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The notion of justice in funded research on urban sustainability: performing on a postpolitical stage or staging the political?

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ABSTRACT

Urban sustainability has often been accused of tending mostly to its environmental and economic dimensions, neglecting or marginalising issues of justice. Simultaneously, the European Union has been increasingly funding research explicitly focused on the intersection of justice, sustainability and the city. The role of such research in furthering or jeopardising *just* urban sustainability objectives and outcomes so far remains underexplored. We conducted a discourse analysis on 27 selected research projects funded by the EU FP7 and Horizon 2020 schemes and which focus on the themes of urban sustainability and justice, supplemented by qualitative interviews with core researchers in those projects, to examine their potential in (re-)politicising or depoliticising urban sustainability. Our findings indicate that justice is often loosely defined through terms such as "stakeholder participation," "inclusion," or "diversity" in urban sustainability interventions, and research projects fail to pay attention to structural and historical drivers of injustice within a broader context of political economy, society and culture. We find this trend mostly in international collaborative projects that are implementation-oriented and promise to fast track inter- or trans-disciplinarity within a context of precarious research contracts and limited timescales for researchers. We build on earlier critiques of the ecological modernist character of EU research and policy priorities and contribute further by demonstrating how the academic entrepreneurial system perpetrated by EU-funded projects can undermine the politicising possibilities of research. To overcome funding constraints, we urge funders to allow for broader methods and timescales to examine and reflect on what are, or could be, just urban sustainabilities.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly urban, climate change-impacted and ecologically degraded world, local governments are faced with the growing social and ecological imperative to mitigate and adapt to climate change and protect ecological systems (Vojnovic 2014). With urban areas being particularly prone to climate change hazards, impacting people's health, livelihoods and infrastructures, and socially and economically marginalised residents impacted most (IPCC 2022), cities are also the

locus of experiments and innovations responding to the need for climate change mitigation, adaptation, resilience and other sustainability challenges (Bulkeley, Broto, and Edwards 2015; Bulkeley and Broto 2012; Bulkeley 2010; Dooling 2019; Vojnovic 2014).

While some urban sustainability plans in Europe and North America have increasingly outlined commitments to equity and justice (e.g. Ajuntament de Barcelona 2012; City of Boston 2019; Nantes Métropole 2019), the integration of justice in most sustainability interventions remains questionable in practice (e.g. Rosan 2012). Urban redevelopment, greening or smart city-projects that hinge on sustainability claims tend to serve powerful economic interests instead of the needs of residents (Akers, Béal, and Rousseau 2019; Anguelovski 2015; Checker 2020; Kotsila et al. 2021; Martin et al. 2019). Urban greening projects, for example, that have the potential to contribute to ecological sustainability and address unequal access to green space, have been shown to end up sustaining or worsening social injustices, through what is known as green gentrification (Pearsall and Anguelovski 2016; Gould and Lewis 2018). Such discrepancies have been attributed to the fact that sustainability interventions "do not necessarily challenge the fundamental structures of social organisation and knowledge production that produce injustices in the first place" (Castán Broto and Westman 2016, 648), and to a blind focus on generating economic growth at the expense of people and the environment (Sekulova et al. 2021; Kotsila et al. 2021).1

In response to the challenge of advancing justice objectives while planning and implementing urban sustainability, the EU has directed a great amount of resources to research, as part of its funding schemes for research and innovation, the most recent being FP7 (€50 billion) and Horizon 2020 (H2020) (€77 billion). Within those, between 2007 and 2020, the main EU database CORDIS recorded 427 projects that relate to justice and/or sustainability in cities, out of which 125 are situated at the intersection of sustainability, justice, and the city (Schipper et al. 2019). Considering that a great number of universities and research institutes have been relying on such funding (Arboledas-Lérida 2020), the types of projects funded can define – and help us identify – the direction of knowledge production and, consequently, can shape powerful discourses taken up by policy and planning (Felt 2014; Levidow and Neubauer 2014). Yet, these dynamics have been widely underexamined. This paper explores this material in the context of how urban sustainability relates to struggles for social and environmental justice.

In this article, we ask (i) how the concept of "justice" is used and operationalised in EU-research projects that situate themselves at the intersection of urban sustainability and justice, and (ii) whether such operationalisation contributes to (re-)politicising or further depoliticising sustainability in cities. We understand justice as a variegated set of conditions ⍰substantially concerned with distribution of resources, political processes, and social recognition ⍰ that allows for full human flourishing (Nussbaum 2001; Schlosberg 2013). If conditions within a given society systematically support some, but hinder other individuals or groups with regard to basic flourishing (i.e. thriving within reasonable limits) according to achievable outcomes that they value in order to live a healthy and fulfilled life, then that society is to some degree unjust (Fraser 2005; Nussbaum 2001; Schlosberg 2013). Crucially, we are not examining first-hand how justice objectives are advanced on the ground through EU-funded projects, but how the *concept* of justice in urban sustainability is portrayed and operationalised in these projects, taking into account the discursive power of knowledge production (Banerjee 2003). We thus employ a discourse analysis of key documents produced by researchers and institutions under the framework of such projects and complement this with semi-structured interviews held with researchers from these projects. Earlier studies have pointed to the usefulness of discourse analysis as a method that can reveal dominant power dynamics and how they are reflected in sustainability (Banerjee 2003; Death 2011; Sharp and Richardson 2001), especially when scrutinising the relationship between knowledge production processes and questions of justice (Baker 2007; Colombo, Pansera, and Owen 2019; Kotsila et al. 2021; Machin 2019). By investigating how justice is taken up by EU-funded projects on the intersection of justice, sustainability and the city, we noticed how the concept of participation is embedded in processes of depoliticization. We found tokenistic uptakes of participation prevailing over more

radical questionings and practices around participation, that is those which would pay attention to intersecting challenges to participation (Anguelovski et al. 2020), create space for dissent (Turnhout et al. 2020) and redirect flows of power away from dominant minority groups (Fung 2015). Finally, we focus on the role of researchers (Kaika 2018) as knowledge producers and either accomplices or subverters of more superficial undertakings around justice. Here we examine under which conditions, research can repoliticize urban sustainability. We contribute to research at the intersections of environmental justice, urban political ecology, and knowledge/power analyses (Svarstad, Benjaminsen, and Overå 2018; Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020).

In what follows, we develop a theoretical framework that examines double depoliticizations of urban sustainability and considers how urban sustainability can be (re)politicised, especially so in the context of EU-research and -policy priorities (Section 2). In the methodology (Section 3) we elaborate on using discourse analysis in relation to our dataset. Then, we provide an analysis of 27 EU-funded projects through materials they have produced and interviews with researchers from these projects (Section 4). We close the article with a discussion of our findings and their implications (Section 5) and then offer some conclusions (Section 6) on the role EU-funded knowledge plays in urban sustainability, and on new pathways for research.

2. Justice deficits in urban sustainability research and practice

Urban sustainability can be approached as a dialectical relationship between theory and practice (Vallance 2011). Theoretical ideas around urban sustainability that arise out of knowledge-producing institutions such as universities, flow into, and can be instrumental to, practice (e.g. "urban planning" for sustainability). Vice versa, theory on urban sustainability is often inspired by and interprets what is performed by activists, planners, and policy-makers. Crucially, in these processes of exchange and interpretation, calls for justice are often left in the margins. Questions such as "whose needs are being met and whose are not?" and "whose voice is present and where?" in urban sustainability interventions and projects, remain largely unaddressed (May and Perry 2016). As we outline in the following paragraphs, this deficit of justice can be explained as – what Machin (2019, 208) coined describing ecological modernism discourse – a process of *double depoliticization*: "not only are political differences erased of the discourse, but the discourse itself is removed from political debate". Specific to the context of this paper, we see a process in which, on the one hand, urban sustainability discourse pays little attention to patterns of socio-environmental injustice, its drivers, and the claims and struggles for justice from below; on the other, this particular uptake on urban sustainability is seen as the only viable option, as an undebatable "commonsensical" way of doing things, distanced from politics.

The first aspect of depoliticising sustainability occurs when dominant governance paradigms for urban sustainability do not question existing political-economic configurations. Rather they tend to operate within a framework of "a consensus … around the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism as an economic system" (Swyngedouw 2009, 609). This is also called as the "postpolitical condition" within which urban sustainability is operationalised, denying it of "a space of contestation and agonistic engagement" (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015, 6; see also: Ernstson and Swyngedouw 2019; Krueger and Buckingham 2012). In other words, this pertains to placing voices that disagree with certain facets of urban sustainability outside of the realm of politics; understanding thus politics as only consensual and a-conflictual and ultimately obscuring ongoing injustices. In this regard, Swyngedouw (2009, 609) further warns that even citizen participation in policy-making can be depoliticising when "the stakeholders (i.e. those with recognised speech) are known in advance and […] disruption or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of governing."

This is increasingly important as justice is growingly cast in terms of participation in (urban) planning (Blue, Rosol, and Fast 2019), including in planning for urban sustainability (Van der Jagt et al. 2016). Turnhout et al. (2020) note three depoliticising tendencies of participatory practices: firstly, they can permeate existing power structures muting other ways of knowing beyond scientific

knowledge; secondly, participatory practices can ignore participants' differences pertaining for example to access to resources, stakes, risks, and vulnerability; and thirdly, participation is often ill connected to its larger political context. While participatory processes have the ability to address social justice when done "right" (Touchton and Wampler 2013; Fung 2015), it is crucial to maintain a critical stance on whether and how participation in policy-making can advance social and environmental justice, especially considering the multiple facets and modes of operating injustices in relation to urban socionatures (see for example Anguelovski et al. [2020] for an expansive view of justice in urban greening). "Participation", indeed, is complex and context-dependant and can both re- or de-politicize practices of urban sustainability.

The second aspect of depoliticising urban sustainability can be traced in reference to the scientific status of knowledge that informs it (Swyngedouw 2009). Here, scientific knowledge production on urban sustainability is likely to reflect dominant power structures in society because of who holds access to funding and to highly regarded scientific publication outlets. In this way, "implicit political assumptions" about knowledge production can influence "how we know the city and how we apply this knowledge in various ways" (Karvonen 2020, 419); what questions are investigated (or ignored) and under which epistemic hierarchies (May and Perry 2016); and the extent to which this knowledge values and incorporates the lay, situated and embodied knowledges of "ordinary folks" from outside the walls of academia and policymaking (Karvonen 2020), including historically marginalised communities (Corburn 2017; Zavestoski 2009).

This second dynamic plays out in Europe with scientific knowledge production increasingly taking place in a context of neoliberal governance and austerity measures, implemented in many European countries over the last decade, which have made universities and researchers more reliant on external funding schemes (Jessop 2017; Kauppinen 2013) such as Horizon 2020 (H2020) (Arboledas-Lérida 2020). This "academic capitalism" of external funding schemes requires demonstrating excellence and expertise often done via the compartmentalisation of knowledge based on fragmented epistemic frames of disciplines, and sacrificing studies on social, environmental and political structures and processes in favour of "a transferable model in a market-place of ideas" (May and Perry 2016, 25). Functioning under time and budget pressures, many researchers tend to be changing their research objectives to fit with more mainstream discourse (Mascarenhas et al. 2021), and the priorities articulated or promoted by funders, such as the European Union (Felt 2014).

This funding context has grave implications for knowledge produced around sustainability, among others, as both EU policy frameworks and research-funding priorities have been shown to broadly follow an ecological-modernist perspective (Baker 2007; Colombo, Pansera, and Owen 2019; Machin 2019; Pollex and Lenschow 2018). In other words, mainstream ideas of what constitutes urban sustainability in the EU are guided by the conviction that economic growth and market-based solutions are necessary to deal with environmental problems, even as they conflict with social and environmental justice.

Early on, the EU's environmental policy priorities promoted an economically biased conception of sustainable development, aligning with the EU as an economic integration project (Baker 2007). In the last two decades, the EU's Environmental Action Programmes, major frameworks for environmental policymaking, have been found to be formulated along the lines of market rationality (Machin 2019). At the same time, social issues in themselves have been neglected on the EU's policy agenda (Polomarkakis 2020). While the 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights does stipulate 20 principles for "a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity" (EC n.d.-b), they are disproportionately focused on labour and working conditions, lacking an EU-wide definition of (social) justice (Bonciu 2018; Pochet 2017; Polomarkakis 2020), especially in the context of a more sustainable Europe. Illustratively, environmental justice has indeed barely been on the EU's policy agenda (de Oliveira Finger and Zorzi 2013; Laurent 2011; Toussaint 2021) and traditionally remained in the domain of the law. While the European Green Deal of 2019 is seen as a turning point, incorporating both social and environmental policy plans, a term as "inequality" is still absent from its text,

and it still misses a workable definition of social and/or environmental justice (Laurent 2020; Fleming and Mauger 2021).

In line with the above, the EU's research funding priorities stipulated under H2020 were also found to disproportionately reflect eco-modernist perspectives, by favouring discourses, for example, of eco-innovation and the circular economy (Colombo, Pansera, and Owen 2019) and uncritical support for "green growth" (Pollex and Lenschow 2018). It is to this extent illustrative that, while a major part of H2020 aimed to address sustainability issues, none of these were connected to social topics such as (in)justice, (in)equality, or exclusion (EC n.d.-a). Relatedly, H2020 has given more support to techno-scientific disciplines than to the social sciences and humanities (Felt 2014; Levidow and Neubauer 2014), which is likely to also shape the types of knowledge produced around urban sustainability.

We can similarly outline the EU's research funding priorities around the concept of "participation". The EU is a complex and diverse institution within which understandings or practices of participation vary. In regard to research projects and particularly those that combine social and environmental sciences, the EU's research funding bodies have put an emphasis on participation in research projects (participatory research) and placed value in participatory processes in society more generally by including these concepts in funding calls and research priorities. For example, in a 2015 report a H2020 expert group on Nature-based Solutions (NbS) writes: "New forms of stakeholder engagement and citizen participation in urban design must be explored to harvest these innovative capabilities, resources and cooperation." (EC 2015b, 17). However, it is our concern and our inquiry in this article to investigate the extent to which this reference to participation is combined with deeper concerns related social justice (and related inequalities) and the extent to which these calls are met with on the ground practices, both from research projects and research subjects.

Against what we have sketched as a doubly depoliticised field of urban sustainability theory and practice, critical perspectives on justice have shifted the focus from "politics" – as the established processes, actions and performances of political-economic institutions – to a multitude of "the political" – as "a space of contestation and agonistic engagement" (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015, 6). This is supported by a just urban sustainabilities (plural) paradigm, that deconstructs and challenges the idea that sustainability can be universalised, and instead calls for sustainability "to be accountable for justice and equity" (Agyeman et al. 2016, 334) by acknowledging "relative, culturally and place-bound nature" of sustainabilities (Agyeman 2013, 5). A critical engagement with urban sustainability can thus be understood as going beyond "politics" (as consensual and non-conflictual) and looking closer at the "tactics, strategies, discursive frames, organisational structure, and resource base" of social and environmental justice movements, as well as at their contradictions, clashes, successes and failures (Pellow and Brulle 2005, 17). In other words, we need to ask whose views, voices, experiences, perceptions and meanings around urban environments are systematically and historically being silenced and excluded, on the basis of what type of intersecting identities (hinging on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, migration status or others), and whose interest does this serve (Anguelovski et al. 2020; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013).

In sum, considering the increased dependency of academic research on EU funding, how such funding is often tied to uncritical and eco-modernist policy and research perspectives, and how urban sustainability has been scrutinised as depoliticised field, it is critical to examine how "justice" is considered and operationalised in EU-funded projects, and what the impact of this is on the dialectic relationship between urban sustainability theory and sustainability practice.

3. Research methods

3.1 Data sources and selection

The EU-funded research projects selected for analysis are derived from a list assembled as part of the UrbanA (Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities) project, an EU-funded project which aimed to

synthesise and broker knowledge generated by prior research and innovation projects situated at the intersection of justice and urban sustainability (UrbanA 2019). The exact methodology applied during a 2-year process of scanning and selecting projects from The Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS) – the European Commission's primary source of results from the projects funded by the EU's framework programmes for research and innovation (FP1 to Horizon 2020), is described in one of the main project deliverables (Avelino et al. 2019). Out of 427 projects that the UrbanA project had initially selected as dealing with (urban) sustainability and/or justice (ibid), 112 projects were found to be particularly focused on urban sustainability and justice (Kotsila et al. 2020a). Notably, the majority of those projects were coordinated by research institutions located in Northern Europe.[1] Of those projects, 35 were targeted as key for developing a detailed understanding of how justice is understood and studied in relation to sustainability. The criteria for this selection included: conceptually and/or methodologically linking sustainability and justice; robust findings related to urban injustice; and aims and objectives stated in summary materials and deliverables explicitly referring to justice (ibid, 7). After a scanning of this subset, we based our in-depth analysis on a core set of 27 projects that ran or are still running between 2007 and 2023 (see the Appendix for exact dates and country of the coordinating institution). The selection of this final core set was made based on the availability of online materials (scientific articles, deliverables, reports, policy recommendations, websites, etc.) and of diverse content (project's defined goals, justifications, methodologies, recommendations, theoretical framework, etc.). In total, we analysed 95 documents deriving from those 27 projects (Appendix). To what concerns the research on project-based documents, this is all publicly open access information, therefore we did not see the need for ethics clearance to use it and analyze it.

We further held nine semi-structured qualitative interviews during the period between 2019 and 2020, with core researchers (PIs, Co-PIs, or research managers) from nine of the 27 EU-funded projects in our core list. These were all core postdoctoral researchers or research coordinators in projects and were selected on the basis of their involvement in research tasks related to justice and/or participation. Interviews were conducted via online conference calls and had a duration of maximum 40 min.

Our interview guide included questions on how justice was addressed, researchers' views on how justice was integrated in the project's aims and implementation, and how in their experiences being funded by the EU influences their work and work environment, paying attention to the tensions, constraints, conflicts, and power dynamics that exist within projects and between funders and research project teams.

3.2 Analytical approach and methods

We employed a discourse analysis of key documents produced through the 27 EU-selected research projects. We analyzed our dataset using an iterative-inductive approach, which recognises research as a practice, "informed by a sophisticated inductivism, in which data collection, analysis and writing up are not discrete phases, but inextricably linked." (O'Reilly 2012, 12). Our research was thus informed by theory, but remained "open to surprises" to which then research was adapted (ibid). Central here is the idea that the process of analysis allows the researcher to be theoretically informed from the start, while being open to interpretations that emerge from such analysis (Charmaz 2005).

Following this approach, we first selected key official documents from each project, paying attention to represent different output types (Appendix). We also took into account two main distinctions in the types of EU-funded projects: (i) implementation-oriented (I), versus purely investigation-driven or research-focused (R), and; (ii) individual or single-institution projects (S), versus consortiums of various research institutions from different countries (C). In line with this, we identified three categories of projects: consortium/implementation-oriented (C/I); consortium/research-oriented (C/R); and, individual or single-institution/research-oriented (S/R). Notably, there were no S/I (individual or single-institution/implementation-oriented) projects in the dataset, and this scheme is indeed mostly absent from EU funding structures.

We then analyzed a total of 95 documents using codes defined upfront based on literature, as well as adding new emerging ones (see Table 1 for the detailed code-list). We identified three main top-level codes under which codes were grouped: "implicit (in)justice", "explicit (in)justice" and "integration of justice". The analysis based on these three top-level codes allowed for two

Table 1. Code-list of codes, grouped under three top-level codes, with their descriptions. The frequency refers to the times a code is ascribed to a piece of text in one of the 95 documents of the 27 projects in our dataset.

Top-level code	Code	Description	Frequency
Implied (in)justice	Tokenistic use of concepts	Words or phrases that address (in)justice, without explanation why or how	311
	Employing trickle down assumptions of justice, sustainability and/or growth	Presuppositions that improving sustainability will lead to justice, or that growth will facilitate sustainability and/or justice	24
	Non-consideration of manifestations of injustice	Sections in which an appeal is made to the necessity of "justice" without addressing the manifestation of injustice the project is addressing	34
Explicit (in)justice	Improved (or not) material resources or livelihoods	Changes in the materiality of aspects of life such as time, money, the built environment and access to it	27
	Improved (or not) consideration of other needs, preferences, identities	The acknowledgment of the needs and/or preferences of other identities in a project or in decision-making processes	54
	Improved (or not) consideration of other knowledge and information	[aside from considering other needs or preferences,] considering other (sources of/methodologies for) knowledge and information to inform a project or decision-making process	27
	Improved (or not) ability to share knowledge	The option for people to share knowledge with limited obstruction	9
	Improved (or not) (access to) environmental goods/bads	Environmental amenities that extensify or intensify, and/or an improvement in the access to environmental amenities	15
	Confrontation (or not) of uninhibited economic growth	(not) stimulating uninhibited economic growth through policies and instruments or the project itself	10
	Confrontation (or not) of neoliberal policies	(not) stimulating policies/policy structures that stimulate the market/privatization and reduce the public sphere	32
	Confrontation (or not) of exclusive regeneration and gentrification	Regeneration of urban areas or neighbourhoods that is only beneficial to particular, middle-class residential groups, without participation or recognition of long-time residents	18
	Confrontation (or not) of institutional disfunction (scale, discipline, sectoral)	The observed failure of institutions to their own goals or fulfil the demands of others, due to discrepancies between scales, siloed disciplinary environments, or sectoral mismatches	70
	Confrontation (or not) of exclusionist, marginalising, or discriminating discourse	Frameworks of thought and practice of which particular (groups of) people are unjustifiably left out	63
	Confrontation of tokenistic use of concepts	The use of (complex or important) concepts without definition of explanation why they figure in the project	8
Integration of justice	Justice merely as a justification/goal, but not operationalised in project's questions or aims	An appeal to justice is made to justify the research project, or justice is described as a broader effect of the research project, without actually deepening the concept of (in)justice or integrating it throughout the different stages of the project	35
	Justice integrated in the project's research questions or aims	The project's research questions or aims specifically confront or require a confrontation of manifestations of injustice(s), or explain how justice could be improved	48
	Integration of local and global injustices	Describing how global injustices play out on a local-urban level and/or how local-urban injustice(s) have global significance	10
	Research aims of justice not reached	A description and/or justification why the original aims of bringing about justice are not (fully) reached	23

main trends to emerge from our findings: first, the tokenistic uptake of the concept of justice in many of the studied EU-funded projects and their outputs, and second, the use of participation as a proxy for justice in such projects. The focused interviews we conducted next were guided by our initial findings and aimed at deepening our understanding of how justice was conceptualised and operationalised and why, from the point of view of individuals who had the task of developing research on these topics.

4. Results

The tensions, discrepancies, and disparities that emerged through our coding analysis (two top-level codes, on the implicit and explicit framings of (in)justice), led us to a first set of core findings that highlight a trend for tokenistic uptakes of justice in EU-funded research projects. Analyzing the knowledge produced in/through these projects, we find that the concept of justice is often engaged with in a rather superficial manner, and this is found to happen mostly in multi-partner consortium and implementation-oriented projects, whereas single-institution/individual projects seem to be engaging more closely analytically and theoretically with the concepts of justice. We find that the specific funding requirements for research in EU-funded consortiums play a role in shaping the process and content of research activities. Our second set of findings (relating to the third top-level code on the extent to which and how justice is integrated in research projects) highlights that justice is mostly approached through the concept and practice of "participation", with different variations of such conceptualisation and practice. A resulting ambiguity around the term often risks making "participation" an empty signifier for justice.

Rather than focusing on how particular drivers or types of (in)justice are reflected (or not) in the empirical case studies discussed in these projects, we explore the extent to which justice in general is integrated and taken up, i.e. how justice was *used and reported* in project materials. In Table 1 we outline the different types of uses identified and their frequency. Overall, we concur that, there are more implicit than explicit uses of justice, and that justice is engaged with differently in the various outputs, indicating a tokenistic use of justice. We thus argue that an important part of EU-funded knowledge production significantly fails to consistently address the deeper drivers of injustice in urban sustainability and contributes to depoliticising practices around urban sustainability.

4.1 Funder priorities and academic research structures conditioning uptakes of justice in EU-funded research projects

A first pattern identified in our analysis concerns how the concept of justice is employed and the risk of tokenising justice in many of the examined project output documents. Tokenism is here understood as the use of the concept of justice, where its essence is reduced, and where this reduction serves to tip the scale of competing interests (Bess et al. 2009; Manteaw 2007). A tokenistic uptake of justice refers more concretely to an – intentional or not – partial, superficial, or selective consideration of what justice can mean in urban sustainability.

Namely, in 12 out of the 27 analyzed projects (all 12 being consortiums, 9 of which implementation-oriented), justice or related concepts such as equality or social resilience were used in phrases describing research goals or desired outcomes of urban interventions, but without providing any further elaboration on how these were taken up analytically and methodologically in the designed researched. In one example, project 8 (C/I) examines how Nature-based Solutions (NbS) can contribute to environmental justice by bringing about "healthier places to live" and "resilient communities", and by increasing "social cohesion" through "inclusive collaboration". Although previous scholarship highlights the importance of inclusive collaboration in the form of co-creating NbS together with different stakeholders (Morello and Mahmoud 2018), the project scarcely discusses to what extent and how the generally defined social benefits of NbS – healthier places, resilient communities, among others – are achieved for the most vulnerable groups, or for historically

marginalised communities, women, or people of colour. An assumed mechanism of "trickle down" benefits is here implied as able to enhance justice, without considering contextual or structural dynamics of existing injustices and exclusions, nor how these might be reproduced through the proposed NbS interventions. In another example, project 1 (C/I), focusing on the products, activities and services surrounding urban food production, claims that "social cohesion" could "counteract environmental injustice, criminality, and exclusion of vulnerable groups" (Säumel, Reddy, and Wachtel 2019, 1). Here, justice is implicitly equated to social cohesion but the links between justice and inclusion, criminality or social cohesion remain loosely described.

In contrast, we notice significantly deeper engagement with the concept of justice in single researcher/institution projects (S) that are primarily research-oriented (R). For example, project 27 (S/R) examining the conflicts, struggles, and legal claims brought by residents and activists over harmful waste management in Naples, Italy, explores various aspects of environmental justice and especially at the level of produced narratives and related knowledge/power dynamics. It showed how apart from distributive injustice (the geographical focus of contamination), the invisibilisation and discrediting of plaintiffs' claims also contributed to environmental injustice through higher incidences of contamination-related diseases among socially vulnerable groups (Armiero and D'Alisa 2012). Project 26 (S/R) also sheds lights on the lived experiences of traditionally marginalised residents, by examining the narratives of resistance articulated and enacted by residents voicing anti-gentrification concerns and countering injustices in their day-to-day practices, in the cities of Rome and Istanbul (Annunziata and Rivas-Alonso 2020). Another project (25, I/R) measures the scope and magnitude of green gentrification in 40 cities, and researchers identify more progressive policy and planning tools that can address gentrification through reparative and emancipatory justice principles (Anguelovski et al. 2020; BCNUEJ 2021). Engaging with urban justice in a critical manner, in this example, results in project outcomes that call for undoing the legacies of racialized segregation and green exclusion in the US and Western Europe and actively engage urban planners in these places.

While more critical takes on justice were also observed in consortium-based projects, these were mostly found in certain types of outcomes, such as scientific journal articles (e.g. Frantzeskaki et al. [2016] and Wamsler et al. [2019]), that speak to a more targeted academic community. Such outputs do not bare the project label and identity as much as, for example, project reports or policy briefs which are directed towards EU evaluators or policymakers. It is thus in such targeted academic outputs where critical voices seem to be able to re-position researchers as narrating stories of socio-ecological (in)justice (Kaika 2018) and challenge dominant ideas around (urban) sustainability, even when this goes beyond the framing and language of the EU project that funded such research. One way that might explain this, as respondents shared with us, is that project deliverables are evaluated negatively if not closely aligned with the original framing of the research proposed. This points to the analytical and thematic dependency of researchers vis-à-vis EU-funded research expectations, and therefore, EU-research priorities – at least in collaborative projects. Furthermore, in some cases, policy-makers involved in collaborative projects are shown to push for "cautious" and "tamed" language. A researcher from project 19 (C/R), for example, experienced that "in the negotiation process of collaborating with the municipality … social justice was removed from the project in order to make it easier to get it in the dominant discourse and in turn more "digestible" to the local government." (Interview 2, February 2019). It is also worth noting that, most of the projects in our dataset were led by interdisciplinary socio-environmental scholars and urban ecology scientists, and as a result, many lack insights that have come from disciplines such as the critical social sciences, e.g. on (de)politicization and participation in planning (e.g. Metzger and Lindblad 2020) or in development studies (e.g. Bilgen 2019; Mishra 2011).

But why is it that more implementation-oriented and consortium-based projects, as opposed to single-institution/individual projects on urban sustainability, tend to refrain from engaging on a deeper level with the concept of (in)justice, especially so in their publicly more comprehensible output? This difference might be explained by the rules governing the funding and the execution

of those types of projects. On the one hand, consortium-driven collaborative projects face specific constraints. Consortiums get funding based on specified, quite detailed calls to which researchers can respond to and apply (European Commission n.d.). Thus, research proposals mirror pre-defined research themes and use the terminology and language followed in such calls in order to increase their funding chances. In contrast, for individual/single-institution projects, proposals can touch on many different themes or fields of research, be much more creative and "risky" in their approach, with the focus being scholarly-led projects, ideas, and pioneering science (European Research Council 2017). How research priorities are articulated in the official funding calls set out by EU institutions thus seems to play an important role in how consortiums shape their approaches to themes such as urban sustainability. Indeed, it has been observed how the EU particularly tends to hold a form of ideological power over consortium-based research, acting as a "buyer of knowledge" (Arboledas-Lérida 2020). Funding thus tends to be attained by those ideas that align better with EU priorities and to those individuals/institutions that can better design and articulate research based on such ideas. As one researcher from project 23 (C/R), explains:

> In order to apply for a grant … I have to find someone with a very good CV who has led a bunch of projects and who has good relations with the European Commission. In that sense, [consortium] projects tend to have a leading researcher that is usually a bit more strategic, who is not very critical in their way of speaking to the Commission and formulating their demands […].
>
> (Interview 8, September 2020).

This dynamic is especially salient considering most EU-funded projects are competitive[2] consortium endeavours, with individual grants being more marginal in the overall EU funding scheme (Abbott and Schiermeier 2019); a dynamic also reflected in our dataset (22 consortiums versus 5 individual grants).

On the other hand, consortium projects that work across different institutions, find it challenging to follow an – increasingly valued and often promised – interdisciplinary approach, and end up working in siloed research environments where questions of justice are more difficult to approach in a transversal way throughout the course of a project and by broad teams of researchers. While interdisciplinarity in urban sustainability research is often called for, "there is scant literature available on the actual *doing* of interdisciplinary research, and particularly the everyday, emotional considerations thereof" (Hadfield-Hill et al. 2020, 12). Indeed, some scholars emphasise that such a discrepancy between the rhetoric and practice of interdisciplinarity is generally present in H2020 projects (Mäki 2016; Stamm 2019). As one interviewee pointed, "interdisciplinarity is something that we still need to understand. It is not so easy to question your basic [disciplinary] assumptions." (Interview 8, September 2020).

Interdisciplinary research requires horizontal debate and exchange between an epistemically plural group of researchers and research approaches (Miller et al. 2008), but as our findings indicate, research on aspects concerning power relations and justice in urban sustainability – as one example – tends to be performed in a single "work package" and usually by a single or a few institutions, and thus in a rather siloed research environment. This impacts negatively on the potential for transversal incorporation of questions related to power, politics, and socio-environmental justice. As one researcher working in a project on community-based initiatives explained:

> It is not that in the core of the project framework justice was an assumption, but that only one work package was really about justice … [others] were focusing on the quantitative environmental impacts, [or] on the social impacts … partners and researchers were able to direct the project to their own research interests.
>
> (Interview 5, February 2020).

In other words, the consortium structure and how it engages with academic topics can limit a deeper engagement between different sub-teams in the project, and as a result issues of justice end up being reflected on a limited subset of project outcomes.

Finally, the short timeframes within which researchers are expected to perform and deliver official project outputs within large scale research endeavours, usually taken up by consortiums, puts pressure and can limit the possibility for deeper considerations of the context, history, and complexity in the case studies or projects under study, that critical justice studies require. Researchers have limited time frame and occasions to engage with communities, movements, and the realities of people whose "problems" it sets out to study, both because of how multiple case study projects organise research and because of the fact that many researchers are on short-term contracts or rotating between projects. As a researcher from project 18 (C/R) described:

> Only two years after the project ended did we really have a clear idea of how we could go about [public engagement]. It really needed that reflection time, but of course, by then the project was over and people had moved on […] to the next project which pays the bills […] I see a clear pattern of wasted opportunity on projects. You do so much work to get together with a group of people and organisations, to work together on a problem, and just when you reach a stage where you can collaborate, the project finishes.
>
> (Interview 6, February 2020)

In the next section we discuss how this limited engagement with justice by EU-funded projects is also related to how the concept of "participation" is used as a common way to approach/approximate justice in projects around urban sustainability.

4.2 Participation as a loose approximation of justice in urban sustainability projects

Given the emphasis in most projects analyzed on the aspect of participation in urban sustainability decision-making (17 out of 27), we here discuss how this focus on participation takes form, and how it can contribute to a rather tokenistic use and operationalisation of justice in such projects. We find that the concept of citizen or stakeholder participation is ambiguously and uncritically taken up by projects, risking becoming an empty signifier, and at the same time overshadowing other ways of fostering just urban sustainabilities, such as more systemic changes in policy and in sectors not commonly linked to sustainability (e.g. housing, education, immigration).

Of the 17 projects that engage with ideas of participation in the governance of urban sustainability, 16 were consortium-based and 12 were (also) implementation-oriented. Participation was advocated for in very different ways, from pointing to the importance of increasing democratic procedures "to strengthen democracy and social justice" through participation (Wilk 2020, 16), to participation for inclusive decision-making and "achieving the inclusion of all key stakeholders" (McCormick and Hartmann 2017, 7), through "inclusive and participatory dynamics" (Säumel, Reddy, and Wachtel 2019, 2) and "greater inclusion of the social stakeholders" (Dane, Houpert, and Derakhshan 2019, 20). Thus, participation is often used in EU-research projects as a "governance tool" to make urban sustainability interventions more just.

Scholarship on the limited emancipatory or justice potential of citizen participation schemes abound (Kaza, 2006; Kübler et al. 2020), also specifically in relation to sustainability efforts (Anguelovski et al. 2020; Checker 2020; Krueger and Buckingham 2012; Wamsler et al. 2019). Participation does thus not guarantee just outcomes (Fainstein 2011), even when designed and executed with the best of intentions. As Leal (2007, 95) notes, "by placing emphasis on the *techniques* of participation, rather than on its *meaning*, empowerment is presented as a *de facto* conclusion to the initiation of a participatory process."

Our analysis shows that many studied EU-funded projects problematically engage with participatory practices, taking for granted that any type of participation process is a step forward towards more just outcomes, thus risking reproducing an a-political and even tokenistic use of the term. While we do not intend to disregard the widespread challenges around (organising) effective and meaningful participation (Turnhout et al. 2020) nor to hold action-researchers and practitioners to any particular standard, we here observe how the particular uses of "participation" can support rather than challenge tokenistic uptakes of justice in the research projects part of our dataset.

Six projects in our dataset promote the idea of participation, but do not engage deeper in defining what different participatory processes could be held, whose knowledges are being included, recognised and valued, what possibilities they open for justice, and what are the challenges involved in their implementation. For example, project 4 (C/I), on using nature-based projects for urban regeneration, claims to strengthen "democracy and social justice in the city" through stimulating "active citizen involvement" in the activities organised by the project, avoiding the sticky issue of who will be involved (and who not) and which kind of injustices such involvement would address (Wilk 2020, 16). Such sweeping generalisations of "citizens" as one homogeneous category, obscure already existing inequities in how people access sustainability in the city, defined by intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity, or age among others. By doing so, this practice risks perpetuating, if not exacerbating, injustice in urban sustainability, instead of addressing it (Agyeman et al. 2016; Anguelovski et al. 2020; Checker 2011; Anguelovski 2015).

In the analysis conducted, ten projects explicitly reflected on the challenges of including marginalised and/or vulnerable groups in participation processes designed. For example, as researchers from project 2 (C/I), on the governance of sustainability transitions, reveal: "Certain citizen groups were more difficult to reach than others, and it was challenging to involve a representative group of the city population" (Menny, Palgan, and McCormick 2018, 75). In project 5 (C/I), on urban greening interventions, researchers further note that "holding only three workshops in each [city] was only partly sufficient in providing the more tailored and hands-on support that [...] co-design requires" (Hanania et al. 2020, 8). As one respondent told us, "it was difficult to implement a proper co-creation process involving many stakeholders, so the stakeholders involved in workshops were more those engaged in city management, businesses representatives and municipal government departments" (Interview 7, February 2020). With regards to participatory processes held in a gentrifying neighbourhood, one interviewee felt disappointed to see that "people participating were more the gentrifiers than people who are jobless or are in debt" (Interview 2, February 2020).

The ambiguity surrounding the concept of participation in general might explain this to some extent. Participation, eventually, can stand for very different types of processes, different levels of engagement with local communities, and different levels of inclusion. An interviewee from a consortium project emphasised that when participation can stand for both consultation and very deep processes of co-construction, and these two very different processes are given "the same worth," the term risks ending up an empty signifier (Interview 8, September 2020). In other words, participation ends up being a relatively easy "add-on" for urban sustainability projects to appear more socially oriented and "just". Crucially, this emphasis on "participation" as a way of paying attention to procedural justice, limits the horizon of other types of discourses, practices, procedures, and pathways that can also contribute to overcome injustices, such as more structural changes in policy (Anguelovski et al. 2020; Schlosberg 2007, 2013; Schipper et al. 2019; Tozer et al. 2020).

4.2.1 Beyond tokenistic participation

Acknowledging the issues described above, in at least two projects of our dataset we did find a reflexive and critical engagement with participation from the start, and a deeper consideration of its strengths and weaknesses in relation to justice. Project 8 (C/I), about nature-based solutions addressing social and environmental challenges in cities, urges practitioners to consider five different levels of engagement, from non-participation to full-involvement, and to be transparent about their choices. Although only full involvement is considered to be truly empowering, it is "often considered tokenistic because in some contexts stakeholders lack power to effect change as they are excluded from the final decision-making processes" (Morello and Mahmoud 2018, 114). Scientific articles published from project 10 (C/R) on urban nature-based solutions, go even further to explore new pathways for "participation", in which diversity, dissent and disagreement are embraced. Scholars point to the subjectification in most processes of participatory governance for NbS, in which existing inequalities, marginalisations, and injustices often remain unquestioned (Kotsila et al. 2021; Tozer et al. 2020). By empirically observing the praxis of *urban environmental*

stewardship, they opt for an inclusivity that is not only about taking "inequalities into account", but also about "designing stewardship initiatives to actively redress social and racial inequalities'" regarding access to land, green space, and natural resources more generally (Tozer et al. 2020, 8). The authors thus sketch a more complex understanding of the nature of participation, of inequalities in power relations, and the benefits it can (or cannot) bring, and under what conditions.

5. Discussion: moving beyond depoliticised knowledge production for urban sustainability and justice

Starting from a recognition of "the epistemological foundations of knowledge and of the power this knowledge has in defining reality" (Banerjee 2003, 174), this paper asked how EU-funded research on urban sustainability approaches justice, and how this impacts on its potential to advance or undermine it. Our analysis indicated that the concept of justice is rather marginalised in much of EU-funded knowledge production that, however, situates itself at the intersection of justice and urban sustainability. This was observed mostly in large consortium projects that are more implementation-oriented and promise to fast track interdisciplinarity within limited timescales and with many of their research teams being employed precariously. Our findings are particularly important to understand the broader policy and planning implications of expert knowledge production and advocacy, considering the core role played by the EU commission in funding and shaping research and policy implementation at different levels within countries and cities, and thus in shaping possibilities for just urban sustainabilities (Agyeman et al. 2016).

Our finding on the marginalisation of justice in much of research stemming from EU funding schemes and addressing urban sustainability, is in line with other findings on a predominantly eco-modernist approach to research and policy priorities of the EU at large (Baker 2007; Colombo, Pansera, and Owen 2019; Pollex and Lenschow 2018) and of many EU-cities in particular (Martin et al. 2019). Eco-modernist approaches place emphasis on green growth, thus on claims for addressing environmental issues through techno-scientific advancements, without challenging core features of western capitalist economies (i.e. the need for continuous economic growth and their reproduction of social injustice locally and globally). By avoiding questioning such core elements of socio-economic organisation, approaches to justice are limited to "trickle down" assumptions and often approximated by rather tokenistic versions of participation.

We similarly here observe that EU-funded projects appear rather limited in their ability to "stage the political" through the research conducted and through the outputs produced. When "staged", it is mostly directed towards a limited and targeted academic audience, rather than towards the wider public, EU funders and policy-makers. We notice that this reflects a wider problem of disciplinary rigidity and silos in academia, whereby each discipline only "speaks to" each own audience. Even in the majority inter-disciplinary projects of our dataset, the leading ideas come from the coordinating socio-environmental scientists, engineers and maybe some geographers, with little engagement with the ample critical literature on (de)politicization that one can find in academic fields such as those in the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, we note how the knowledge produced in/through the EU-funded projects we here studied, seems to reflect the marginalisation or "deficit" of justice in much of (urban) sustainability theory and practice in the previous two to three decades (although more recent works have advanced research in these domains) (e.g. Anguelovski et al. 2020; May and Perry 2016; Rosan 2012). We thus find a certain "vicious circle" operating here whereby academic work that is less informed by critical justice studies keeps feeding research on the intersection of urban sustainability and justice, which in turns feeds dominant narratives of what just sustainabile futures can look like in cities. Therefore, the potential of such research to advance justice objectives on the ground remains questionable. This, we argue, foreshadows a *double depoliticization* (see Machin 2019), as firstly, we found that EU-funded research projects that aim to address issues of justice in urban sustainability, in fact overall (re-)produce a similarly limited engagement with the question of justice. In that sense, and secondly, dominant urban sustainability practices

are likely legitimised, referencing the scientific status of the knowledge, to continue a "performance on a postpolitical stage".

While we build on the literature describing the eco-modernist tendencies of EU-funded research priorities, we also enrich those findings by pointing to the political possibilities of knowledge production. In a smaller portion of the dataset, especially so in individual projects such as ERC and Marie Curie schemes, researchers tend to research the articulations of antagonisms from below (Fougère and Bond 2016; Kakenmaster 2019), rethink the role of researchers in doing so (Kaika 2018), and pay attention to the intersectional challenges that characterise life in the city and that prevent the achievement of justice in the context of sustainability (Agyeman et al. 2016; Anguelovski et al. 2020). Furthermore, by rethinking the role and possibilities of "participation", or *stewardship* in urban sustainability, our findings align with Fung's (2015) position that the challenge of participation is not so much one of institutional design, but of "creating the political conditions under which powerful organisations and leaders are motivated to advance social justice" (Fung 2015, 521).

From this point of view, we here discuss processes of participation with regards to their potential to advance social justice. In the example of urban greening in Dublin, Ireland, the unequal distribution of green spaces in the city was addressed through multiple efforts and a municipality-led report (2015), but it also included resident-led planning in the city's historically deprived and rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood of The Liberties. Here, by making sure to include both local skaters and other residents in the conception and development of the newly built Weaver park (Vollmer 2021). However, while Weaver park was accompanied by social housing developments – an important measure of anti-gentrification planning (Oscilowicz et al. 2021) – previously city-supported community gardens adjacent to the park had to make way for prefabricated housing units and were demolished. As a result, the Liberties' residents questioned the ability of planning decisions around Weaver Park to effectively address deeper housing and social inequalities and contribute to socio-ecological justice (Anguelovski et al. 2021). On the one hand, this example illustrates some of the intersecting complexities inherent to participatory processes, supporting and contextualising similar difficulties likely faced by many researchers and practitioners in the studied EU-funded projects. On the other hand, it also underscores the need to understand participation as "inevitably imbued with unequal power relations that need to be acknowledged but cannot be managed away" (Turnhout et al. 2020, 18) and illustrate what more politicising contributions by researchers can look like. In Dublin, as in many cases of urban gardening projects, gardeners' priorities and needs are relegated behind in formal planning processes (Kotsila et al. 2020b).

Our findings on the tokenism of justice, and of participation as its proxy, can be discussed in relation to de Moor et al. 2021 distinction of at least three different dimensions of "the political". The first is the political as an expression of "an idea that challenges the existing order"; the second is about "engag[ing] in open conflict to challenge … systematic injustices and inequalities"; and the third dimension considers the political as "actual engagements in conflict [through] extra-institutional, contentious or transgressive action" (ibid, 315–316). The authors identify a partial depoliticization when the third and to a lesser extent the second dimensions of "the political" are hampered. We connect this to the observed difficulty of EU-funded research projects to connect to justice and to enhance meaningful participation, beyond the mention of ideas that to some extent support it (and challenge the existing order).

Identifying discrepancies between these "political" dimensions that de Moor et al. (2021) outline can point us to some decisions that researchers and practitioners engaged in urban sustainability and justice project might want to consider in order to bring research back into "staging the political". We, at the same time, note the challenging "balancing acts" that many researchers and practitioners have to perform, navigating between "translating their [agonistic] ideas and practices into the mainstream" and "having these scaled-up and diffused" (ibid, 325). In other words, we realise "there is a limit of how confrontational [researchers] can be without compromising access" to funding agencies like the EU (ibid, 324). Instead of writing EU-funded research projects off as per definition depoliticising through their knowledge production, we see research/-ers strategic decisions as a consequence

of "working, at least partly, within the constraints of post-politics" (ibid, 325), while we at the same time highlight the moments when EU-funded research can be and has been radical, deeply political and advancing justice.

One constraint, we argue, that researchers face, is the limited attention given to the actual doing of inter- and transdisciplinary research within the context of current funding schemes such as H2020 (Mäki 2016; Stamm 2019). This is recently supported by Mascarenhas et al. (2021), who offer insights of researchers' reflections in a H2020-funded transdisciplinary consortium on green and blue urban infrastructures. The authors celebrate the rare moments in which consortium partners acknowledge the difference in their approaches and took the time to learn from one another on topics such as justice: "discussions on finding common ground for definitions were "particularly insightful for all"" (ibid, 19). More attention to such processes could help in more awareness of the fact that knowledge production on just and sustainable futures is "a democratic challenge, raising the question of societal participation and responsibility" to which alternative perspectives from within and outside academia are needed (Felt 2014, 386).

Certainly, several limitations can be raised in our own research design, as we examined a specific group of EU-funded projects on sustainability and justice, that is only a fraction of the overall amount of projects on these and similar topics. Left out of consideration are, for example, projects that deal with urban justice but do not situate themselves under the "sustainability" umbrella. Our dataset also did not include research outputs that were not visibly linked to a specific research project, as those were hard to trace (i.e. researchers independent publications, conference talks, or other communications that stem from research conducted under the framework of the projects in our dataset). Moreover, while some project outputs provided detailed accounts and reports of advancing participatory practices and the limitations thereof, we have generally not been able to witness how justice and participation goals have been advanced on the ground, nor the (everyday) struggles of action-researchers and practitioners around doing so, since we have not followed the day-to-day research of those projects. Relatedly, discourse coming from urban stakeholders and actors (policy makers, urban planners, real estate developers, etc.) after they interact with or partake in EU-funded projects lay outside the scope of the study. In other words, we have not been able to witness the practical impact, during and after projects, of the knowledge production we examined. Finally, there is no data included in this research on the race, ethnicity, gender, class, physical ability or other characteristics of social difference concerning coordinators or other contributors of the EU-funded projects analyzed in this study. We see this as an important point of reflection for future research, as it can offer "a tool for critically assessing the existing assumptions that inform our research" (Khalikova, Jin, and Chopra 2021, 910). Indeed, much of environmental justice scholarship has been historically permeated by a Western, liberal framing of justice that is narrowly focused on distributional fairness (Reed and George 2011; Vermeylen 2019). We acknowledge that the "social locations, particularly locations of power and privilege," of environmental justice scholars – including undoubtedly ourselves – "often keep those who experience multiple forms of oppression from being heard or from being recognised fully for their work and contributions" (Malin and Ryder 2018, 4), and that this should be further explored and reflected upon.

6. Conclusions

Our analysis shows how various types of knowledge can be found in the overall production of scientific outputs at the intersection of urban sustainability and justice (over urban sustainability, over how to implement it, over how justice can be incorporated and be part of urban sustainability efforts, of how justice might be compromised in urban sustainability), and how there is indeed a "tipping of the scale" that favours research approaches that are less critical of the underlying processes of social inequality in urban sustainability, and that therefore can re-produce injustice.

Our critique to this trend is one that speaks from our own embodied and long-term engagement and research with communities, practitioners and grassroots movements who struggle for socio-

environmental justice but whose voices we do not find reflected in the objectives or findings of many EU-funded research on pertinent topics. This critique is thus our way of advancing "an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims" (Haraway 1988, 583). Our research subject here is the knowledge produced, and thus our critique is not directed to the individual researchers, who we very much sympathise with, and many of whom, according to our interviews, are committed to a more structural engagement with justice issues, but the overall infrastructure of knowledge production and funding which guides research to certain directions. Indeed, we make an effort to show how researchers are often "trapped" into reproducing research that is fast, not engaging closely with communities and with processes of urban change related to sustainability implementation including civil participation. Such research thus often adopts a disembodied or "god-like" vision of these phenomena (ibid).

We find that many EU-funded projects that situate themselves on the intersection of justice, sustainability and the city, generally engage with justice (and participation as its proxy) in ambiguous and often tokenistic ways. This is most characteristic of consortium projects that focus more on concrete urban sustainability implementations, and an environment of research that is focused on fast results and thus gives little opportunity for truly interdisciplinary research design and analysis. Furthermore, we find that the logic of the call-based funding structure specific to consortiums seems to steer towards appeasing rather than dissenting discourse in consortium project outputs. As a topic generally belonging to the social sciences and humanities, justice is often left to be dealt with in separation to the more "technical" or "scientific" parts of projects, and has been often given only marginal attention. We have concordantly argued how the control EU has over knowledge production, especially in academic contexts where funding for research mostly comes from EU and international grants, foreshadows a *double depoliticization* specifically in urban sustainability.

To move beyond depoliticised/-ing knowledge production, we thus see it as imperative for more progressive theories and meaningful practices of justice and participation to be better integrated in current and future EU-funded schemes (such as Horizon Europe, 2021–2027). If EU-funded projects contribute to "the construction of discourses and associated narratives [as] activities that influence ways of thinking, public opinion, and thereby decision-making" (Svarstad, Benjaminsen, and Overå 2018, 359), we need to explore ways in which EU-funded research projects can stage, rather than foreclose, "the political" (see de Moor et al. 2021). In other words, avoiding targeting individual researchers, we need to ask under what conditions EU-funded projects can be attentive to multiple forms of (in)justices (Anguelovski et al. 2020) and thus to new forms of just (urban) sustainabilities that can emerge (Agyeman 2013).

Finally, we do hope that this research will inform future funding schemes, especially so for large-scale collaborative projects and their evaluation, allowing for and valuing methods and timescales that can provide greater academic liberty to more closely examine the question of justice in urban sustainability; and embrace epistemic pluralism as a prerequisite of interdisciplinary (Miller et al. 2008) and transdisciplinary research (Mascarenhas et al. 2021). We also suggest that, to further our understanding of what leads or prevents researchers from critically engaging with social inequalities and questions of justice, power, privilege, or participation, we encourage self-reflexive, qualitative studies and ethnographies of actual lived experiences of researchers . This could help uncover what funding and research framework alternatives exist or need to be put in place to overcome constraints on the quality of inter- and transdisciplinary research.

Notes

1. The exact long-list and short-list that resulted of this process can be found here: https://wiki.sustainablejustcities. eu/images/7/75/Longlist_projects.pdf and here: https://wiki.sustainablejustcities.eu/images/0/00/Shortlist_projects.pdf.
2. Under FP7, 22% of applications were successful, going down to only 16% in the first year of H2020 (EC 2015a).

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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Appendix

1. A typology of the studied documents and EU-funded projects.

Project number	Project pseudonym	Project duration	Funding program	Funding scheme	Consortium/ Single-institution, individual (C/S)	Implementation-/ research-oriented (I/R)	Deliverable	Published article	Website page	Policy brief	Handbook/ guidelines	Workworn paper	Leaflet	Total number of documents collected
1	EDICITNET	2018–2023	H2020	IA	C	I	2	1	1					4
2	GREEN SURGE	2013–2017	FP7	CP	C	R	1			2	1			4
3	GUST	2014–2017	H2020	RIA	C	I	1	2		1	1		1	6
4	FOODLINKS	2011–2013	FP7	CP-FP	C	I	1	1		1	1			4
5	PROGIREG	2018–2023	H2020	IA	C	I	2		1		1			4
6	GRAGE	2014–2018	H2020	MC	C	I	3							3
7	MUSIC	2010–2015	INTERREG IVB	-	C	I	1							1
8	CLEVER CITIES	2018–2023	H2020	IA	C	I	2		1	1				4
9	URBAN GREENUP	2017–2022	H2020	IA	C	I	3							3
10	NATURVATION	2016–2021	H2020	RIA	C	R	2	1			1			4
11	NATURE4CITIES	2016–2021	H2020	RIA	C	I	2				1			3
12	ROCK	2017–2020	H2020	IA	C	I	1				2			3
13	SEISMIC	2013–2016	FP7	SA	C	I				1	1			2
14	CITYSPYCE	2013–2015	FP7	CP-FP	C	R	3				1			4
15	CROWD_USG	2017–2019	H2020	MC	C	R	1	1	1		1			4
16	CITI-SENSE	2012–2016	FP7	CP	C	I	1							1
17	SHARECITY	2015–2021	H2020	ERC	S	R		2	1					3
18	CONVERGE	2009–2013	FP7	CP-FP	C	R	3							3
19	TRANSIT	2014–2017	FP7	RIA	C	R	2			2	1		1	6
20	BRAINPOOL	2011–2017	FP7	FP-FP	C	R	2							2
21	EVALUATE	2017–2019	H2020	ERC	I	R		3		1			1	5
22	HIREACH	2017–2020	H2020	RIA	C	I	3						1	4
23	TESS	2013–2016	FP7	CP	C	R	2	2						4
24	RELOCAL	2016–2021	H2020	RIA	C	R	4			1				5
25	GREENLULUS	2016–2022	H2020	ERC	I	R	1	3						4
26	AGAPE	2014–2016	FP7	MC	I	R		2						2
27	LARES	2010–2012	FP7	MC	I	R		2	1					3
											Total number of documents	95		