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Content

Research Paper

Virtual public participation during the Covid-19 crises

Hype or new normal for city planning?

A research paper coordinated by the International
Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) and Cyber Agora initiative

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Abstract

City and Regional planning should be accompanied by a thorough understanding of the contemporary social dynamics of the place and the implications it has for the people and other species who inhabit and use these places. As a result, territorial planning has been increasingly linked to participatory planning approaches in most politically and fiscally decentralised countries, to create sustainable living spaces through a bottom-up approach. Participatory planning again aiming to translate global solutions locally, giving local accents. The recent Covid-19 health and related economic crises brought even more complexity to the planning table, emphasising the need for supplementary stakeholder and public participation using virtual platforms. Thanks to the pandemic crisis, planners across the globe are increasingly engaged with virtual participatory approaches, some with more success than others, due to various social, economic and cultural reasons. In an attempt to contextualise the challenges and opportunities of virtual participatory planning, this paper captures reflections of purposefully selected professional planners, all members of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP), who indicated an affinity with participatory planning approaches and the challenges and opportunities that the virtual platform provides. Specific focus was placed on a) challenges of virtual planning and b) opportunities of virtual participation - to draw conclusions on whether virtual participatory planning is only a hype, or would become the new normal for city and regional planning.

Keywords

Participatory city and regional planning, virtual participation, Covid-19, sustainable places.

1. Introduction

Conyers and Hills (1984) defined planning as a continuous process that involves making decisions or choices about alternative ways of using available resources, with the aim of achieving particular goals in the future and ensuring quality of life to all citizens. Almost 40 years later this urban reality is even more challenging than ever before, with diverse needs and limited, but highly contested urban spaces across the globe. The contemporary social dynamics of cities, as well as the implications it has for the people who inhabit these places, are some of the issues that need to be thoroughly understood when considering the planning of these urban spaces. Participatory planning, in this sense, forms an integral part of city planning processes, especially when dealing with public interest and shared spaces (Legacy et al., 2019; McClymont, 2019). This notion of equitable community participation being intrinsic to the sustainability of planning and development, has risen to the forefront of global consciousness. Emerging from the inclusive Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador, the New Urban Agenda highlighted participatory planning as critical to urban spatial development methodologies for approaching global goals for sustainable development (United Nations, 2017). Recently the notion of participatory planning approaches was even more emphasized as part of broad sustainable development thinking (Raynor, Doyon & Beer, 2017; Nae et al., 2019; Fouché & Brent, 2020).

2. Participatory planning as integral part of city planning

Planning entails decision-making, problem solving and consensus building among the stakeholders (Cooksey & Kikula, 2005). Two basic approaches have led the planning profession in this regard, namely the top-down approach and the bottom-up planning-approach. Smith (2003) refers to these approaches as favouring “special interests” and “public interests” respectively. The extent of community involvement during planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of a programme or a project, distinguishes the top-down from the bottom-up (Cooksey & Kikula, 2005:3) and is commonly referred to as participatory planning that is now considered an accepted phenomenon in current day practice and city planning (Roy & Ganguly, 2009; Cilliers et al., 2011).

The challenges regarding the level of stakeholder involvement is well documented in literature, referring to amongst others the participation ladder, illustrating the different levels of participation, without focussing on quality or applicability of the different levels as it is subject to each individual situation (Breman et al., 2008). Previously the complexity of participation was linked to the diversity of the members it tries to accommodate (Breman et al., 2008:17) and how such approaches could be meaningful, transparent, inclusive and successful.

In recent years we saw participation in terms of basic questionnaires or short interviews being replaced with comprehensive participatory planning, that entailed more creative, innovative and out-of-the-box approaches (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014), which was driven by expertise (knowledge), creative thinking skills (flexibility and imagination) and motivation (linked to intrinsic values) (Adams, 2005).

The progressive move of cities into ‘smart cities’ based on the implementation of newly and more accessible information and communication technologies (ICT), not only seeks the optimization of resources and the reduction of maintenance, but also to engage citizens in the wider decisions related with the urban environment, looking for their physical and/or digital participation. In this way, participation is foreseen - more and more felt as necessary- from the early planning process up to the final and later management tasks, during the long life of the urban management. (Batty et al., 2012; van Hoof et al., 2018).

The recent Covid-19 crises brought even more complexity to the planning table and emphasised the need for creative participation, although now, for time being, on a virtual platform. The challenging realities of

2020 forced planners across the globe to adapt, either willingly or reluctantly. Some cities transitioned relatively smoothly into new planning and participatory approaches, or simply extended existing ones in response to these challenges. In other countries topics such as basic internet availability or digital literacy hindered broader engagement.

Under the framework of the EU Horizon 2020 Program, the Smarticipate project "Open governance in the Smart City" recently considered 9 European Cities and 2 non-European cities to analyse the different approaches of how communities and government can use ICT platforms for an open governance (virtual participation) (Smarticipate, 2016; Smarticipate, 2019). Some of the issues considered amongst others were accessibility and the anonymity, user friendliness in local democracy, online and offline communication interfaces, horizontal and vertical integration of governance processes and the effectiveness of such virtual citizen participation and stakeholder engagement processes aligned with ownership and responsibility.

In attempt to contextualise the current rapid developments, this paper captured reflections from professional planners across the globe, purposefully selected as members of the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP), who indicated an affinity with participatory planning approaches and the challenges and opportunities that the virtual platform now provides. Specific focus was placed on a) challenges of virtual planning and b) opportunities of virtual participation in an attempt to draw conclusions on whether virtual participatory planning is only a hype, or would become the new normal for city planning.

3. Methodology

Following the literature review on participatory planning and importance thereof as part of city planning, this paper included reflections of 14 professional planners and members of the International Society of City and Regional Planners capturing viewpoints on a) challenges of virtual planning and b) opportunities of virtual participation. Based on the qualitative inquiry into the challenges and opportunities pertaining to virtual participatory planning from these stakeholders' perspective, the paper draws conclusions on whether virtual participatory planning is considered a hype, encapsulated by the Covid-19 crises, or whether virtual participatory planning would become the new normal for city planning. This paper offers a point of departure to further collaboration on the topic of virtual participatory planning, that has instantly become part of the everyday reality of planners across the globe.

3.1. Participants

The population sample of this paper comprises 15 purposefully selected professional planners, all members of the International Society of City and Regional Planners, with adequate expertise and interest pertaining to participatory planning. The geographical diversity of the participants is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Geographical diversity of participants included in this research

3.2. Data generation and analysis

The participants contributed to the ISOCARP's Cyber Agora open public event where virtual participatory approaches, challenges and opportunities were discussed during spring 2020. By this occasion there were requested to complete an open-ended questionnaire to provide their reflections and experiences in terms of a) challenges of virtual planning and b) opportunities of virtual participation. Follow-up in-depth discussions were held accordingly, to further investigate their experiences and perspectives relating to virtual participatory planning, as experienced in their home towns and countries. A comparative analysis was conducted between the multiple reflections provided by the purposefully selected professional planners, in an attempt to provide a point of departure for contextualising virtual participatory planning. The reflections and findings presented accordingly originate from this process, and further discussed and elaborated through a real participatory and digital workflow.

4. Reflections from professional planners

The reflections from the professional planners included in this research are presented accordingly, first in terms of the challenges, followed by the opportunities, thematically discussed in terms of a) inequality (accessibility), b) inclusiveness (anonymity), c) meaningfulness (user-friendliness), d) knowledge (feedback loops) and e) trustworthiness (transparency).These themes corresponds to the issues identified by the Smarticipate project as mentioned earlier, but revised through the collaborative efforts of the authors of this paper.

Inequality in broad refers to the level of accessibility to technology infrastructure and virtual platforms, especially taking different socio-economic areas and global contexts into consideration. According to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP, 2017) the extent of technological inequalities among countries broadly depends on three factors namely investment in technological development, overall national capacity to innovate and the availability of ICT infrastructure.

Inclusiveness (anonymity) can, according to CISCO (2020), be reached through digital connectivity, and is considered the most critical factor for inclusiveness as it provides pathways out of poverty.

Meaningfulness (user-friendliness) is defined by Coombs (2000) in terms of the context of user-friendly interfaces for Information technology which the challenge to properly understand the pedagogy of virtual environments and ultimately to generate a more meaningful social interaction with the use of data and technology advances.

Knowledge (feedback loops) is according to Gigler & Bailur (2014) linked to the rationale that feedback will contribute to successful planning, management, and evaluation of development projects. Therefore, citizen participation (feedback in this sense) is typically not the end goal but rather instrumental to improving the results of development interventions and achieving other goals, such as social accountability, good governance, and citizen empowerment.

Trustworthiness (transparency) is the final theme that was considered, acknowledging the perspectives of Nickel et al. (2010) that any applicable notion of trustworthy technology would have to depart significantly from the full-blown notion of trustworthiness associated with interpersonal trust. The challenges of virtual participation are accordingly discussed in terms of these identified themes.

4.1. Challenges of virtual participation

Virtual participatory planning approaches pose various challenges for contemporary cities, planners and the planning profession. Based on the debates and surveys completed by the participants of this study, specific challenges were identified as discussed accordingly.

4.1.1. *Inequality (Accessibility)*

From a city planning perspective, the ultimate challenges of virtual participation lie within the urban-rural divides in terms of infrastructure. There is a significant difference in infrastructural attainment between urban and rural areas, for example in Serbia pertaining to road infrastructure, water supply, sewage system as well as accessibility to the internet (Pantić, 2014). Limited access to digital platforms is thus a common feature, especially in poor neighbourhoods, where in this study, in Toronto, Ontario was emphasised. The inequality in terms of accessibility is further inflated by the uneven digital literacy, where especially elderly and rural populations show lower levels in terms of computer literacy. As in many world cities, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide and inequalities within the Canadian communities. Wi-Fi hotspots, and public spaces, public libraries and restaurants providing Wi-Fi access became unavailable during the Covid-19 lockdown periods which implied that large numbers of residents were left without internet access. In most cases it was the vulnerable and disadvantaged communities who were most affected with regards to internet access during the lockdown. In rural communities there are often also fewer internet services provided and lower internet service speeds in comparison to urban centres (CRTC, 2020). In Spain it was determined that 91,4% of Spanish houses have access to the Internet, but the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted that low income families in this country have access mostly through mobile devices. Although it might seem adequate, it was found that this situation leads to a wider divide, as the continuity of learning of children could not be guaranteed if the internet could only be accessed by a mobile device (UNICEF, 2020). In this sense, digital infrastructure, access and literacy became very relevant during the Covid-19 lockdown for business, education, health, life and livelihoods. The Government of Ontario, Canada allocated C$150 million to expand broadband internet across the province, as part of a previous C$315 million plan developed to improve digital connectivity in rural communities, emphasising the high costs associated with technology advances, but also the importance of leadership and political will in addressing inequality of technology accessibility.

4.1.2. *Inclusiveness (Anonymity)*

The inclusion of representative samples, especially considering the portion of population that is not technically skilled, was also identified as a challenge linked to virtual participation processes. In Serbia for example, more than half of the population (51%) that is over 15 years of age is computer illiterate, with substantial regional differences (SORS, 2013). In Spain access to the internet falls in the elderly (65-74 years old) to 63.6% from the average 90.7% (16-74 years old). Based on Wearesocial Survey 2019, in Indonesia, the internet penetration only reaches 56% of population and the internet speed in average only 4.1 mbps in 2014 (ASEAN DNA, 2015). However, the number of internet users in Indonesia is more than 140 million people.

The other side of the problem of inclusiveness entails the inclusion of participants that are not in the target group and thus providing false information, in some cases manipulated data when hackers interfere with the process. The gap of digital literacy among the citizens is probably the greatest issue to consider in preparing the virtual public participation platform. Inclusiveness of marginalized groups in some societies, such as in some rural African communities, women do not speak in public in the presence of men or women do not have access to a phone or own a mobile device; and therefore it could be challenging when attempting to reach out to these groups digitally.

Even when such challenges are bridged, some participation propositions, such as an early public enquiry and public enquiry are to be formally defined (by law) and as a result the process of virtual participation might take a long time to realise. And even when the public administration offers online services, some citizens might still prefer to use traditional (in person) ways to communicate with the local administration, arguing that it might provide an opportunity to more interaction and clarification of the intents and attitudes. Overall anonymity provides easy access and a safe space for expressing opinions, but the accountability of contributors should be carefully considered, since community participation processes guide public spending and affect others. It is a challenging task to find the balance between inclusiveness and anonymity.

4.1.3. *Meaningfulness (User-friendliness)*

There is often a lack of a “human touch” when face to face engagements are replaced by virtual encounters. Members of some communities feel more confident sharing details with people from the same gender or ethnicity. Virtual participation does not seem as inviting as face to face collaborations. Also, the apathetic nature of virtual participation, means that it is not possible (in most cases) to read body language, further limiting meaningful conversation. Virtual discussions tend to have more rigidly structured questions in comparison to in person discussions, thus not leading to discussions outside their realm that may be important depending on socio-cultural circumstances.

Virtual participation platforms might make it easier to be present, but does not necessarily enhance participation, especially since some participants tend to keep their microphone muted and video off, thus depersonalizing their participation to the maximum. A facilitator would tend to skip such participants during the discussion and would thus limit the meaningfulness of the participation.

The other issue is the time constraints linked to online events. Collective and interactive group dynamics, instigated via in-person community-led spatial visioning workshops and planning charrettes, with many break-out and sketching groups, often spread over multiple days cannot be easily and meaningfully be virtualized, based on recent practices on Somaliland, Gambia, Laos and Thailand.

The City of Belgrade also tested these possibilities of virtual participation through the Green City Action Plan for the City of Belgrade, which was envisioned as a participatory procedure in defining a vision, mission and main objectives. The primary idea was to gather various parties in a workshop, which was

dismissed after Covid-19 crises accelerated. To secure the timely completion of the project, the consultant and the City have decided to make public online voting for the most suitable vision, including the possibility for voters to suggest their own vision proposal. The proposals given by the citizens have shown that they are lacking understanding and awareness of what a vision is. These cases identified that insufficient education (of all participants) weakens the meaningfulness of the participatory approach.

Similar findings were visible in Spain, with a preliminary participatory process conducted in Santander in July 2020 during the lockdown period. The process was constituted by in-person and online activities, but the latter lack explanations. Also, limited space was provided for participants to include personal opinions and suggestions, thus limiting participation and failing the aim to be citizen-driven. Overall it should be considered what kind of online tools can be instrumental in the process and to what degree these tools should be used. While it should be user-friendly to use, it should still result in meaningful participatory processes.

4.1.4. *Knowledge (Feedback loops)*

There is limited knowledge on virtual participation methodologies. Virtual engagement can face a baseline negative characterization as automatically being inequitable. It is often viewed as a lesser investment of resources, and therefore is equated with a lesser effort to engage diverse and representative participants within a community A lack of supportive documentation and data may serve as a barrier to change regulation related to community planning processes. Regulatory land use processes in New York City for example, mandate public planning processes include in-person and in-community participatory planning processes. This can be seen as creating a situation that promotes “checking the boxes” over evidence-based considerations.

In Portland, Oregon, local development review processes traditionally requiring open in-person public hearings or meetings were delayed due to social distancing requirements associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Meetings were moved online despite fears of inferior quality and positive feedback was received from interested parties. In Lima there were different results when the participatory processes pertaining to the Metropolitan Development Plan (which started in late 2019) were taken online. There were very limited discussions and it created further uncertainty for stakeholders. In Serbia, especially in rural areas, it was also found that stakeholders are more confused with the unexpected transition to virtual means of discussion. In Munich on the other hand, the strict planning regulations and formal processes leave a lack of freedom for participatory and co-creation formats. As mentioned in the ongoing Smart Together program “not all local problems can be solved with the smart city project, which can lead to frustrations of residents” (Citizen and Stakeholder Engagement Munich, 2020). Other cities however do embrace the benefits of participatory planning, for example Antwerp, where the enormous resistance to finish the city-ring has grown into a collaboration with Ringland authorities, which resulted in the ring being covered in strategic places and the city is connected to its spacious surroundings by parks. While there is limited knowledge on methodologies pertaining to virtual participatory processes, the feedback loops could be beneficial from a spatial planning perspective and should at least be explored in this sense.

4.1.5. Trustworthiness (Transparency)

Inclusive virtual participation could face more challenges in cities where there is a poor trust in governance. Due to corruption in Lima for example, followed by weak coordination mechanisms of the Metropolitan Governance as well as a lack of an official term for planning in the Peruvian legislation, significant omissions are evident in planning the city. The research on the biosphere reserve in Serbia has shown that trustworthiness and overall willingness to participate in planning processes highly depend on the implementation success of previous projects based on a participatory approach.

The perception that a complex matter is difficult to do online and the mistrust in the use of personal data on the internet plays an important role when attracting people to take part in virtual participation. The hoax production is also a potential problem in certain countries that can haunt the information validity in the participatory process. For example, in Indonesia during the first semester 2017, the government received more than 6,632 reports from the netizen regarding hoax contents. It thus required the double-check verification, the clearance of data providers, the clarity of the rule of thumb, and strong law enforcement. Integration between vertical levels of government is another critical factor to enhance trustworthiness. The experience from Lima illustrated that when there is an overlapping of powers and functions due to unclear roles division from the Metropolitan Government, it results in various barriers in terms of the decision-making and implementation process. For example, when the Metropolitan Government is about to implement a project, it requires the Local Municipality's permission (Integracion, 2020).

Trustworthiness and transparency are even more critical when considering virtual participatory platforms and traditional concerns and challenges pertaining to trustworthiness is highlighted by the online reality brought along by the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.2. Opportunities of virtual participation

Virtual participatory planning approaches do however provide various opportunities for Planners and the Planning Profession. Based on the debates and surveys completed by the participants of this study, the following opportunities were identified within each of the themes.

4.2.1. *Inequality (Accessibility)*

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted inequalities and emphasised the need to address global accessibility to internet, online platforms and supporting infrastructures. It resulted in increased pressure for technological advances across the globe, motivated in terms of the overall well-being of the planet and communities. Inequality and accessibility to technology infrastructure and virtual platforms between different socio-economic areas and global contexts, could be addressed through investment in technological development, and supporting overall national capacity to innovate and provide adequate infrastructure. In agreement with CISCO (2020) this research also identified that digital connectivity is a critical factor to address inequality, as it provides pathways out of poverty.

4.2.2. *Inclusiveness (Anonymity)*

Virtual participation could address traditional concerns of inclusive participation in terms of ineffective processes, representative population samples, excluding participation due to the time of the meeting, and limiting costs associated with hosting the meeting and travelling to and from such meetings. Virtual platforms were also found to make engagement with larger audiences are more feasible. In Lima for example, given the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens, and architects' participation in virtual conferences, seminars, and forums developed by the College of Architects of Peru have greatly increased. It seems to be more accessible due to the avoid of commuting to the place, and growing interest on topics towards the city's future. There is also evidence that participants have equal opportunity to engage when participatory processes are online.

In 2019 in Rivas Vaciamadrid, Spain, a digital platform for participatory budgeting attracted approximately 200 proposals, followed by 3000 votes. The platform enabled an easy evaluation process, resulting in 14 actions being timeously selected for funding, worth 300,000 €. In Munich, it became evident that the combination of working offline and online can lead to better results. For example, to

optimize workshops by using the CityApp in combination with existing events and local bottom-up initiatives.

Virtual participation processes assist with the facilitation of meetings, as the platform ensures that all voices are equal, rather than the often experienced scenario where the "loudest person is heard". It holds unique possibilities with members of the younger generation which prefer digital collaboration. Virtual platforms could ensure that the reachability be extended even further, especially through asynchronous processes and by providing the option to view the recording of the events at a convenient time and day. Virtual platforms pose the option to extend inclusiveness and overcome many of the traditional barriers of participatory processes.

4.2.3. Meaningfulness (User-friendliness)

This research identified that user-friendly interface applications could enhance participatory approaches and that quality control could be enhanced through virtual participatory planning processes. The Covid-19 realities highlighted the unequal distribution of technology advances and socio-economic realities and in some sense sensitized the planning profession to a greater extent. It provided opportunities to rethink business as usual. It was identified that meaningful participation implies that all parties should be able to adequately engage and interact and share information in a manner similar to better than would have happened if they were face to face. It was recognised that virtual platforms now provide an opportunity of building trust, to enhance participation, and to overcome language barriers. It is evident that information can be transparent and distributed to all stakeholders, as information can be effectively presented via virtual platforms.

Willingness and creativity to try new virtual tools, to be innovative to find new ways for meaningful engagement will determine if virtual participatory processes escalate to the next level of engagement where openness could gain momentum and could lead to great strides toward meaningful virtual participation. Meaningful virtual participation could suffice and can become a powerful tool to promote participation.

4.2.4. Knowledge (Feedback loops)

This paper is evidence of the benefits of cross country sharing of best practices, emphasising context-based planning, and the importance to translate global solutions locally, thus giving local accents. In Munich, under the Smart Together program, it was identified that this direct and personal dialogue is helpful to deeply understand the local needs. Similar findings were evident across the globe and this research conforms to the findings of Gigler & Bailur (2014) that knowledge is linked to the rationale that feedback will contribute to successful planning, as citizen participation and feedback are instrumental to enhance social accountability, good governance, and citizen empowerment.

4.2.5. Trustworthiness (Transparency)

The research identified that virtual platforms often lead to prompt obtainment of results. Voting for scenarios can be done virtually (graphically, with videos telling the story and explaining the scenarios). Virtual participatory platforms enable measurable results from the input of all participants and these inputs are formally acknowledged through the digital structures. The city of Munich, for example, has created a smart data platform known as the Transparency Dashboard which gives interested people a clear and comprehensive overview of which and what kind of data is being collected in the project, how it is processed and the measures taken to protect data and privacy, among others (Smarter Together, 2019). These digital advances improve transparency and as a direct result enhances trustworthiness.

However, in agreement with Nickel et al (2010) this research also identified that notion of trustworthiness is associated with interpersonal trust and that there is scope to address cultural and

context-based scenarios to address corruption and enhance communication, in attempt to further increase trustworthiness, especially when considering virtual participatory processes.

4.3. Virtual participation hype or new normal

Upon debating whether virtual participation is a hype or new normal for post Covid-19 cities the majority of participants (65%) voted in favour of “new normal” with the remainder of participants (35%) indicating it would become the new normal if specific requirements were put in places and challenges as indicated above, adequately address. The great challenges in terms of equality, urban-rural divide and exclusion of stakeholders should firstly be addressed before the new normal will realise across the globe. Virtual participatory planning might be currently considered a sense of “forced openness”, especially under the current health circumstances and enforcement of social (physical) distancing measures. It is thus not per definition a hype, but rather a coping mechanism, but through pandemic-planning there might be new “digital habits” that will remain and improve the planning profession.

Participants also indicated that planning approaches tended to migrate towards virtual participatory platforms and that the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated such. It might now become a 'continued normal' for post-Covid-19 cities. Even as it might realise as the new normal, it would entail great innovations and advancement to ensure a win-win situation. However, the past taught us that pandemics (or other disruptions) mostly result in advances and resilience of communities. Socio-spatial inequalities might be the great barrier to success, but at the same time also the ideal start for research and innovation on inclusive virtual planning.

The participants had consensus (100%) that Planners should embrace virtual participation as the way forward. It could redefine the level of participation. However, Planners should not replace traditional methods of participation, but rather reinforce inclusive participatory processes with the help of virtual platforms. Virtual participation should complement in-person engagement. Traditional means of participation should not be ignored. These new forms of human interaction could offer potential benefits to enhance participation, especially in a globalizing world where open-mindedness, exposure to diverse opinions, people and culture are critical. Virtual participation does not need to be considered an alternative, but should be considered as a supplementary method offering real benefits and new opportunities for “meaningful” interactions. Participatory planning processes that can be scaled up to have a greater impact as planners address global issues, while simultaneously acknowledging the need to embrace inclusiveness.

For the interim, transitional hybrid strategies that allow for progress should be explored. Planners should acknowledge the dynamic, non-static reality of cultures, communities and the built environment and embrace to facilitate growth, evolution, transformation, change and hopefully, progress in a way that works for everyone. What has been learned about virtual participation, and any advances we have made during Covid-19 pandemic, should be leveraged to advance virtual and inclusive participation. However, a particular attention should be on formal procedures, which require adaptation of legislation, that cannot be solved *ad hoc* but in contrast require more time to be put in practice.

5. Conclusions: Post Covid-19 City and virtual public participation – Hype or new normal?

Covid-19 brought various challenges along for cities and communities across the globe, but it also brought some positive considerations along in terms of the acceleration of technological development. The pandemic has, in this sense, positively accelerated the pathway for digital development including virtual participation. In a heterogeneous context, the rollout of such technological advances and opportunities are not equal, but given the benefits associated with the development of technological interfaces and virtual participatory platforms, the Planning profession could benefit from exploring and integrating such as part of mainstream planning approaches. In quest of realising this, the following are recommended:

- Covid-19 pandemic has forced people to change the practice of their everyday life, including the intensity of using internet facilities. To a certain extent, it accelerates the transiting formation of digital society. The virtual public participation is one of the vehicles to encounter the journey of the digitalization of social and economic life. How legitimate the virtual process will vary among countries. The maturity level of the society will play a significant role.
- Inclusive virtual planning can start with local governments, from the notion that it has a powerful role in building better cities, highlighting the collective power of small actions.
- Bridging digital literacy and digital infrastructure divides should be prioritized as a goal to resilient and sustainable urbanism, rather than considered a barrier to using virtual participation processes.
- The planning profession should promote knowledge-sharing and documentation of practical experience with virtual participatory planning processes to facilitate evidence-based assessment, advancement, and application.
- In addition, the planners should increase the competence in using digital platforms through collaborative works with data scientists and other professions in digital technology.

Perhaps the overall aim would be to ensure that this “new normal” of virtual participatory platforms are indeed effective and efficient in all contexts, and not just as hype brought along by the pandemic as a quick-fix solution. Effective and efficient communication is after all further motivated from the perspective of overall well-being for the world and its inhabitants as a whole, and lies at the heart of sustainable Planning.

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