

Urban Governance and Sustainable Neighbourhoods

A Contribution to a Lasting Sustainable Development

Abstract

Since the 1990s, sustainable neighbourhoods have become an increasingly important topic. However, their development has proven to be difficult. There is an often considerable gap, which must be reduced, between the initial goals, the way they are implemented and how the project is finally inhabited. A sustainable neighbourhood is inherently a complex project, with ambitious goals that lie at the intersection of multiple disciplines, involving numerous stakeholders with diverging interests. Moreover, each project, due to its specific characteristics, requires an adapted steering.

The main goal of this research is to analyse the nature of the steering process during the planning, realisation and use of sustainable neighbourhoods. The results aim to contribute to the promotion of sustainable urban development.

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on the concept of urban governance, adapted to the particular context of sustainable neighbourhoods. Urban governance is understood in this work, as a mode of project steering based on the cooperation between public and private stakeholders. The central hypotheses of this work test the importance and the limits of the key characteristics of urban governance (cooperation, participation, negotiation) as well as the importance of continuity for the project quality.

To begin with, we surveyed and analysed twenty exemplary European sustainable neighbourhoods and identified their strengths and weaknesses in terms of sustainability, as well as their diverse steering modes. The lessons learned from these examples reveal the need to improve the projects' steering.

Secondly we elaborated a detailed framework for analysis founded on stakeholder-centred institutionalism and the key characteristics of urban governance. By systematically applying this framework, we analysed the planning and implementation process of the sustainable neighbourhood "Kronsberg" (Hannover). Our focus was on the following dimensions: the stakeholders (with their particular interests and goals), the instruments of spatial planning, the steering modes, the points of divergence and convergence amongst the stakeholders, as well as their impacts on the process and on the project.

The final step was to test the core hypotheses on the neighbourhood "Neu-Oerlikon" (Zürich) in order to broaden the lessons learned from "Kronsberg".

The results of the analysis highlight the fact that an urban governance type project steering is certainly a necessary but insufficient condition to improve the project quality. Moreover, the added value of urban governance is only valid under certain conditions. In fact, cooperation and negotiation can even in certain situations reduce the project's quality! The main lesson of this research is that there is not an ideal steering mode, but rather that the quality of the project depends on numerous factors, such as the stakeholder constellation, their individual and institutional interests, the general conditions and the "rules of the game" of urban governance. If these "rules of the game" are not really appropriated by all stakeholders, individual and institutional interests and behaviours predominate at the expense of the project's quality. Likewise, if the future users' participation in the project development is insufficient, both the project's quality and its continuity suffer. We have also observed that the presence of a stakeholder (in general the public authorities) who ensures the definition of ambitious goals in terms of sustainable development and their implementation is crucial for the project's quality.

Furthermore, this research highlights the deficiencies in the follow-up and long-term preservation of the sustainability qualities in the neighbourhood projects which we have analysed. In the use phase, the degree of cooperation generally diminishes. Attitudes and project management become more sectorial at the expense of the project's quality. This confirms the need to continue the steering process according to the principles of urban governance beyond the project's implementation phase. This research specifies the challenges that affect the use phase (a still neglected area) and shows the relevance of the recommended steering mode.

Finally, the analyses also identify the success and risk factors that may influence urban-governance systems, as well as the challenges of still neglected fields of sustainability (urban agriculture, long-term environmental management, user behaviour, fair funding, etc.). Taking into account these outcomes is essential to improve the management of future sustainable-neighbourhood projects.