



drift for transition

An evaluation of the

Actors of Urban Change program: empowerment, social learning and translocal diffusion

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authors

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Dear reader, funder, changemaker, (former) participant,

You are reading an important document. The Actors of Urban Change (ACT) is not a program you will see that often. Likewise, this is not a 'standard' evaluation.

The ACT program aims to support the learning of the participating urban change-makers and enable more effective ways of working together to make cities a better place to live. Since 2013, the program has attracted more than 120 participants from 37 cities over four cohorts, in total from 25 countries all over Europe, including Turkey, Georgia and Russia.

We have evaluated the impact of the program on its participants through three lenses: empowerment, social learning and translocal diffusion. **In this document, we share the main insights from this evaluation along with an explanation of the three lenses.**

We are aware that a program lasting for eight years, cannot be fully assessed through a survey and evaluative workshops with participants and the management team. Still, this evaluation revealed relevant insights on how the program achieved its goals, and which limitations and tensions came with it.

Hopefully, this evaluation helps illustrate the program's impact to those involved and inspires beyond ACT. Enjoy the ACT journey of empowerment, social learning and translocal diffusion!

Key insights:

- Participants gained confidence to create urban change and professionalise as members in an international, translocal network across Europe
- The program has empowered the participants by helping them create collective narratives through a shared identity of urban change agents.
- Key to the successful program was the management team, which is perceived as highly motivated, compassionate, connected, caring and willing to go beyond their capacities to help participants
- The actual impacts on urban change in the respective case cities were not further reflected in this evaluation. Still, they should be addressed in continuous monitoring of the alumni network of urban change makers.

“The ACT program helped us to form new visions of urban changes in our city, to bring new ideas from Academy Meetings and Shadowing Internships* and to adopt these ideas to local reality.”

Program participant

* The Shadowing Internship is a grant within the ACT project which enabled someone or a team to travel in the network and visit other projects or to follow a training

The lenses

We conducted the evaluation based on the concepts of empowerment, social-learning, and translocal diffusion.



The first concept, **empowerment**¹ refers to how someone gains the capacity to influence their environment in the desired direction. It does not focus on the outcomes but the process of autonomous motivation. We analysed the empowerment of participants during the ACT program through six dimensions of empowerment: relatedness, autonomy, competence, impact, meaning and resilience.



The second concept – **social learning**² – focuses on the learning that happens in interaction with others and sees learning as a shared practice. We assessed the social learning of participants through the development of knowledge, skills, the level of reflexivity and to what extent this happened in social interactions throughout the program.



Lastly, we also understand the ACT program as a translocal network³. These networks support replicating innovations in other contexts and sharing and developing skills, knowledge, shared discourses, and learning from each other's failures (**translocal diffusion**). The network also fosters translocal

empowerment that supports increasing access to resources, building legitimacy, and developing shared narratives.

Method

The evaluation was carried out in three steps: an online survey with 25 questions (a combination of testimonials and open questions); a 3-hour participant workshop to verify and enrich the insights from the survey in relation to the three lenses, and a timeline workshop with the ACT team to understand the context of the program better. Overall, a diverse group of participants was included: 39 participants from 27 cities conducted the survey, with a slight overrepresentation of the current 4th cohort. Another 13 participants from 10 cities took part in the workshop.

“The ACT team achieved to build such strong relations amongst us that fast, made us to keep in contact, thus exchanging ideas, tools, practices, concerns from the very first moment”

Program participant

¹ Avelino, F., Dumitru, A., Cipolla, C., Kunze, I., & Wittmayer, J. (2020). Translocal empowerment in transformative social innovation networks. *European Planning Studies*, 28(5), 955-977. doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2019.1578339

² Dumitru, A., Lema-Blanco, I., Kunze, I., Kemp, R., Wittmayer, J., Haxeltine, A., García-Mira, R., Zuijderwijk, L. and Cozan, S. (2017) [Social learning in social innovation](#)

[initiatives : learning about systemic relations and strategies for transformative change \(TRANSIT Brief : 4\)](#), TRANSIT: EU SHH.2013.3.2-1 Grant agreement no: 613169.

³ Loorbach, D., Wittmayer, J., Avelino, F., von Wirth, T., & Frantzeskaki, N. (2020). Transformative innovation and translocal diffusion. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*. [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2210422420300198](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2210422420300198)

Results and analysis



Empowerment

'Building confidence to drive the desired change' – On an individual level, the ACT program helped participants **gain the confidence to change**. Some participants stated that they are being taken more seriously (compared to before) and can now successfully amend their project's strategy to create the desired impact. This confidence to change was also possible due to the participants gaining new knowledge. The program provided them with training sessions that built their capacities as change agents. These sessions focused on knowledge-building like participants' own 'theory of change', and to strengthen capabilities such as participatory methods, conflict resolutions and process design. This encouraged participants to work on many other aspects that they did not consider before, like cross-sector collaborations.

'Enhancing professionalism and normalizing engagements' – ACT provided a platform where the actors recognised, validated and formalised the soft, unseen engagement practices required to make the project work. This approach cultivated a sense of professionalism and made them accept this engagement as normal. The academies, retreats and constant exchange forced participants to prepare and reflect on their work and strategies. It was described as a soft force to professionalise and strengthen the necessary structures. This led to the validation of (the already implemented) novel ways of working and organizing projects, validating certain gut feelings and providing more meaning to their work.

'Not letting the pandemic hinder the ongoing efforts' – All these efforts, communication, and sharing are continuing despite the COVID-related travel bans and lockdowns. The participants were still able to connect with other participants and continued to strengthen their purpose-driven work.

'Realisation of empowerment is a collective process' – In connecting to others, the participants learnt the importance of collaboration and diverse ways of strengthening collaborative engagement for urban change. The program made the participants realize **that empowerment is not just an individual goal but a collective process**. They also feel that they can now empathize better, enabling them to understand the needs of different actors of their respective projects.

“I found for me, personally, the work on collaborative leadership (was) really helpful. This has given me a real understanding of what colleagues from different organisations want from collaboration and how I can help them reach their goals and objectives whilst meeting my own priorities.”

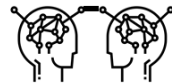
Program participant

'Local practices need to reflect the re-structuring of larger visions' – The ACT program did not necessarily add meaning to their work as several participants already had a strong, established passion for and belief in their work. Simultaneously, most participants were very happy with the opportunities to change perspective and re-structure visions and strategies through the program. However, some felt that the pathways to make these changes possible, especially at the cost of promised outcomes, were not discussed. Some also felt that ACT did not play a significant role when it came to direct influence on their envisioned impact in the cities.

Social Learning

'Participants exchanged innovative approaches' – The interactions with others helped participants in the ACT program **learn new approaches and tools**, such as – placemaking interventions, benefits of community engagement, analysis through systems-thinking, engaging with the private sector, etc. The new approaches included innovative and creative ways of doing when insights were shared within and between teams. Some of these were 'a-ha moments' to others and led them to take projects to a different level. The problem framing improved and participants strategised differently. The new insights also helped in breaking prejudices, which were hindering their processes of work.

'Interactions lead to change in perspectives' – Moreover, the social interactions helped participants **change perspectives and zoom out**. The participants moved from focusing just on the project-related outcomes to relating them to global social changes. Many realized



the value and need to engage with a broader set of stakeholders and subsequently enlarge their local stakeholder engagement.

'Social learning motivated participants to self-reflect' – The interactions with others also made the participants **self-reflect**. They felt the need to **change themselves** to be a better person and build a better team. For example, they felt the need to improve their managerial skills, leadership qualities, and personal traits relevant to the betterment of the project. Also, the international exchange experiences developed confidence in actors to pursue their own goals and apply them on the ground.

Translocal Diffusion

'The network felt part of a larger movement' – The interactions throughout the network helped the participants **to feel part of a larger movement with similar goals**. They reported sharing the same values and even the same ideologies, awareness of social issues, sustainability challenges, and caring for society and nature. The translocal exchange broadened the outlook of the participants towards the scope of their projects. They realized how they are working towards a similar goal.



“One thing that rose up as something common to all the teams was the difficulty of communication and articulation across sectors (...) this consciousness contributed to improve our project and still contributes to my approach when working in partnership with others”

Program participant

'Continuous exchange of success and failure stories' – During the online workshops, we noticed that the participants addressed the problems as **'we' instead of 'I'**. By discussing how each of them combatted the pandemic crisis or the local bureaucratic hindrances, participants demonstrated the ability to share ownership of challenges and opportunities. Participants exchanged inspirational success stories and lessons from the failures of others.

'Translocal diffusion made participants retrospect' – Realising that you are part of something larger is a balancing act, however. One of the participants also reflected how small they felt in comparison to complex societal challenges. This feeling was further reflected in their individual learnings: experiencing soft forces, respect, helpfulness, being down to earth; this was then transferable to their urban cases and into their own attitudes.

'Enabled formation of new coalitions' – The translocal network in the ACT program also helped **form new coalitions** within the **diversity** of the network. Participants across cities were not perceived as a single movement with one clear path but rather as a series of diverse initiatives orchestrated through shared ideas and narratives of better city life. The shared ideologies made them develop 'personal links'. These personal relations kept their coalitions active even during pandemic times. These coalitions were also able to apply for funding and consult with each other when further required.

'Need for more shadow funding' – However, to ensure the sustainability of these networks, participants highlighted the necessity of more shadow funding. The shadow funding facilitates travelling to different geographies, thereby fostering exchange and

enabling learning. The current shadow funding was unusable because of pandemic travel bans.

ACT coordination and management

Participants of the program gave an overly positive and supportive evaluation of the program. While some minor adjustments were proposed, the actual impacts on urban changes in the case cities often remained overlooked in participants' reflections. These impacts were not monitored over the course of this evaluation. This should be subjected to future assessments connecting the capacity-building of urban change agents with the actual impacts onto the urban fabric in the case regions across Europe.

Key to the successful program was a coordinating management team that we perceived as highly motivated, compassionate, connected, caring and willing to go beyond their capacities to help participants. The team has shown perseverance and resilience by coping with uncertainty, such as - changing funding situations, difficult pandemic times, and dealing with challenging incidents within program workshops. The ACT has built its strategies towards the continuity of the program and is planning novel forms of an empowering change-maker program yet to come.

***“A key element of the ACT program was about learning how to deal with difficulties and failure” (...)* “it was inspiring to see how there was positive change driven by it and how failed projects led into new initiatives”**

Program participant

Colophon

Commissioned by Actors of Urban Change

A special **thank you** for all the participants that contributed to this evaluation.

The Dutch Research Institute for Transition Studies (DRIFT) is a leading research institute in the field of sustainability transitions. DRIFT is known (inter)nationally for its unique focus on transition management, an approach in which scientific insights on transitions are translated into practical tools and governance instruments through applied action research.



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Wordcloud resulting from answers to the survey question: 'Could you please summarize your experience as a participant in the Actors of Urban Change program in three key words?'

