Audio paper 2 – MEDIATING SUSTAINABLE CITIES: creative migrants and urban sustainability

Welcome to the series of audio papers: Mediating Sustainable Cities!

I am Paola Monachesi, researcher at Utrecht University.

In this audio paper, we focus on the role of creative migrants in shaping an alternative smart city discourse in social media. After a brief introduction, I engage in a discussion with some of my students on urban sustainability. The discussion emerged in class after having read one of my papers on creative migrants and the smart city. Most of the students taking part in the debate are young creative migrants themselves, studying in the Netherlands, they tell us what is for them a sustainable city, we discuss about the role of technology and what can be done to improve city life.

Jingle

The smart city is an urban space shaped by global technology companies, governments, and knowledge institutions that collect and monitor data produced through digital devices. These data allow for a better understanding and efficient management of urban processes and contribute to more sustainable urban spaces. More specifically, the smart city agenda aims to support sustainability, which is often understood as a function of innovation in relation with technology.

However, economic growth seems the main concern of urban development and we wonder whether digitization can actually deliver sustainability, especially environmental protection and social equity. In order to give rise to more sustainable modes of urban development, technology should serve the needs of the citizens and citizens should participate in innovation processes, as co-creators. Data should be conceived as a common good and be open to local companies, social platforms and organizations, creating long term public value. Citizens should not be mere data providers but decision-makers.

Jingle

In my work, I have addressed a specific group of citizens, that is creative skilled migrants. I have analyzed their role in broadcasting an innovative use of technology in support of sustainable urban development. The first step was to identify them in Twitter and then analyze their communication. I focused on this groups because I believe that they can see opportunities for new ideas more than others. This is because they regularly shift between different cultural, linguistic, and social contexts.

From the analysis emerges that creative migrants contribute to an alternative, more sustainable idea of smart city. Co-creation and participation are important issues in the discourse of creative migrants, but they also argue for the importance of datafication of urban space and acknowledge in this way the role of government and corporations in data governance. They combine technology with a participatory and socially driven discourse based on events, initiatives and projects showing social and environmental engagement.

This is especially evident in the case of the group of architects and designers. They are interested not only in technology and data, two of the features of the smart city discourse but they relate them to the common good. They play an important role in broadcasting grassroots initiatives aimed at social inclusion and the circular economy.

Their discourse can contribute to give rise to a more emancipatory and innovative smart city agenda. They can raise awareness within civil society by broadcasting relevant topics and social, local activities through Twitter at global level, even beyond their professional circle, linking Amsterdam to the global networks of power represented by global cities.

The creative migrants analyzed connect mainly with similar spaces, that is cities such as New York, London or Paris. Those spaces represent the ideal global city of the future in terms of architecture, progressive thinking, education, sustainability, and solutions for the migrants.

I have asked my students what is for them a sustainable city and what is the role of technology in improving city life. We will hear the opinion of those that engaged in the debate. They are Josine from the Netherlands, Sofia from Portugal, Vlad and Noemi from Romania and Christo from Indonesia. They are young creative migrants studying at Utrecht University.

Jingle

Paola: GOODMORNING EVERYBODY! LET'S START RIGHT AWAY...

Okay so yes what do you think a sustainable city should look like?

Josine: When I think about a sustainable city, I think about bicycles. So, to become more sustainable, cities should create more spaces for bikes, by creating more bicycle lanes and bicycle racks, to put your bike for example. And I feel like more people would choose their bikes over a car or public transport if there were more bike lanes and places to put your bike. Because some places are currently not accessible by bike. Like some supermarkets or schools or other kinds of shops. Or maybe, its unsafe to go by bike because the bicycle lane is right next to a busy road, so you wouldn't feel safe to cycle there. I think these are things cities should consider if they want to become more sustainable. In case, for example, when you're in the Netherlands, I think that is a very Dutch thing to say. Actually.

Paola: Okay, yes, Thanks Josine. Indeed, I think in this respect the Netherlands are very sustainable and a good example for the rest of Europe and the rest of the world.

Sophia: For me, I think a sustainable city doesn't only mean that it should be green and eco-friendly, because that's the first thought that comes to mind, to me. I think a sustainable city has to have jobs and a future for its population. It has to have careers for them to grow and be able to have an affordable living there. So, it has to have houses and transportation that are affordable and accessible to the normal population and yeah that's what it looks like to me.

Paola: Thanks Sophia. I think it definitely makes sense, and that's probably you know from you coming from Lisbon, that's probably the most obvious thing to say. Anybody else?

Vlad: Yes, I would like to intervene here. So I am on the same page with Sophia, and I agree with her that a city should be sustainable in a green sense, in a resilient manner of speaking, and besides that, I think it should be focused on innovation and it should aim to become a competitive place for businesses or even on one hand or the other hand for citizens, I think it should be.. in order to become as a sustainable city, the city should be well-governed, transparent, equitable, just with the with its citizens. So, an overarching strategy for a city could become its best for the citizens if we keep in mind these ideas.

Paola: Thanks Vlad! And yeah, I mean, I remember Romania. It was very green and sustainable in the past. I have these fantastic memories of the way it was in the 90s when you know, there were no cars, pretty much you could go around with a horse and women were washing clothes on the rivers and there was no electricity in houses, and yeah this was all very fantastic. When I went back 10 years later this whole image had changed, and especially Iasi from where you're from cars was killing people on the streets, I mean this view had totally changed in fact. For me it was really a shock, I couldn't believe

it, you know, the way the city had changed in such a short time. Yeah, I don't know if anybody else wants to intervene?

Noemi: Yes, I would like to add something to this, because I see that you have this fairytale view of how Romania is supposed to be, or how it was in the 90s. I was born in the early 90s, so I still lived in that green era of Romania. I'm from a different part, from Transylvania, but I see some things that were similar. But I have to add that it's also because Romania is a post-communist country, and what you described that was so fantastic that people didn't have electricity, and living was much more sustainable, washing in the rivers and everything. It's also related to poverty that was followed by the communist era and during communism. And it's not really, I don't see it in an urban way related to sustainability, but more related to an underdeveloped country. And sustainability, it's only achievable by developing the urban sides. However, I see a kind of paradox, because I see sustainability, like you all said, a green thing. Like "greening the environment" we live in. But, as I experience here in Romania, it's really hard because it's more and more cars, and with the coming of this capitalist society that's driving Romania to be like more western, it has become less green, busier, but with the same bad infrastructure that we had from communism. So, it's somewhere like this disparity between how it used to be and how it strives to be, it's not really sustainable. And I see this change, that younger people are trying to live more sustainable and advocate for sustainability, but the government is really behind with these kinds of plans. Because it's full of cars and public transport, it's just horrible. Like it's really poor infrastructure. And for many like my parents' generation and older generations, they still don't trust the government and don't trust development, because it's really a really slow way of how things are going. And air quality here it's also not the best in cities. So yeah, it's a fairytale world that you described, but since then many things have changed. And the only way I see that we can go is to grow sustainability in Romania, is by going back to the countryside and being more mindful about agriculture and these kinds of things. So yeah.

Paola: Yeah, thanks Noemi! Yeah, you're right of course. It's true, you know, that's the image I had, being a tourist being there for a few weeks. But it was fantastic, you know. To see this kind of environment that I had when I was in Italy. You know, as a kid.

Cristo: Yeah, I think the discussion is getting more interesting because most of you guys here are coming from Europe, while I'm coming from Asia, so obviously our perception of sustainable cities is quite different. Yes, I mean, our perception of a sustainable city is more like an eco-friendly one, where I believe it's crucial to have more green spaces, and of course walkable and bikeable neighborhoods. But I think a bikeable city is a luxury that many cities in Europe have. Because like in my country, in my city in Jakarta, and many more cities in Asia, I think it is very important to have good air quality. Because here, we don't really have good air quality, since there's just a lot of people besides here, a lot of people use cars and not public transportation. And the reason for people not using public transportation is because it's not good enough. It's not accessible, it doesn't reach all areas of the city. So, I think it's very important to have good public transportation of course, and another thing is universal health care and accessible public resources, equal digital infrastructure to all. Because again, despite Indonesia is a country that has one of the biggest populations, many of us do not have the luxury of the Internet. I mean yes in my city, in Jakarta, a lot of people have access to the Internet, but in other islands in Indonesia, they don't even have access to the Internet. So, I think that's my perception of a sustainable city.

Paola: Yeah, thanks, Cristo. It's true, I mean, air quality is something we forget. And also, this divide between cities and countryside, you know as Noemi was saying, yeah I mean maybe we should go back to the countryside and maybe this whole idea of the smart city, it's not that strong anymore, and definitely, I think the pandemic also is playing a role. But on the other hand, I think it's true what you said. I mean the digital infrastructure needs to be there. For me working in the countryside, there is

also the issue of good internet. Also, in Italy you know, people are discussing more and more about having these small nice, picturesque villages being open to the digital nomads you know, especially now with smart working. But it's difficult, you know, if the infrastructure is not there, and if the internet is not there, which leads me to the second question I want to ask about technology and data. You know, can technology and data play a role in sustainability and creating more sustainable cities? Do you also see a connection between the two? Maybe even, you know, beyond what we've read about smart cities and technologies and sensors, you know, help to monitor everything and datifying everything. Yeah Noemi, what do you think?

Noemi: Well, I thought a lot about this because what I think it is in Romania, it's the case that many people use social media, young especially, but also the older generation now. But it's a really different kind of social media use and that's why I'm afraid what the data will generate. It's not necessarily what the citizens need and that's why I think it's really hard to make a smart city in places like developing countries like Romania, where smartphones and these kinds of things are still new to generations that grew up in communism. For example, or just like I wasn't growing up with the smartphone and I already feel the difference like the 10 year older- younger generation, it's already in a different kind of relationship with technology. So, you know, in a country where citizens don't really trust their governments and they don't really know what data is and how it can be used and they just like free stuff. Because it's unbelievable to have something free, but they don't really understand that playing with data is something different than money and it's still really a big contribution that can be exploited. I think it's a really hard question to talk about smart cities like in the west, I see it's still utopistic for me, but of course I see Amsterdam, how it's thriving on being more sustainable and smarter, but, really, I think when you talk about smart cities you always have to take in consideration the local situation. It's really important to see because I would see here how you can solve the traffic and the many cars and poor infrastructure by monitoring like in the Netherlands, with the train apps and everything. You can see when it's busy and you see when you need more trains, it would really be a good use of data here. But I'm not sure that the data people produce is the data that actually could help to develop this kind of infrastructure because people are not educated on how to use technology.

Paola: Thanks. Vlad, do you want to add something?

Vlad: Yes. The discussion that Noemi puts in front of us it is really interesting, your question as well. Smart cities have been a trend for a couple of decades now at the beginning of this millennium. It's a discussion about smart cities. I think the solutions, for example, taking traffic some of the solutions while monitoring traffic that we have, good practices in the western part of Europe as well as the United States and some cities in Asia as well. This means the data policies that we want to see in our daily lives somehow. Yes, gather data from citizens. The interesting fact is that through gathering these data, you can understand the behavior of the citizens that are living in that city and you can understand how you can use that data to create and apply different policies that answer better to their behavior. That's on one hand. On the other hand, it's a heated debate, an ethical discussion actually, to who owns the data. Probably in the gathering of data there are companies. Private companies and private sector involved, and we can see that through on companies with companies like Airbnb or Uber and other companies alike that have access to data with regards to citizens and their behavior and can easily observe the trends but to make policies you have to involve the local government also maybe the citizens. It's an important fact that governance in a participatory way is implemented in a city so it's really interesting how this period of changes with the struggle to include technology in governing the city on the one hand and still keeping it green as we can see gardens coming back to companies' buildings in the city. It's curious it's and will be interesting how these two ideas will merge and hopefully, if they will, to improve our quality of life.

Paola: Yeah thanks. Yeah, I think you touched on a couple of very relevant issues. I mean the quality of the data, the relation between citizens and technology, who owns the data, and regulations also on the use of these data and can we trust governments to make a proper use of the data? I think this has a lot to do with the local governments and with the relationship of trust between citizens and their governments. Meanwhile most of our data is in the hands of private companies and it's not even regulated or managed by the government. Or if it is, it is not very often in this dubious collaboration between private and public, that sometimes are not very transparent. Yeah, I don't know if anybody else want to contribute or to add to this discussion. Yeah, Christo?

Christo: Yeah, I think when we're talking about data Indonesia is quite an interesting country to talk about because we have one of the biggest users of social media internet in the world. But I wouldn't say that Indonesia is well developed enough where they can use data to govern or if they know how to govern this data. I mean of course there's a smart city project back in 2014, but until now the smart city is not very well developed despite it's already more than seven years old. It's ranked 94 on the smart city index out of 109 cities so we scored pretty low and it's pretty bad. When I talk about smart city it's not like the AI monitor, kind of things, it's just the government developed a platform where the citizen can report any misconduct on their daily lives, so for example traffics or road closures, even floods, because we have a lot of floods in this tropical country or construction. So, one of the crucial things in making this smart city a realization is collaboration. So, if the citizens don't collaborate with the government, it's not going to work. This smart city project is not going to work. But up until now we don't even have a regulation on data protection, despite almost all countries in this world have data regulation. So, I think it's very important to raise the issue of privacy and let the government know that we need some kind of regulation. I mean there's a discussion on this data protection regulation, but it's stalled for almost like two years, so I think that's quite a problem and obviously a challenge to the smart government.

Paola: Yeah. Thanks. True, data protection privacy, you know, all relevant issues. But I see that Noemi and Vlad want to intervene. Noemi first?

Noemi: Vlad, go ahead, you were first. Thank you. Well, I wanted to say a few things like what you said about smart cities, AI, and these kind of things. I just remembered that yes that's also a part of technology and smart cities and this is the part that's for me it's raising the most questions about ethical smart cities like surveillance technologies and this kind of things that can also of course lead to a safer city or a better governed city. We all know examples where this is not helping to democratize governance but to be more controlling. It's also a thing that I'm starting to think about, like what do I want? do I want to live in a city, where it's sustainable and safe, and we pay the price that everything we do and everywhere…, the mobility is controlled and everything is supervised by governing entities, that we cannot really trust because we all know that data is also biased it's also who gathers what kind of data, and what is the selection criteria and the other thing that I wanted to say that who is represented by the data. Many people use technology in a really different way so I cannot say that it's going to be a better place to live for my parents if they look at the data that I am producing so what kind of smart city are we doing like to be top one in the world and do a city that all the young people want to move in and like you know it's also a really big question, like who are you serving as a government because the city should be about the people who live in it not to attract or be top one. So yeah, data can be used in many ways but the ethical part it's a really important question, who is served by the government, who uses the data that's supposedly produced by its citizens. That's my conclusion, I think.

Paola: Yeah. Thanks. I mean surveillance I think you put it really clearly you know the trade-off between yeah data that can contribute maybe to a better city if there are agreements also and if you have a government that can be trusted but on the other hand you know everything is controlled I

mean you know that's also what we see in the Netherlands where this whole idea of datification and smart city, you know, it's much more advanced, but when you think about it, you know, from the moment you get up to the moment you go to bed, pretty much every action that you carry out can be monitored…But yeah, so it is difficult to think, how, you know, to find the balance, but maybe it is also what Christo said, we need collaboration among all these different institutions, but definitely also the presence and the monitoring of the citizens. Vlad what do you want to add to this?

Vlad: This was something that precisely I wanted to add. The civil society contribution it's really relevant so I agree with the with that and also I agree with what you said earlier Paola, to an extent, however, because I think that young people should be in the center of the efforts of creating and projecting the city that we want but I see those efforts of co-imagining and co-production has to be done with the other generations together, to build the city that that we want. Also the struggle of using technology because it was something mentioned before it's not only to other generations, people that have greater ages. Young people have struggles with using technology also. There's a lot of data that is biased on the internet whether it comes from media from the press or from series we watch on Netflix and so on. And many young people do not know how to interpret the data and don't even sometimes recognize the bias and that's why we need digital literacy, media literacy now more than ever, for all generations.

Paola: Yes, you're probably right. I mean, very often it's the older generations, you know, that we think that they need data media literacy, but I think with the, you know, with digital world changing so fast maybe yeah, we see a need for managing technology, internet, data, social media maybe you know at all different levels. Yeah, well, this was interesting. I don't know if any of you want to add something more if you have the key solution to the problem of sustainability, urban sustainability, and maybe you know digital and data sustainability.

Noemi: I think it should start from reimagining education as Vlad also said that this media literacy and digital literacy is really important and yeah I think the old education system just doesn't work in this this world like when everything is so mediatized you cannot have kids reading books written 100 years ago and still trying to grasp that kind of lifestyle that the literature is all about and also it's not only this but what kids are learning they should choose they there should be more space to find out what you want and also more yeah more in the digital era, not just go read the books and write in your little papers and things like this because it… I see it on kids my sister is a teacher and it just doesn't work anymore so it's it starts everything I think it starts from education because this is how you can build up a mentality towards a more sustainable way of living.

Paola: Thanks, yeah, education. It's true. It's probably, you know, a relevant aspect to take into consideration maybe update it more, but you can't also, yeah, it is true that it is necessary to look forward but at the same time also in this case we need a balance, with what was produced in the past because certain concepts, certain ideas are still valid, even though, of course, you need to deal with tools that you now have at your disposal. Christo?

Cristo: Well I think in the case of Jakarta first and foremost we need to establish an equality to the digital infrastructure all across the country because well I agree with Vlad and Noemi that we should teach people how to use digital literacy and media literacy of course but I think if there is no digital infrastructure in the area how do we teach this kind of digital literacy, right, and of course I think this digital literacy needs to be integrated to the curriculum at school which is very important so I think that's two way on how we start to build a sustainable city.

Paola: Thanks, Noemi, you want to add something? And then Vlad, yes and then I think we should close the discussion, even though it's very interesting.

Noemi: Yes, I agree that we shouldn't throw out everything. I didn't mean that we should throw out the whole previous curriculum we just have to incorporate more newer ideas and concepts and to respond to Christo it's I agree it's also in Romania that not everybody has access to internet or digital tools or even hardware and now in the pandemic this is a really big trouble and the education system is failing now because of this. Because you cannot keep up online education if people don't have access to it so yes this is not only in Indonesia this is problem in other countries too and also here in Europe even though Europe seems to be in a really great position because we only think about western Europe so yeah this, yeah, that's it.

Paola: Vlad?

Vlad: Yes, so Noemi also covered some of my ideas, but indeed digital education goes hand in hand with infrastructure education for all kinds of ages. It should be adapted and put into use and there is a solution, something that comes to mind right now, is the need for proactiveness in all forms, at least from more stakeholders and actors in the society and their involvement in decision making. Because if you if we know they have a bigger picture not just pieces of the puzzle we can therefore have better policies that are implemented.

Paola: Thanks. Yes, I think that's the good way to end this discussion. Participation and participation of all the various stakeholders involved. That's probably what we need to do, to get back more active involvement of all of us in the managing of cities, data and environments. Thanks a lot.