et al., 2017). Social learning is the process through which urban labs' participants collaboratively learn from joint experiences (Bos et al., 2013). Social learning allows for addressing possible conflicts among different interests about sustainable transformations by engaging participants in exploring and learning by bringing together their knowledge and perspectives (Pahl-Wostl, 2007). The notion of social learning also includes the process through which urban labs' findings and learnings are further anchored in different organizations to create changes in their ways of working (Forrest & Wiek, 2014). Social learning is recognized as key to fostering transformative capacity (Castán Broto et al., 2019) and several efforts have been made towards articulating its nature. Some have focused on articulating learning within urban labs activities (Beukers & Bertolini, 2021; Van Poeck et al., 2020), while others have looked at organizational learning (Luederitz et al., 2017; Seravalli, 2021), the process through which urban labs outcomes are further anchored in participating organizations. A less explored question is the relationship between social learning and democratic concerns related to urban labs. Despite their participatory nature and democratic ambitions, urban labs often struggle to generate public value and tend to respond to the interests of a few actors (Eneqvist et al., 2022).

This article explores how social learning can enhance urban labs' democratic aspirations. Firstly, it articulates the political nature of social learning, then it provides some insights on how to understand and organize social learning as a democratic effort. It does so by building on the theoretical relationship between social learning and participation and by reflecting on the insights emerging from a collaborative reflective process within a Swedish urban lab that engaged civil servants working with participatory processes in city planning and development. The intertwining of theoretical and practical insights points to the need to sustain plurality while challenging privileged knowledge regimes and fostering a listening capacity within urban labs and municipal organizations.

2. Social Learning for Sustainable City Development

This section overviews the idea of social learning as discussed in sustainable transition studies. Then, it focuses on the political dimension of social learning and its importance for urban labs.

2.1. In Between Experiential and Organizational Learning

Social learning represents a cornerstone within sustainable transition studies (Bos et al., 2013). Sustainability is recognized as a complex problem that requires ongoing collective learning and adaptation to be tackled (Pahl-Wostl, 2007). Social learning is also seen as key to fostering changes among people and organizations, nurturing collective intelligence and shaping better governance (Van Poeck et al., 2020).

When it comes to urban labs, two kinds of social learning have been identified. The first one is the learning that happens within urban labs activities, which is about collaboratively evaluating joint experiences out from participants' different knowledge and perspectives (Beukers & Bertolini, 2021; Van Poeck et al., 2020). To articulate this kind of learning, pragmatist theory (Dewey in Rodgers, 2002) and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) have been used. Reflecting in and on experience allows the correction of errors using established rules and procedures, but also the revision of existing rules and procedures if they do not fit new challenges. This is done by engaging with the core values, purposes, and principles that guide current ways of doing and thinking about the issue at hand (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

The second kind of learning is about the spreading of urban labs results and insights to organizations, namely organizational learning (Luederitz et al., 2017; Seravalli, 2021). The concept of organizational learning is entangled with the idea of organizational change. It involves creating opportunities within organizations for people to learn and to act upon that learning by using new insights and understandings to improve ways of working and organizational structures (Senge, 1990). This form of learning is often resisted as it challenges not only structures and routines, but also existing mindsets and power relationships in an organization (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Organizational learning is key to transferring the outcomes of urban labs and for transforming municipal organizations as well as governance modes toward the creation of sustainable and just cities (Schöll et al., 2017).

2.2. The Politics of Social Learning

Sustainable transition studies frame social learning as a matter of shifting mindsets and practices to achieve sustainability (Bos et al., 2013; Pahl-Wostl, 2007). When it comes to its political dimension, social learning is seen as an opportunity to deal with the possible controversies that might emerge around sustainable transformations that, if not carefully handled, can lead to destructive polarizations (Collins & Ison, 2009; Pahl-Wostl, 2007). Schöll et al. (2017) have recognized the importance of including marginalized actors in urban labs to strengthen their democratic legitimacy and capacity to generate public value. Castán Broto et al. (2019) observed how urban labs displaying a high degree of social learning considered inclusive forms of urban governance and deliberately tried to empower communities. However, they also noted that only a few urban labs are working proactively with social learning. Furthermore, Eneqvist et al. (2022) have been highlighting how, in urban labs, the participation of different actors does not necessarily entail more democratic processes, and there is a risk for urban labs to become instrumental in the pursuit of specific interests rather than the public good. Moreover, transition studies are approaching social learning mostly as a rational process (Beukers & Bertolini, 2021; Luederitz et al., 2017; Van Poeck et al., 2020) and little attention is given to how different interests are at play in and shape learning processes. Flyvbjerg (1998) captured how specific rationalities, and thus knowledge, are shaped in city planning and development to serve the interests of certain actors and to reproduce existing power relationships in the urban context. Overall, this calls for a careful engagement with the politics of social learning.

3. Unpacking the Politics of Social Learning in Urban Labs

To articulate the politics of social learning, this article relies on the relationship between social learning and participation. On one side, the collaborative and collective nature of social learning (Bos et al., 2013; Pahl-Wostl, 2007) makes it a participatory process that combines exploration and deliberation by bringing together different knowledge and perspectives (Pahl-Wostl, 2007). On the other hand, within urban planning, there is an increased understanding of participation not as a deliberative process, but rather as a process that is about gathering different perspectives and knowledge to learn about how to handle the complexity of contemporary urban development (De Blust et al., 2019). Thus, in social

learning processes, a key concern is not only "who is deciding" (Arnstein, 1969), but how understandings are created and, for example, what kind of knowledge (and thus interests) are given priority in the process (Collins & Ison, 2006, 2009). Additionally, social learning engages with existing structures and procedures within organizations (Seravalli, 2021) that are shaped by underlying views and rationalities that are difficult not only to change but even just to expose (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

3.1. Fostering and Maintaining Plurality While Questioning Privilege

The notion of "unpacking participation" has been introduced by Cornwall (2008) as she recognized how the traditional way of framing citizens as a homogeneous group (Arnstein, 1969) was challenged in practical work with participation. She highlights, for example, how the intersection of ethnicity and class among citizens determines a plurality of interests and different capacity for participation. As a consequence, certain citizens might be more aligned with authorities' representatives than with other citizens (Cornwall, 2008). Thus, urban labs need to pay attention not only to the engagement of different actors (Schöll et al., 2017), but also to what perspectives are present and which are absent in their social learning processes. It is also crucial to follow how plurality is maintained or dismissed along the processes. Democratic achievements of participatory processes depend not only on who is invited but also on the dynamics that emerge among participants engaged in the process and on how processes' outcomes are further integrated into ordinary activities (Palmås & Von Busch, 2015). As a consequence, the involvement and valuing of plurality in social learning processes does not automatically entail that marginal/marginalized perspectives influence the development of shared understandings. It is key to recognize the role of taken-for-granted perspectives and specific actors' interests in shaping single processes and formal structures and thus limiting the possibility for plurality to be maintained. This demands a careful engagement with the way that established views, structures, and practices are challenged or reproduced in social learning, recognizing how striving towards plurality cannot be separate from undoing privilege (Pease, 2010), i.e., the systematic questioning of taken for granted ideas, ways of working and positions about and around the issue at stake.

3.2. Beyond "Having a Say": A Listening Capacity for Social Learning

Maintaining plurality in urban labs is not just a matter of providing marginal/marginalized voices with the opportunity to "have a say" (Schöll et al., 2017); it is also vital for these voices to be "heard." This highlights the importance of listening in social learning processes, which can be defined as a political act that gives attention to voices and perspectives that might be marginalized (Coles, 2004), and that fosters deep engagement among radically different perspectives (Bickford, 1996). Listening has already been recognized as a key capacity for engaging with tacit knowledge in participatory city planning and development (Moore & Elliott, 2016). It is a capacity that is determined both by individuals' skills and attitudes, as well as by organizational structures and routines (Moore & Elliott, 2016). Here, I suggest that a listening capacity can also enhance urban labs' democratic foundation, by fostering learning from diversity among urban lab participants and within municipal organizations. This kind of learning also requires unlearning (Visser, 2017), which is the ability to recognize and question taken-for-granted knowledge regimes and rationalities, and the way they shape urban labs' processes as well as municipal ordinary activities. The aim would be not only to make space for different views but to question power dynamics that regulate positions of marginality and privilege (Pease, 2010) in city planning and development, in order to ensure that plurality is maintained.

4. Method: A Collaborative Learning Process Within an Urban Lab

The practical insights presented in this article were developed as part of an urban lab promoted by the city of K (the name of the city is fictious to ensure the informants' anonymity), which included the Planning Department, the Environmental Department, and the Buildings and Streets Departments of the City. This was The Innovation Arena (TIA). The lab focused on driving several planning efforts in the city by experimenting with new ways of working, with a particular focus on citizens' participation.

In the frame of TIA, together with a civil servant, I ran an initiative to enhance social learning about TIA's participatory planning processes. This was the Forum for Citizens' Involvement (FCI). We involved people working in TIA and colleagues from different departments. Similar to the format used by De Blust et al. (2022), FCI consisted of regular meetings among civil servants to share experiences, collaboratively reflect on single processes and their challenges, and analyze the organizational settings in which they were operating. We decided to involve only civil servants on an operative level, as we wanted to create a safe space for them to support learning and unlearning (Visser, 2017) about their practice and the role of organizational aspects (Argyris & Schön, 1974) in shaping opportunities and hindrances for participation in planning processes.

Each meeting was about two hours long and started with a presentation, given by us (the civil servant and I) or one of the participants, delineating a case or issue to discuss and reflect upon. This was followed by a series of exercises aimed at fostering collaborative reflection. We applied traditional participatory design approaches (Brandt et al., 2012), combining exercises where people talked with exercises where people could draw and

work with different materials (particularly, collaborative mappings and visualizations) to allow them to engage with and express both their explicit and tacit knowledge (Brandt et al., 2012; see Figure 1). In each meeting, we also ensured a mix of exercises. In some of them, participants could think on their own to formulate their own position; in others, participants discussed in small groups different positions and experiences to develop shared formulations and understandings. There were also plenary sessions where they shared the small groups' insights and identified common themes and differences.

Data were collected in two ways. During all sessions, participants were asked to summarize personal reflections and group discussions with short sentences, often prompted by specific questions that the project secretary and I formulated beforehand. At the same time, the civil servant and I were also documenting the small group sessions and the plenary sessions by listening and taking notes.

In between one meeting and the next one, the civil servant and I analyzed the materials produced by the participants and the notes we took during each session. We used an "analysis on the wall" method (Sanders & Stappers, 2012) where we engaged our different perspectives (that of a participatory design researcher and a civil servant) to cluster and connect data, identify insights, and name emerging themes (Figure 2). During these sessions, we also jointly reflected on the emerging themes and tried to formulate some preliminary conclusions. The outcomes were short written reports summarizing the main insights emerging from each session as well as our joint reflections. These reports were shared with participants and discussed (and in case adjusted) at the beginning of the following meeting. The data used in this paper are the insights and reflections from the written reports.

A limitation of the method is related to the involved people. All FCI participants were interested and passionate about questions of participation in city planning and development and, therefore, their understandings and position cannot be considered as representative of their departments.

5. Case: The Forum for Citizens' Involvement

TIA was the third iteration of an urban lab in the city of K. TIA was managed by the environmental department and focused on developing approaches for sustainable city planning and development. TIA was financed through a mix of internal funding and funding coming from an EU structural funds project and a national project financed by the Swedish Innovation Agency. The city of K has a strong tradition of addressing climate adaptation and ecological sustainability in city planning and development. In the last years, there has been also a growing focus on how to tackle problems related to segregation

Figure 1. One of the templates we used for the individual exercises.

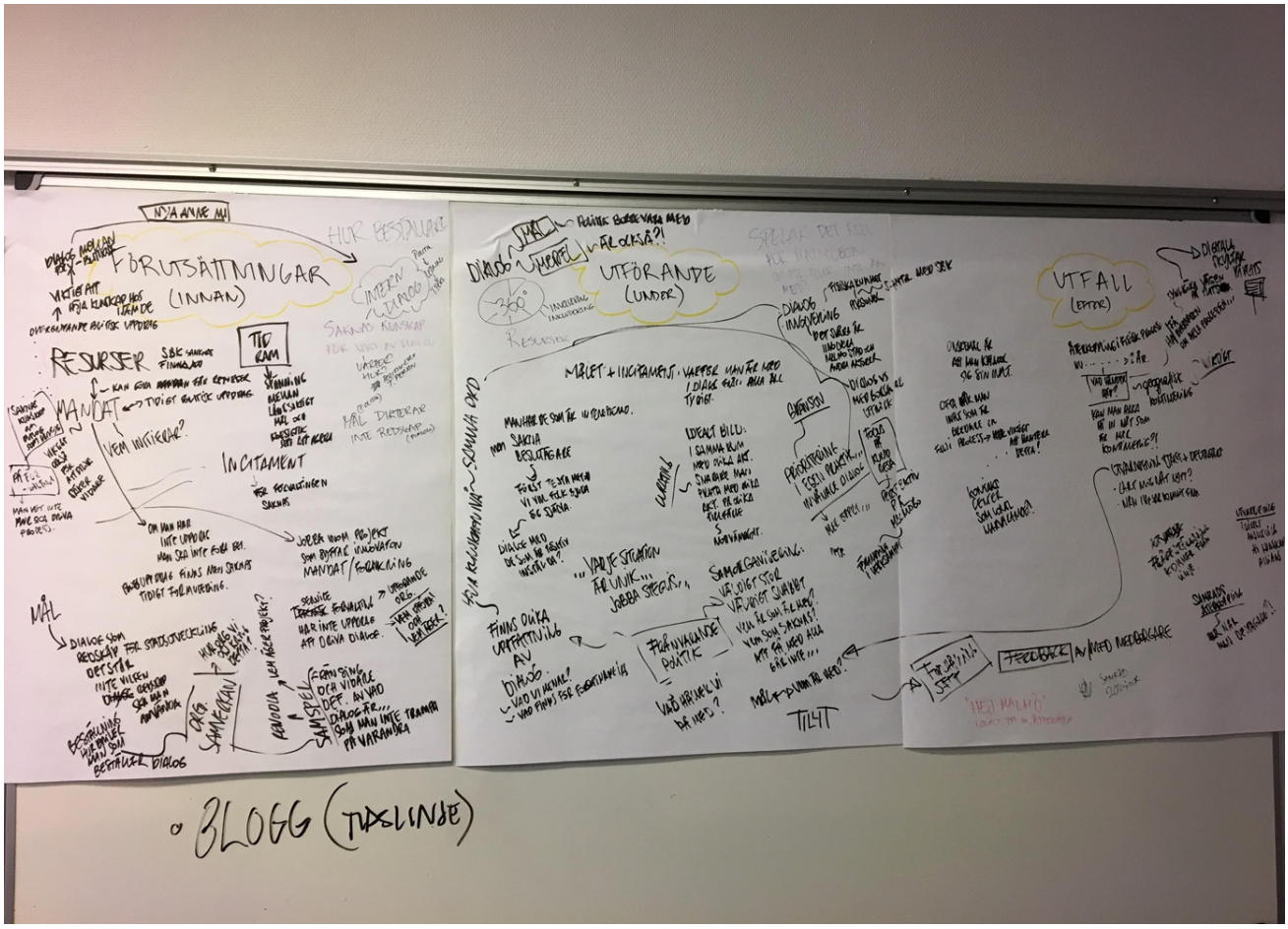

Figure 2. The "analysis on the wall" of one of the meetings.

and social inequalities. The first two iterations of the urban lab focused on the question of how to plan for sustainable and inclusive cities. They raised the need for better anchoring the urban lab's efforts within different departments' ordinary activities to support the spreading of their outcomes. Thus, in the planning of TIA, it was decided to dedicate a full project activity to learning with the aim of not only supporting learning within processes, i.e., experiential learning (Beukers & Bertolini, 2021; Van Poeck et al., 2020), but also fostering new ways of working within ordinary activities, i.e., organizational learning (Luederitz et al., 2017; Seravalli, 2021). Given my profile as a participatory design researcher, I took the responsibility for conducting a learning process about citizens' participation, in collaboration with TIA project secretary. This was how the FCI came to be. We framed it as a collaborative learning initiative focusing on supporting learning within single planning processes in TIA (experiential learning), between these processes and ordinary activities (organizational learning), and on identifying opportunities and hindrances for organizational learning within ordinary activities.

FCI ran between November 2018 and June 2019 and consisted of seven meetings gathering between 30 to 35 civil servants from the Environmental Department, the Planning Department, the Buildings and Streets Department, the Service Department, and the Central City Office. All the participants came voluntarily, and they were all working with and being passionate about participation.

The last meeting took place right before the summer of 2019. There were plans to continue in the autumn by trying to involve both politicians and managers from the departments engaged with city planning and development to discuss how to organize long-term participatory work across departments. However, because of a lack of personnel (many people in TIA's leading team quit their position, among them, the project secretary; the reasons were the difficulties in anchoring TIA outcomes within ordinary activities), the leading group of TIA decided to stop FCI and rather focus on the deliverables demanded by the external financing bodies. I used the input gathered in FCI to formulate a report about methods for citizens' participation that focused on the importance of organizational aspects for participatory processes.

Table 1 provides a summary of the focus of each meeting and the main findings that emerged. The single insights are categorized as they relate to the different themes developed in the analysis: (a) participation as social learning; (b) political aspects related to planning and social learning; (c) the listening capacity, opportunities, and challenges related to it.

Table 1. Description of each FCI meeting and its main insights.

Meeting focus	Insights related to single planning processes	Insights related to organizational aspects
1. Case: River Park, the planning of a new neighborhood with a focus on sustainability and sharing economy. The case was presented by the civil servant who was part of the communication group that included civil servants and building companies and had the task to involve citizens in the shaping of the area. Particularly, the presenter raised the tensions that emerged in this process between the economic interests of the building companies and public interests.	Citizens' participation is about establishing learning between citizens, civil servants, politicians, and other actors (a) There should be a special focus on supporting learning between citizens and politicians (a, b) The importance of moving from temporal and short-term processes to long-term permanent dialogue and learning (c) Besides having dialogues with citizens, it is important to work with small-scale experimentations to provide quick feedback to citizens. This might also allow for an organic development of an area, so when people move in, they can influence the process (a) Is it possible to design a city "for all"? Or rather, is it better to ensure that the interests of groups that are often forgotten (e.g., children) are given priority in planning processes? (b)	Different departments have different pre-conditions for driving participation. They have different resources and different relationships with citizens, politicians, and other actors (for example, the planning department has to ensure that every planning processes include participatory/dialogue sessions with interested actors; the streets and buildings department has a much closer relationship with politicians than other departments) (c) There are general rules in the city about how to conduct communication activities. These rules can be a hindrance to developing learning in participatory processes because they don't allow to adapt the style of communication in relation to the involved groups of citizens (c)
2. Own practice. Participants were invited to discuss and reflect on their own way of working with citizens' participation.	The importance of having a repertoire of methods and tools but also a particular sensibility to choose and adapt the method to the situation (c) It is important to distinguish between self-evaluation (i.e., self-reflection) and evaluation (i.e., a systematic way to evaluate participatory processes) (a) In talking about evaluation of and learning within the process, it is important to be aware of what knowledge and perspectives are given priority (a, b)	Participation is a 360° process. There is a need to focus also on involvement within one's own organization (managers, colleagues, and politicians) to ensure that processes' outcomes and learnings are appropriated (a) The departments lack internal routines for systematically evaluating citizens' participation efforts (c) It is important that civil servants make visible to politicians the compromises that are made in planning processes to accommodate the economic interests of property owners and building companies (b)
3. Organizational learning and challenges: The meeting included civil servants and researchers working in another Swedish city with participatory planning processes. They presented their cases and then there was a discussion about organizational aspects related to participation.	The need for managing conflicts between expert/professional knowledge and citizens/users' knowledge (a,b) How to make space for different forms of knowledge in planning processes? (a)	The difficulty of integrating tacit and experiential knowledge in bureaucratic processes (a, c) How to create an organization that can systematically listen? For example, how it might be possible to use input from city services that have daily contact with citizens (e.g., schools or libraries) in planning processes? (c) How to combine expert and local knowledge? Could it be possible to have a planning process run by local citizens and actors with the participation of city planners? (b, c)

Table 1. (Cont.) Description of each FCI meeting and its main insights.

Meeting focus	Insights related to single planning processes	Insights related to organizational aspects
4. Case: Reconversion of a former industrial area. The area was a former railway deposit (owned by a private company) that was hosting cultural actors and creative companies. Because of its central location, the city wanted to reconvert it into a residential area. The presenters were the planners involved in the process that tried to establish a fair and long-term collaboration between the landlord and the current tenants with the goal of ensuring that the old industrial buildings were not demolished and that the current tenants could have a future in the area.	The importance of involving property owners to ensure that participation efforts and their outcomes are integrated into both planning and development processes (a, c) How to move from short-term interventions to a long-term collaboration between different actors? (c) How to ensure a fair relationship between the property owners and current tenants? Could long-term contracts that clarify and regulate their relationship be a possible solution? (b)	The city lacks internal routines, structures, and resources to engage in long-term local collaborations about city planning and development (c)
5. Participation in projects vs. participation in ordinary activities. The session was based on a dialogue between two civil servants. The first one had been working with citizens' participation in many planning and development projects. The second one had been working with participation in a specific neighborhood for several years as part of their ordinary tasks.	The importance of starting from "a not-knowing position" (c) It is important to build trust with citizens, but it takes time (c) If one has time and mandate to work locally in an area, one does not need so many resources to create a long-term citizens' dialogue (c) A long-term engagement in an area gives the opportunity to develop a more nuanced understanding of different citizens' perspectives and interests (b, c) Being a good facilitator is not so much about methods. It is more important to focus on mindsets. One needs to be able to integrate theory and practice (c) There is a need to move beyond representation, one cannot expect single participants to represent the interests of larger citizens' groups. It also might be counterproductive to define possible citizens' groups as there are so many different factors that are determining citizens' interests and positions (b)	It is difficult to promote and spread new ways of working both for urban lab initiatives as well as for efforts within ordinary activities (a) Internal mandate, legitimacy, and resources influence the way one can work with participation (c) It is important to anchor participatory processes internally (c) Most of us work isolated in our departments. It is important to find ways to meet and learn across departments (a, c)

Table 1. (Cont.) Description of each FCI meeting and its main insights.

Meeting focus	Insights related to single planning processes	Insights related to organizational aspects
6. Mapping the before, during, and after, of participatory planning processes. Participants were invited to map current processes they were involved in and consider the preconditions for processes and the outcomes/effects generated.		There is a gap between "formal" and "practical" mandates for participation. The formal mandate has usually higher ambitions that cannot be achieved because of a lack of resources and mandate to integrate results in ordinary activities (a) There is a lack of shared understandings and approaches to work with participation across departments (a, c) There is no shared structure to bring back the results of processes across departments (a, c) On the organizational level, there is little focus on the outcomes/effects of participatory processes (a, c)
7. Discussion on the results from the mapping of preconditions, and outcomes/effects of participation in planning processes. This last meeting focused on discussing further and elaborating on the results of the previous session. It started with a short presentation summing up the main insights from the previous session.	The importance of understanding citizens' participation as a learning process and the importance of including in this process also property owners and other actors. A learning process that can depart from questions that are coming from the city, but also from the citizens and/or other actors (a, b) One needs good knowledge about an area to be able to reach citizens that are rarely involved in participatory processes (b) One needs a flexible mandate and resources to be able to intervene with different methods in relation to the characteristics of an area (high level of participation, low level of participation, possible tensions and polarizations) (c) Participatory processes could also drive questions/issues which are important for citizens rather than the city (b)	Planners see the need for having a better understanding of local areas and being able to map needs and potentials. However, they often lack the resources to be able to do that (a) A focus on participation requires a radical change in planners' roles since they need to be able to capture and integrate different forms of knowledge in the planning process. This shift needs to be discussed with managers and politicians to ensure that there are structures and support for working in this way (c)

6. Analysis

This section summarizes the main findings that emerged from the FCI highlighting elements that are related to (a) participation as social learning, (b) political aspects related to planning and social learning, and (c) opportunities and challenges related to listening.

6.1. Participation as Social Learning

The centrality of social learning emerged already from the first FCI meeting. Single planning processes were explicitly defined as learning processes that needed to involve not only civil servants and citizens, but also other actors engaged in city planning and development (De Blust et al., 2019). Planners felt the need for knowing more about an area but often lacked the resources for doing so (De Blust et al., 2019). Emphasis was also put on the need of supporting learning between politicians and citizens. Participants showed a good understanding of the political challenges of social learning by raising the importance of mobilizing and involving different kinds of knowledge in planning processes and the difficulties of doing so. They also discussed the importance of small-scale interventions, but mostly as a matter of providing feedback to citizens rather than as means for social learning.

While the expression organizational learning was not explicitly used by participants, they lifted the importance of and challenges in bringing back results of participatory processes in ordinary activities. With the idea of participation as a 360-degree process, they pointed to the importance of reaching citizens and external stakeholders as well as involving colleagues, managers, and politicians. They recognized how both urban labs' efforts and internal attempts to introduce new ways of working with participation were meeting resistance (Argyris & Schön, 1974). They stressed how, internally, there was little focus on evaluating participatory processes and lifted the need for distinguishing between self-reflection and more systematic ways to evaluate participatory processes and thus improving the way they were dealt with on an organizational level. They highlighted the lack of structures and routines across the departments to feed back the outcomes of participatory processes and to learn about participation. The civil servants who had long experience working with participation highlighted that they perceived a gap between strategic aims about participation and what could be achieved in practice, due to a lack of resources and poor attention to how the outcomes of participatory efforts were integrated into planning processes. Overall, they recognized that to support participation as a social learning process, planners needed to take another role and focus on capturing and integrating different kinds of knowledge (De Blust et al., 2019). A role that required different structures and routines within the departments and in the interaction with politicians.

6.2. Political Aspects Related to Planning and Social Learning

Participants in FCI were highly sensitive to political questions. When it comes to planning processes, emphasis was put on the need to better respond to the needs of marginal/marginalized groups in planning processes. They also raised the problem of the privileged position of property owners and builders in planning and development processes (Flyvbjerg, 1998). On one side, they were interested in finding pragmatic ways of balancing the strong role of these actors (i.e., the idea of long-term agreements between current tenants and property owners) on the other, they expressed the wish of making politicians more aware of the compromises that were made in planning processes to accommodate the interests of these actors. They also challenged taken-for-granted ideas about participation in urban planning, like the criteria of representation (Cornwall, 2008), and suggested the idea of planning out from the interests of marginal/marginalized groups, like children. They recognized how knowledge of an area was vital to have a deep understanding of diverse interests and views.

They also articulated some political challenges of social learning. They were aware that different forms of knowledge had different possibilities to shape planning processes and their results. This was both raised in terms of conflicts between experts' and citizens' knowledge, but also the need of taking into consideration which views, and perspectives were applied in the evaluation of participatory efforts. They were also fully aware of the challenges that current structures and procedures posed in terms of making space for citizens' perspectives and they speculated around the possibility of restructuring planning processes so that they were driven by local communities rather than planners, thus giving priority to citizens' knowledge and perspectives rather than experts' views. They also considered how participatory processes could be organized so that they could be used by citizens to explore and learn about issues that mattered to communities rather than to the municipality. Both these suggestions can be seen as a matter of questioning positions of privilege (Pease, 2010) in planning processes.

6.3. Existing Opportunities and Challenges Related to Listening

Listening emerged as a crucial aspect to enhance social learning. Participants explicitly talked about the importance of starting from "a not-knowing position" as a matter of trying to avoid preconceptions and thus being open to different perspectives (Bickford, 1996). They described listening as being related to single planning processes alongside organizational conditions (Moore & Elliott, 2016). When it comes to the interaction with citizens, civil servants highlighted the importance of long-term and area-based efforts that could allow the development of good knowledge about an area, build local trust, and thus ensure a broad and deep understanding of different local interests. They highlighted that this required a flexible mandate and the freedom of adapting methods and approaches to the specific situation. They saw this way of working as not requiring so many resources, but rather being more a question of having the possibility and capacity to work out from the local settings. They also discussed the importance of attitudes and mindsets over methods for doing this kind of work.

On the organizational level, a key problem was recognized in the fragmentation across departments. They had different pre-conditions to work with participation. They lacked shared structures and routines and ways to integrate back participatory processes' results, evaluate participatory efforts, and learn together how to improve their way of working. Moreover, existing communication standards in the municipality were seen as a hindrance to working in flexible ways. During the discussions, it emerged also the proposal of exploring how it might be possible to engage in planning processes representatives from municipal services that had everyday contact with citizens (i.e., schools and libraries), given that they had a good overview of a local area and could facilitate interactions with different groups.

7. Discussion

As already highlighted, FCI's participants were civil servants who valued participation and who were involved in complex urban development processes. Their understandings were advanced and some of their proposals were quite radical, yet they pointed at some interesting insights that could be used to improve the way urban labs engage with the politics of social learning and strengthen their democratic ambitions.

7.1. Maintaining Plurality While Challenging Privilege Through Social Learning

Urban labs have already recognized the importance of fostering plurality (Schöll et al., 2017) as a means of strengthening their democratic nature. The findings from FCI confirm the significance of including different knowledge and perspectives in Urban Labs, particularly those that tend to be marginalized, to ensure that the understandings developed through social learning and the decisions that follow are democratically grounded. At the same time, it also becomes evident that creating space for plurality cannot be separated from challenging existing conditions of privilege (Pease, 2010). Therefore, urban labs should focus on engaging with plurality while questioning taken-for-granted knowledge regimes and rationalities. When it comes to social learning, this requires paying attention to the type of knowledge and perspectives that inform understandings and decisions as well as monitoring social learning processes capacity to challenge privileged knowledge regimes and foster unlearning (Visser, 2017) among those involved in (re)producing these regimes. This entails recognizing and tracing the role of planners', property owners', building companies', and other privileged actors' perspectives in the learning process. At the same time, urban labs could experiment with these perspectives, for example, by involving politicians and the public in learning about how privilege and marginalization operate in urban development processes, exploring ways of mitigating privileged conditions (like the agreement between tenants and property owners), or directly challenging them (like the idea of having citizens rather than planners driving planning processes). It is also crucial to work on internal structures and practices within municipal organizations, making visible how they are informed by specific views and knowledge regimes (Argyris & Schön, 1974), and exploring to what extent they allow or neglect the possibility of integrating a plurality of perspectives. This internal process needs to be grounded and to involve civil servants, managers, and politicians to create a shared understanding of the limitations of current structures in driving more democratic planning processes.

In this way, social learning can take on a new dimension. Besides being a process that focuses on integrating different forms of knowledge and managing possible polarizations around sustainable transitions (Collins & Ison, 2009; Pahl-Wostl, 2007), it could also enhance urban labs' capacity to maintain plurality and questioning privilege in their activities and outcomes and in relation to existing structures and procedures within ordinary municipal activities.

7.2. Nurturing a Listening Capacity

Civil servants involved in FCI highlighted how, in maintaining plurality and challenging privilege, listening represents a key capacity as the ability to deeply engage with diversity (Bickford, 1996). They emphasized how listening required long-term local engagement and a flexible approach for developing a deep understanding of an area, its citizens, and their diverse interests. This requires new ways of framing and organizing participation in urban planning, like, for example, the permanent involvement of schools and libraries in these processes, but also a new role for the city planner. In line with Moore and Elliott (2016), the listening capacity is defined by single planning processes as well as organizational aspects. It depends on individual civil servants' attitudes and skills, formats and procedures for participatory processes, as well as on mandate and resources, the way participatory process results are integrated into ordinary activities, systemic evaluation, and learning about participation. Additionally, FCI participants emphasized the importance of political bodies in enhancing listening. They discussed the need for making politicians aware of the compromises made in urban planning and for directly involving them in participatory processes.

Urban labs could work towards enhancing a listening capacity in and across single planning processes, municipal departments, and political bodies overseeing planning processes. On the level of the single planning process, they could foster the exploration of attitudes and approaches, but also the testing of new ways of framing and organizing participation with an explicit focus on "listening" (Bickford, 1996) besides "providing a say" (Arnstein, 1969), and with a clear understanding of the limits of the "representation criteria" and the need for "unpacking" (Cornwall, 2008) citizens' and other actors' interests. Through dedicated social learning processes, and similarly to what we did with FCI, these explorations could be connected to ordinary activities to identify possible organizational hindrances or opportunities to enhance a listening capacity on organizational level (Moore & Elliott, 2016). However, it is crucial that these processes reach out to political bodies overseeing urban planning to ensure that they are aware of the limits of current participatory practices and organizational structures and, hopefully, ensure a mandate to enhance their listening capacity.

8. Conclusions

Urban labs are rapidly spreading in Europe as an approach to promoting sustainable city development.

Despite their participatory nature and democratic ambitions, urban labs are at risk of promoting the interests of a few actors rather than serving the public good (Eneqvist et al., 2022). This article explores how social learning, a key feature in urban labs, could be used not only to tackle sustainability challenges while mitigating possible polarizations (Pahl-Wostl, 2007) but also to enhance urban labs' democratic aspirations.

The article builds on the insights of FCI, a collaborative learning process about participation in sustainable city planning and development, that was organized within an urban lab in the Swedish city of K. FCI participants highlighted the importance of social learning to enhance the democratic quality of planning processes and the centrality of a listening capacity (Moore & Elliott, 2016) in planning processes and municipal organizations to engage with the political challenges of social learning.

The key insights are that besides fostering plurality in their activities (Schöll et al., 2017), urban labs should focus on how plurality is maintained over time and to what extent marginalized perspectives inform learnings and decisions in their own activities as well as within municipal ordinary activities. When it comes to social learning, this entails not only engaging with a diversity of perspectives, but also challenging taken-for-granted perspectives and the privileged position of experts' and other influential actors' views in informing understandings of and actions in urban labs and, more in general, urban development processes.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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