

Contribution to the 7th Global Report on Local
Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VII) on the
Economies of Equality and Care

Future partnerships for a 'caring city'

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Positive case studies of urban planning are rare¹, as I am constantly reminded by my students at the Bartlett School of Planning, UCL. Therefore, the Global Observatory's latest piece on the 'Caring City' is a welcome tonic. It offers cases from across the world, where people have been put at the centre of urbanism. On reading this, my attention is drawn to the potential partnership models for delivering urban (re)development projects and programmes.

Fundamentally, this is a study that draws attention to a two-sided missions of governance based on values of 'inclusivity, equity, and accountability' plus uplifting 'well-being of all residents'. It may well beat the heart of most urban studies, but it is rarely testified with evidence of success. The cases are written super succinctly, yet with sufficient detail on the approaches taken in cities across the globe and nuanced reflections on regional contexts, to provide hopeful directions on urban futures with social value.

Refreshingly, the research starts from a 'people-centred' framing of urban dilemmas. This converges thinking on a shared human experience, for instance ways of seeking 'health & wellbeing' via insights from Guangzhou, Istanbul, Iztapalapa, and Kazan. At the same time, the underlying planetary crises (with Covid-19 as the prime example) are not presented as simply universal, as impacts on localities vary greatly and different communities across municipalities are affected very unequally. This brings us to the central question of 'how can we live well together?'

The theme of caring is not necessarily new for urbanists, but the problems manifest differently today and, crucially, actions of response have been falsely divided up. Of particular interest is the loneliness pandemic, for people living in crowded and digitally spliced cities. As the work acknowledges, care has been seen in a gendered way i.e. as 'women's work'. This is bad for men because looking after each another sustains good mental health, i.e. as well as providing companionship and bonds of social capital. In the same vein, seeking success purely as growth in GDP or cityscapes is out-dated. There are other forms of economic exchange² and infrastructures³ within cities that have value. This

¹ Wray, I., & Natarajan, L. (2022). The Power of Plans. Built Environment. <https://www.alexandrinepress.co.uk/built-environment/power-plans-0>

² Durrant, D., Rydin, Y., & Marjanovic, M. (2025). Post-growth Planning. 51(1) <https://www.alexandrinepress.co.uk/built-environment/current-issues>

³ Tomaney, J., Blackman, M., Natarajan, L., Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, D., Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, F., & Taylor, M. (2024). Social infrastructure and 'left-behind places'. *Regional Studies*, 58(6), 1237-1250. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032710051>

underscores to the need to share responsibilities around the multiple socio-economic layers of cities.

Across the cities presented in Towards a “Caring City”, there is notable diversity of partners, governance, and engagement mechanisms. The tools that connect partners around people-led problematics can unlock innovative collaborations are evidenced, but new partnership models to delivering urban (re)development projects and programmes remain implicit in the sketches. This needs to be taken forwards with international efforts, which is well aligned with the renewed focus of the Habitat Professionals Forum on participation⁴. I would add that evaluating those partnership in a co-productive way⁵ will surely also matter.

⁴ UN HABITAT Professionals Forum (2024). International Participatory Charter. <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k12/k126gdhg7h>

⁵ Natarajan, L., & Hassan, S. (2024). 9DF: a nine-dimensional framework for community engagement. Town Planning Review, 95(3), 283-306. <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/full/10.3828/tpr.2024.8>