

The Mobility of Urban Policies: How Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Initiatives Travelled to Other European Urban Contexts

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of urban public policy mobility within European intercity transfer programmes, focusing on co-policies, those that combine co-production and co-governance in the shaping and implementation of urban transformation. While such policies are increasingly mobilised through transfer networks, the field lacks analytical tools to assess how these models are interpreted and adapted in diverse local contexts. This paper addresses that gap by investigating the first international transfer of Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Strategy to seven cities via the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network. Using an adapted "follow the policy" methodology, the research employs combined methods to trace how decisions were made, how actors shaped outcomes, and how the process evolved over time. Findings show that co-policy mobility especially not merely technical or administrative; it is deeply political, involving distributed decision-making, interpretive flexibility, and uneven capacities for adaptation. The study underscores the value of procedural approaches in understanding evolving power dynamics and calls for assessment frameworks that are process-oriented, context-sensitive, and power-aware. It contributes to emerging methodologies in urban policy studies by framing co-policy mobility as a negotiated and contested process with potential lasting implications for governance cultures and spatial justice.

Keywords

policy mobility,
policy analysis,
co-production,
co-governance,
urban policy

Introduction

In the last two decades, a growing number of European cities have witnessed a marked shift towards participatory governance models that reconfigure the relationship between civil society and the state (Allegretti & Sintomer, 2009; Harvey, 2012) framing of cities as central arenas for political contestation and systemic change.”). These models often combine co-production, in

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which citizens¹ are involved in policy and spatial design, and co-governance, where citizens and local administrations cooperate in implementation, maintenance and any necessary adaptations. This approach forms the basis of what we define here as co-policies: public policies that promote sustained, structured cooperation between organised citizens and municipal authorities in both shaping and managing urban transformation, primarily at the neighbourhood level.

The emergence of co-policies is closely tied to the concept of the Right to the City (Lefebvre, 1969; Harvey, 2003), a vision of urban justice rooted in active participation and spatial equity. These co-policies, including Bologna's Urban Commons Regulation² (2014), Madrid's Public-Social Cooperation Ordinance³ (2018), and Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Strategy⁴ (*Bairros de Intervenção Prioritária*, or Neighbourhoods of Priority Intervention Programme) from 2010, represent municipal responses to civic efforts to reclaim urban space as a collective good. They are grounded in political struggles that seek to go beyond consultation, aiming instead to redistribute power in city-making processes (Falanga, 2019; Fung & Wright, 2001). These have often consisted of citizens using urban space to claim the right to participate in their social production, and led to projects of democratisation and the communalisation of city spaces which reconstruct the city, through everyday use, as a meeting point for collective life (Lefebvre, 1969; Harvey, 2012; Knierbein & Degros, 2014). In many cases, efforts have been made by citizens to transition from temporary uses to shared management, in pursuit of spatial justice (Davoudi & Bell, 2016). When these organised citizens managed to access institutional political decision-making positions that allowed them to distribute power in relation to city-making – in a more timely or comprehensive fashion, as in the case of the new Spanish municipalism (Russel, 2019) – many of these co-production and co-governance policies were developed and implemented in order to contribute to a deepening of democracy (Appadurai, 2001).

¹ In this text, the term “citizen” is used in line with the conceptualisation developed by the Spanish new municipalist movement—emerging from grassroots initiatives to democratise local governance and resist neoliberal austerity urbanism and platform capitalism (Barcelona en Comú, 2019). Citizenship, in this context, refers not to legal belonging to a nation-state but to the lived condition of all city dwellers who have rights within the urban space: “citizenship is the condition of all people who live in the city: they all have rights within the city and the rights of a citizen” (Barcelona en Comú, 2019, p. 29). This interpretation closely aligns with Lefebvre's notion of *citadins*, as discussed by Purcell (2002).

² *The Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons*, also known as the Bologna Regulation, is a regulatory framework that actively invites ordinary citizens and neighbourhoods to protect and improve their own urban commons with active assistance from the government.

³ *The Public-Social Cooperation Ordinance of the City of Madrid* (*Ordenanza de Cooperación Público-Social del Ayuntamiento de Madrid*) is an instrument that standardizes the processes in relation to all existing cooperations, benefiting communication and transparency. The Ordinance works in sync with a digital platform that concentrates participatory activities in the city of Madrid, called Decide Madrid.

⁴ *The BIP/ZIP Strategy* (*Bairros de Intervenção Prioritária / Zonas de Intervenção Prioritária*), hereafter referred to as BIP/ZIP, is composed of a set of tools (map, funding scheme, taskforce and local development network) that are used to promote local development, foster active citizenship, boost the capacity for self-organisation, and encourage the collective search for solutions through the participation of the population in improving their living conditions.

The motivation for this study arose from an awareness of multiple 'co' and related policies, their synergies and complementarities, and their increasing mobility, especially among European cities. Despite the interest from institutions and governments in learning from these policies, true local autonomy in decision-making remains rare. The belief that replicating policy formats will yield similar outcomes is a frequent pitfall in the “best practices” discourse. Achieving effective cooperation between public administrations and citizens demands more than imitation. While it is well established that combining lessons from past experiences with sensitivity to local culture, political structures, and available resources is essential, applying this to specific policies remains largely experimental. This study explores the potential of co-policies to contribute to local dynamics contributing to spatial justice. Although such policies can drive meaningful change, they remain peripheral to the dominant urban policy framework and may not significantly reshape municipal territorial development, which makes a critical examination of how transnational policy mechanisms relate to locally grounded agency particularly pertinent. In line with Temenos and Ward (2025), who advocate for closer examination of how governance structures and processes interact across multiple levels and actors, this study explores how uneven power relations shape both the transfer and evaluation of policies across different locales. Co-policies, in this regard, offer a compelling empirical lens through which to observe how these dynamics unfold within diverse and often contested urban contexts. While co-policies have gained traction, particularly in Southern Europe, where they have been more frequently adopted and integrated into city planning, little is known about how these models travel, including how they are transferred, adapted, and, in particular, implemented in different socio-political contexts. While transnational municipal networks like those supported by URBACT play a key role in spreading “good practices,” the assessment of how policies actually move, adapt, and evolve across contexts remains underdeveloped. Existing data focus on policy design or short-term outputs, often neglecting procedural dimensions and longer-term power implications. This methodological gap is especially problematic for co-policies, which aim not only to produce functional outcomes but also to foster local-level transformative change, with effects that may only become apparent over time.

This article addresses this gap by investigating the first transnational transfer of Lisbon’s BIP/ZIP Strategy, a co-policy focused on neighbourhood regeneration through local partnerships. Between 2018 and 2021, elements of BIP/ZIP were adapted and adopted by seven other European cities: Bari, Lille, Ostrava, Lublin, The Hague, Sofia, and Aalborg, through the URBACT Transfer Network Com.Unity.Lab⁵. This transfer process provides a rich empirical case. The

⁵ The Com.Unity.Lab Transfer network adapted Lisbon's approach to Priority Intervention Areas for different European cities, focusing on social-territorial cohesion through co-governance and bottom-up participation (URBACT, n.d.).

policy was well-established in its city of origin; this was its first transfer initiative, the Lisbon lead team offered generous access to internal discussions, and the network structure enabled in-depth observation of transnational interactions.

Although co-policies promise transformation, it is important to analyse whether this transformation genuinely takes place or whether these policies merely reinforce the status quo, thereby strengthening mainstream ideas about urban development and diminishing critical discourse. The main objective of this study is to explore what researchers and practitioners should take into account when evaluating the transferability and local impact of co-policies. This is addressed through two central research questions: (1) What should researchers and urban actors consider when assessing the outcomes of co-policy mobility? (2) What insights does the BIP/ZIP case provide regarding the strengths and limitations of municipal co-policy transfers within networks such as URBACT? These are complemented by secondary inquiries into the redistributive ambitions of co-policies, the power asymmetries embedded in policy transfer, and the need for systematic, longer-term evaluation frameworks. By tracing how co-policies are interpreted and reshaped in different urban settings, this paper contributes to emerging methodologies for assessing transformative and procedural dimensions of policy impact, particularly within transnational policy transfers.

The article begins with a conceptual review of co-production and co-governance, leading to the formulation of co-policies as a distinct analytical category and situating them within the context of policy mobility. It then presents the Lisbon-origin BIP/ZIP policy and the Com.Unity.Lab transfer network, followed by a description of the adopted methodology based on the “follow the policy” framework (Peck & Theodore, 2015). The section on applied methodology and findings draws on document analysis, interviews, participant observation and participatory evaluation tools to assess actor dynamics, decision-making patterns, and implementation challenges. The discussion reflects on the analytical implications and offers recommendations for developing assessment tools that could match the complexity and political ambition of co-policies while remaining sufficiently simple to be actionable.

Conceptualising Co-Policies in the Context of Policy Mobility

Participatory governance has expanded across European cities, often through models that integrate citizens into the design and delivery of public policies. Yet, many of these models remain largely consultative, risking superficial engagement and reinforcing existing power asymmetries (Farrington et al., 1993; Gabauer, 2018). For co-policies to function as genuine tools of transformative participation in city-making, the depth of engagement must go beyond tokenistic inclusion. As Falanga (2018; 2019) and others have emphasised, meaningful

transformation requires institutional mechanisms that allow citizens to exert tangible influence over decision-making processes. Gabauer (2018), drawing on Mouffe's (1999) agonistic pluralism and Hillier's (2002) concept of freedom of dissent, argues that participatory practices must recognise and accommodate conflict, multiplicity, and asymmetry – features inherent to democratic life. Gaventa (2006) further deepens this view by distinguishing among visible, hidden, and invisible forms of power. To critically analyse how co-policies develop, it is essential to examine how these dimensions of power intersect in urban governance over time. As Mouffe (2005, 2013) reminds us, democratic engagement requires not only acknowledging power relations but also actively contesting and transforming them.

This is where co-policies come into play. These are urban policies that integrate both co-production and co-governance, foregrounding what Ober (2008) calls the *kratos* of democracy: the power to act. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical frameworks, co-policies emphasise practice: doing, managing, and negotiating collectively. At their core, co-policies rely on solid collaboration between citizens and municipal institutions—not only in the ideation of projects, but also in their implementation and longer-term management. Engaging citizens in these concrete stages of city-making brings abstract power dynamics into sharper relief, where negotiation around material decisions often reveals hidden tensions and opportunities.

As projects unfold, the unpredictability of real-world implementation often makes local and practical knowledge indispensable. This process strengthens the role of citizens, shifting them from passive beneficiaries to active agents of urban change. In recognising the political agency of organised citizen groups, co-policies offer the potential to support more radical, egalitarian interpretations of democracy (Fung & Wright, 2001). This section provides the theoretical grounding for analysing co-policy mobility, considering them as both instruments of potential emancipation and mechanisms of regulation. Their dual nature requires careful scrutiny. While they aim to redistribute power and enhance democratic engagement, co-policies are also susceptible to institutional capture and co-optation.

Like other public policies, co-policies are increasingly subject to translocal influence. Many cities' actors frequently look beyond their borders for inspiration: borrowing ideas, methods, and institutional formats to tackle urban challenges (Healey & Upton, 2010). Our research contributes to understanding the expansion of the Portuguese urban policy, BIP/ZIP, beyond Portugal. It provides a foundational analysis for this mobility and integrates these findings into a broader theoretical framework. In doing so, this section clarifies the conceptual lens through which we propose to assess the dynamics of co-policy transfer and localisation, highlighting power analysis and critical perspectives on policy mobility.

Co-Policies: urban policies that encompass co-production and co-governance

The emergence of co-policies reflects a broader shift in urban governance, challenging traditional hierarchical relationships between the state and civil society. The prefix 'co' implies shared responsibility and horizontal rearrangement, signalling collaboration among diverse participants (Sorrentino et al., 2018) and reflecting collective efforts to build, manage, and implement policy processes. This includes engaging citizens in the co-design and co-delivery of public services, as emphasised in recent debates on co-production and co-creation (Brandsen, Verschuere, & Steen, 2018). Although co-policies take varied forms, ranging from regulatory frameworks (as in Bologna), to campaigns and digital platforms (Madrid), to policy toolkits (such as Lisbon's BIP/ZIP), they are united by a common aim: to mobilise local knowledge and foster collective action in co-creating urban improvements. Drawing from the broader field of collaborative governance and deep participation, co-policies aim to move beyond service co-production by institutionalising long-term cooperation between organised citizen groups and municipal authorities. They recognise citizen agency and are grounded in local partnerships, particularly within neighbourhood-scale planning and management.

Joshi and Moore (2004, p. 31) define institutionalised co-production as "the provision of public services (broadly defined to include regulation) through regular and long-term relationships between state agencies and organised citizen groups, which make considerable substantial contributions." From a citizen-centred perspective, Mitlin (2008) frames co-production as a political strategy through which associations can maintain effective relationships with the state, meeting basic needs while negotiating for broader gains. This study draws on these foundations, focusing particularly on how local groups co-produce place and knowledge (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018; Watson, 2014; Albrechts, 2013). Co-production is not merely collaborative service provision; it is a mechanism to generate legitimacy and elevate marginalised voices into decision-making processes (Santos & Rodríguez-Garavito, 2005; Fung & Wright, 2001).

While the literature on co-production is diverse, a common theme emerges: to advance their interests, citizens must engage with formalised institutions that operate under different values and structures (Watson, 2014). However, most existing research has focused on co-production's contribution to service delivery, with limited exploration of its role in redistributing power within urban governance (Mitlin, 2008).

Gabauer (2018) highlights the importance of collective practices in participatory planning, arguing that emancipation depends on cultivating shared attitudes through collaborative action. Mitlin and Bartlett (2018) note that co-production can extend beyond basic service delivery to

transform community-government relations, creating new avenues for more equitable urban development.

These evolving co-operations may transition into co-governance processes (Iaione, 2012; Appadurai, 2001). Co-governance reflects a reimagining of democracy, promoting deeper civic engagement in addressing complex urban challenges. Its sustainability and adaptability depend on the structure of the partnerships it fosters and their capacity to remain meaningful amid changing circumstances.

Traditionally, state-citizen relationships have been hierarchical. In response, movements for autonomy and self-governance have emerged, aiming to democratise both state and society (Fung & Wright, 2001). Co-governance, defined as shared management of resources through public-social partnerships (Iaione, 2012), demands mutual recognition of asymmetries and balanced cooperation between government representatives and residents. It aspires to enhance democratic accountability and foster equitable decision-making.

Le Galès (1998) conceptualises co-governance as the dual capacity to shape and represent collectivities across governance spheres. Kooiman (2003) outlines three governance modes: hierarchical, self, and co-governance, the latter of which has gained traction among local authorities seeking neighbourhood-level solutions through joint service delivery and community involvement (Somerville, 2011). However, not all such efforts reflect a genuine commitment to co-governance. Van Dyck (2018) cautions against romanticising community, warning that participatory rhetoric may mask unpaid labour and reinforce neoliberal logics of "community capitalism."

Co-policies can institutionalise a relationship between citizens and municipalities, where citizens demand greater control over the transformations of their neighbourhoods and cities, particularly in relation to co-production and co-governance. In this context, institutionalisation refers to the transformation of informal groups into more formal structures, such as associations or other entities that allow for legal cooperation with local administrations, as part of a broader process of boundary negotiation between civic and institutional spheres (Colyvas & Powell, 2006). However, initiatives such as BIP/ZIP, along with the other policies combining co-production and co-governance briefly referred to in this text, have not yet gained significant scale within public administrations. They remain exceptions to the standard practices of city-making, which often occur through desk work or partnerships with private companies. These policies also receive limited resources, typically being confined to specific departments or sectors within the municipal administration.

While they bring meaningful (though not structural) transformations, all the evidence studied for this paper suggests that such policies can deepen citizens' engagement in city-making.

However, they also risk undermining citizen autonomy, as seen in local strategic partnerships where co-governance aspirations often face structural limits (Johnson & Osborne, 2003). The impact of these policies depends on numerous factors, such as the scale of implementation and the national or international influence of the city. It also varies according to political cycles and other aspects of power distribution.

This paper recognises the value of these types of policies, which attempt to bridge the gap between local self-management and government as it is today, although it is important to be clear that these policies are not seen as a panacea for cities. Co-policies are part of citizens demands to achieve democratization of community-led initiatives and frameworks, a victory in terms of recognition and scale. However, what ends up institutionalised often differs from the original demands, as bureaucracy tends to limit the scope of these policies. Moreover, once institutionalised, "specialised" groups are often formed, and new demands arise from evolving circumstances or the inability of institutionalisation to fully meet all needs. This leads to a cyclical process of claim, negotiation and institutionalisation, which can renew and strengthen the democratic relationship in urban governance.

These hybrid models between self-governance and institutionalisation, as the enabled by co-policies, reflect broader shifts in European urban governance, where social conflict and networked authority are central (Le Galès, 2002). They simultaneously serve as modes of producing social action, power, law and knowledge through which social, political and cultural inequalities are reproduced and justified. Yet, they also frequently recognise, value and can create space for resistance and emancipation. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002, p. 417) notes, "the idioms of regulation and emancipation are inextricably linked." These aspects are distinct but inseparable, as "the contradiction between regulation and emancipation, which manifests itself as latent or overt conflicts among concrete social groups, runs through even the most hegemonic constellations of power, legality and knowledge. (...) As a result, neither regulation nor emancipation will ever be complete or everlasting" (Santos, 2002, p. 417).

This perspective is highly relevant to understanding the significance of co-policies. While these public policies institutionalise movements that were largely informal or went unrecognised by public administrations, they also create space for other similar initiatives to emerge, sometimes even challenging those that have moved toward a more structured dialogue with the administration. Co-policies, therefore, can be a driving force for the vitality of citizen movements, even if they moderate some movements' radicalism by integrating them into the more formalised local associative fabric, providing space to new movements to arise and take their place.

Policy Mobility: Beyond Transfer

The second analytical pillar of this study is the policy mobility literature, which critiques the technocratic logic of replicating ‘best practices’ across contexts. While programmes such as URBACT promote the transnational circulation of urban policy innovations, research shows that policy transfer is inherently selective and political, involving context-specific negotiations, strategic framing, and power-laden decisions (Peck & Theodore, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2011; Temenos & Ward, 2025).

Key scholars in the field (e.g. McCann & Ward, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Healey, 2013) argue that urban policies and their mobilities are not neutral or technocratic templates. Rather, they are deeply embedded in cultural, institutional, and relational contexts. According to McCann (2011), even when policy models are promoted for adoption elsewhere, local adaptation is both inevitable and necessary. Healey (2013) suggests that a critical examination of policy mobility should focus on the ‘origin stories’, ‘travel narratives’, and ‘translation processes’ through which external planning practices become locally meaningful. Similarly, Purkarthofer and Granqvist (2021), in their study of the “soft spaces” concept, underscore that planning ideas in circulation are continuously reinterpreted and politicised through situated negotiations. Their analysis highlights how seemingly universal frameworks acquire specific meanings and functions only through local institutional practices, reaffirming that mobility is not mere transfer, but a process of contextual transformation. Peck and Theodore (2012) further stress that policies are not merely transferred, they are transformed during the process of movement. Temenos and McCann (2013) use the notion of assemblage to describe how fragments of diverse policies are selected and recombined into locally tailored solutions.

This framing highlights the limits of replication logic. Although ‘inspirational’ models can guide learning, the assumption that policies can be transferred wholesale often leads to shallow implementation. In Europe, formal knowledge circulation networks, including URBACT, have institutionalised such exchanges since the early 2000s. Transnational municipal networks (Bulkeley, 2006) facilitate policy learning, benchmarking, and mutual support among cities. Knowledge exchange remains a key motivation for local governments to participate in these networks (Kübler & Piliutyte, 2007; Mocca, 2018), although it does not always lead to meaningful policy learning (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004).

Even when learning occurs, the roles of ‘teachers’ and ‘apprentices’ are often fluid, and what is transferred may be limited to general principles or formats (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Bennett & Howlett, 1992). Mocca (2018) notes that most exchanges focus on concrete policies and practices, often overlooking the deeper political and institutional challenges of implementation. Despite the appeal of good practices as a ‘safe path to territorial cohesion’, critical discussion

around political learning within these networks remains limited. Vettoretto (2009) and Stead (2012) question the widespread acceptance of best practices as universally applicable solutions. Despite significant socio-economic and institutional diversity across EU member states, European transfer programmes frequently overlook the need for context-sensitive adaptation. Stead emphasises that a more granular analysis is needed—one that breaks down policy instruments into transferable components and critically assesses their operational contexts.

Rooted in critical urban and policy studies, policy mobility research emphasises that policy ideas do not move untouched—they are assembled, reshaped, and politicised as they are territorialised (Baker & Temenos, 2015). The globalisation of communication has made the movement of public policies more visible and frequent, yet studies often lack sufficient analysis of the actors, methods, motives, and especially implementation challenges behind these movements. In particular, while the policy mobility literature has advanced our understanding of how policies travel, there remains a notable gap in analysing what happens when they fail. Diallo et al. (2025) underscore the need to investigate how learning is shaped also by these failures – particularly given that so-called ‘best practices’ are often replicated almost exclusively based on the perceived success of their original implementation.

People have always travelled between places, bringing with them ideas to solve problems or improve conditions based on experiences elsewhere (Healey & Upton, 2010). In urban contexts, it is reasonable to assume that when political elites or civic activists are motivated to improve their cities, they look outward for inspiration (Healey & Upton, 2010; Healey, 2013). Various types of public policies have historically sparked this kind of interest, and co-policies are now entering this field of trans-local influence. However, when such transfers are studied, if at all, their assessment tends to be superficial, limited to early implementation phases, and disconnected from procedural or longer-term political impacts. This gap represents one of the central concerns of this paper.

Academic discourse on policy ‘travel’ employs a range of terms to distinguish between modes of movement. Porto de Oliveira, Saraiva, and Sakai (2020) define ‘transfer’ as the punctual relocation of a policy from one site to another, while ‘diffusion’ refers to clustered or regional adoptions. ‘Circulation’ encompasses broader processes of mutual learning and continuous exchange. In this study, the term policy mobility is used to capture these dynamics holistically, particularly in relation to the territorial impact and contextual negotiation of co-policies.

This study responds to such critiques by exploring the mobility of a co-policy, Lisbon’s BIP/ZIP Strategy, across different European cities, with particular attention to how its outcomes can be assessed. By analysing this mobility process, particularly what influences the

implementation and effects of the transferred policy, the paper contributes to the literature on urban policy transfers as arenas of negotiation, contestation, and contextual adaptation. The focus on power dynamics and territorial specificity offers a critical perspective on how co-policies are reshaped through trans-local movement. As Falanga (2018) emphasises, this is especially important for participatory and redistributive policies, whose success relies on sustained civic agency and equitable governance. Assessing their mobility requires longer-term, process-oriented frameworks, which remain underdeveloped in most current European policy transfer mechanisms.

Methodologies for Co-Policy Adaptation Analysis

Conventional policy evaluation methods often fail to capture the procedural and relational dimensions of participatory governance. Impact is typically measured through replication metrics or short-term outputs, yet such indicators overlook the transformative aims of co-policies—namely, the reconfiguration of governance cultures and the activation of collective civic agency. Transferred policies are frequently stripped of their socio-political context, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive change. This risk is particularly acute for co-policies, whose success depends on embedded civic relationships, trust-building, and institutional openness. These elements resist standardisation and are difficult to export. In light of these challenges, this study traces the trajectory of Lisbon’s BIP/ZIP Strategy as it was transferred through the URBACT Com.Unity.Lab network.

The research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in a revised “follow the policy” framework (Peck & Theodore, 2012; Wood, 2016), with particular attention to power relations and local institutional dynamics. Rather than proceeding through discrete phases, the research design integrates interdependent methods in an iterative manner. The literature review, while not exhaustive, informed the conceptual framing and helped define the study’s central questions around how power is negotiated and reconfigured during policy transfers. Participant observation proved critical for capturing the everyday practices and informal dynamics shaping co-policy adaptation. Through sustained engagement with Lisbon’s URBACT Local Group and regular exchanges with partner municipalities, the researcher observed how policies were debated, reinterpreted, and enacted across diverse contexts.

Semi-structured interviews with municipal officers, URBACT experts, and facilitators added insight into institutional constraints, actor configurations, and political cultures affecting adaptation. Finally, participatory evaluation tools such as “how nice that / what a pity that / what if” were applied in collective sessions with network participants. These reflective exercises surfaced both shared learning and site-specific challenges, offering a grounded perspective on

the effectiveness and limitations of transferred instruments. Together, these methods produced a nuanced, multi-layered understanding of co-policy mobility.

Case Selection: The Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network

This study examines the first international transfer of Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Strategy (*Estratégia para Bairros de Intervenção Prioritária, Zonas de Intervenção Prioritária*), a neighbourhood-level co-policy launched in 2011 as part of Lisbon's participatory urban regeneration agenda. BIP/ZIP, an acronym for "Priority Intervention Neighbourhoods and Zones", integrates participatory governance, social cohesion, and place-based interventions. From 2018 to 2021, Lisbon shared the programme with seven European cities: Bari, Lille, Ostrava, Lublin, The Hague, Sofia, and Aalborg, through the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network⁶ within the URBACT framework.

BIP/ZIP is best understood as a suite of interlinked instruments, including (1) a city-wide mapping tool that identifies areas of vulnerability using intersecting socio-economic and environmental criteria; (2) a Local Partnerships Programme, offering funding and technical support to civic-led neighbourhood initiatives; (3) GABIPs, interdepartmental task forces that bridge local authorities, civic associations, and regeneration stakeholders; and (4) a Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) network to train and connect grassroots organisations with institutional actors. This structure combines activity funding, citizen participation, and institutional mediation in a consultative yet structured manner (URBACT, 2023).

The strategy emerged within Lisbon's mid-2000s political landscape, shaped by collaboration between the Socialist Party and the civic platform Citizens for Lisbon, supported by professionals in architecture, planning, NGOs, and grassroots organisations (Farias, 2021). Influenced by Portugal's participatory SAAL model of the 1970s, Brazilian participatory budgeting, and the IBC initiative of the 2000s, BIP/ZIP reflects the city's tradition of associational politics and social learning (Roseta, 2013). Civic activist and architect Helena Roseta played a prominent role, advancing the policy while serving as councillor within the Local Housing Programme during Portugal's austerity context. Her leadership forged links between civic agency and municipal structures, situating BIP/ZIP within broader democratic ambitions.

Conceptually, BIP/ZIP is grounded in critical theories of the Right to the City, seeking equitable spatial redistribution and civic empowerment. Yet Falanga (2019) alerts us to the risks of institutional co-optation or the commodification of community action, suggesting that meaningful participation requires careful negotiation of power imbalances.

⁶ The Com.Unity.Lab Transfer network adapted Lisbon's approach to Priority Intervention Areas for different European cities, focusing on social-territorial cohesion through co-governance and bottom-up participation (URBACT, n.d.).

Lisbon's visibility increased through its participation in URBACT's USER network (2013–15), which invited city administrations from across Europe to co-design urban frameworks emphasising civic engagement. BIP/ZIP was awarded the title of URBACT Good Practice in 2017, qualifying Lisbon to lead the Com.Unity.Lab transfer initiative. Implemented in two phases between April and September 2018, Phase 1 enabled Lisbon to serve as lead partner with Bari and Aalborg as project partners, while Phase 2 expanded to the full network until 2021 (extended due to COVID-19). Despite efforts to document outcomes, the cycle lacked a planned mid- or long-term, process-oriented mobility assessment framework.

The Com.Unity.Lab case is analytically significant in several respects. First, as the first transfer of a mature reactive strategy, it allows for tracing how a consolidated co-policy is interpreted across diverse urban contexts. Second, it reveals how local institutional cultures, governance structures, and political leadership shape adaptation processes. Third, internal discussions within the network surfaced the need for post-implementation monitoring mechanisms, a need that is rarely institutionalised in typical transfer networks. These debates underscore the paper's theoretical focus on how co-policies may transform through travel, and where they may falter when local developments are ignored.

Following the BIP/ZIP Policy: Power as analytical lens

The first mobility of Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Strategy provides a valuable case for examining how co-policies are reshaped through transnational transfer processes. Different aspects of the BIP/ZIP were adapted to distinct institutional environments, civic capacities and political cultures. This adaptation process illuminates the dynamics of policy mobility as a terrain of negotiation, meaning-making and power reconfiguration.

This study positions power relations as the core analytical parameter in assessing co-policy mobility. Co-policies are not only governance tools but also political experiments, whose outcomes are deeply influenced by who defines their scope, who enacts them and who gains or loses influence in the process. Drawing from critical urban theory and participatory governance literature (Fung and Wright, 2001; Gabauer, 2018), this approach emphasises that impact must be understood as a power-inflected process.

To capture these dynamics, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in the "follow the policy" framework developed by Peck and Theodore (2012) and expanded by Wood (2016). This methodological approach explores how policies are disseminated, translated and appropriated across diverse urban contexts. The analysis is structured along three interrelated axes:

- *Follow the actors*: identify the institutional, civic and transnational stakeholders involved in shaping, supporting, contesting or transforming the co-policy.
- *Follow the decisions*: trace how values, priorities and trade-offs are negotiated, framed and stabilised (or not) during the adaptation and implementation process.
- *Follow the effects*: assess institutional practical developments, shifts in local governance dynamics, new collaborations and symbolic or discursive redefinitions of the policy, aiming to understand their impact in the implementation phase.

This three-part structure facilitates a process-oriented and relational understanding of co-policy mobility.

Primary data collection included analysis of programme reports, strategic documents, internal presentations and technical guides from both Lisbon and the partner cities. These materials were complemented by semi-structured interviews with city coordinators, facilitators and technical staff, conducted via email and virtual meetings. Participant observation of online network exchanges, including study visits and transnational workshops, allowed documentation of formal and informal dynamics, moments of contestation, application of participatory assessment tools, and practical coordination efforts.

Initial analytical insights emerged from a review of relevant literature on urban policy mobility and post-implementation assessment. Exploratory interviews conducted in a prior phase through snowball sampling helped to refine the conceptual approach. These conversations revealed both the demand for more systematic evaluation tools and the lack of shared criteria for defining success, which were confirmed by later-stage interviews.

In focusing on co-policy local developments, the study draws on Falanga's (2019) propositions regarding how impact may depend on diverse partnership arrangements, capacity to mobilise local residents and issue specificity. However, longitudinal and comparative data on these dimensions remain scarce, this study aiming to contribute to filling that gap. By treating co-policies as both administrative instruments and political fields, this methodology provides insight into how power relations shape the way policies are interpreted and enacted. This approach supports a deeper understanding of whether co-policies, when mobilised transnationally, can retain their transformative potential or whether they become adjusted to prevailing institutional logics without systemic change.

Applied methodology and Findings

Building on the follow-up of the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network case (2018-2021), this paper presents preliminary results based on the literature review and the methodology proposed

for the case study. The latter consists of the following: (1) follow the actors, (2) follow the decisions and (3) follow the effects. These guidelines were applied in a multilayered manner throughout the research conducted from 2020 to 2023. The official end of the Transfer Network (TN) took place in June 2021, and documents with the outcomes were delivered by the member cities to URBACT by September 2021. The research results presented here represent the first effort to sort and interpret the data assembled. Further analysis and interpretation will be carried out in subsequent stages, with the aim of elaborating on additional aspects outlined in this text.

The opportunity to closely follow Com.Unity.Lab was made possible by joining the URBACT Local Group (ULG) of Lisbon as a participant-observer in the second half of 2020. Each URBACT partner is required to establish a ULG, which brings together key local stakeholders, including representatives from local associations and academia, to co-create city strategies and action plans. The author joined the Lisbon group on behalf of ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, as part of TN Com.Unity.Lab. This role enabled regular interactions with representatives from Lisbon City Council, who were deeply involved in the process, as well as teams from other city partners in Com.Unity.Lab, including municipal staff from Bari, Lille and other participating cities. This provided valuable insights into decision-making processes, helped identify key decision-makers, and allowed for an assessment of the preliminary outcomes of the mobility efforts.

Follow the actors

To "follow the actors", we mapped both direct and indirect human and non-human actors, focusing on those within the TN Com.Unity.Lab network. This mapping informed our written analysis of the URBACT Transfer Network records, extending beyond the programme and its Transfer Networks to include related documentation, particularly on the case under study and its associated EU policies, such as the Leipzig Charter and the New Leipzig Charter. This process enabled us to identify the official discourse for these policies, their mobility, underlying motives, and their connection to the European Union's stance on urban development. Recognising the actors involved in the mobility process and their respective roles was crucial for the subsequent step: "follow the decisions".

The initial partners of the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network (TN), along with their respective cities and official representatives, were identified using the "follow the actors" method. This involved analysing key documents, such as the Com.Unity.Lab application submitted to URBACT. The first phase of Com.Unity.Lab TN included meetings with the three founding partners, namely municipal representatives from Lisbon, Bari and Aalborg, in Bari (May 2018) and Aalborg (June 2018). During this phase, five potential Phase 2 partners were identified: Lille,

Ostrava, Sofia, The Hague and Lublin. These cities were visited by representatives from the Lead Partner (Lisbon) and the TN's Lead Expert. A final meeting with all eight partners was held in Lisbon (September 2018) to conclude Phase 1 and prepare the application for Phase 2, which ran from December 2018 to December 2020.

Figure 1 – First actors of the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network

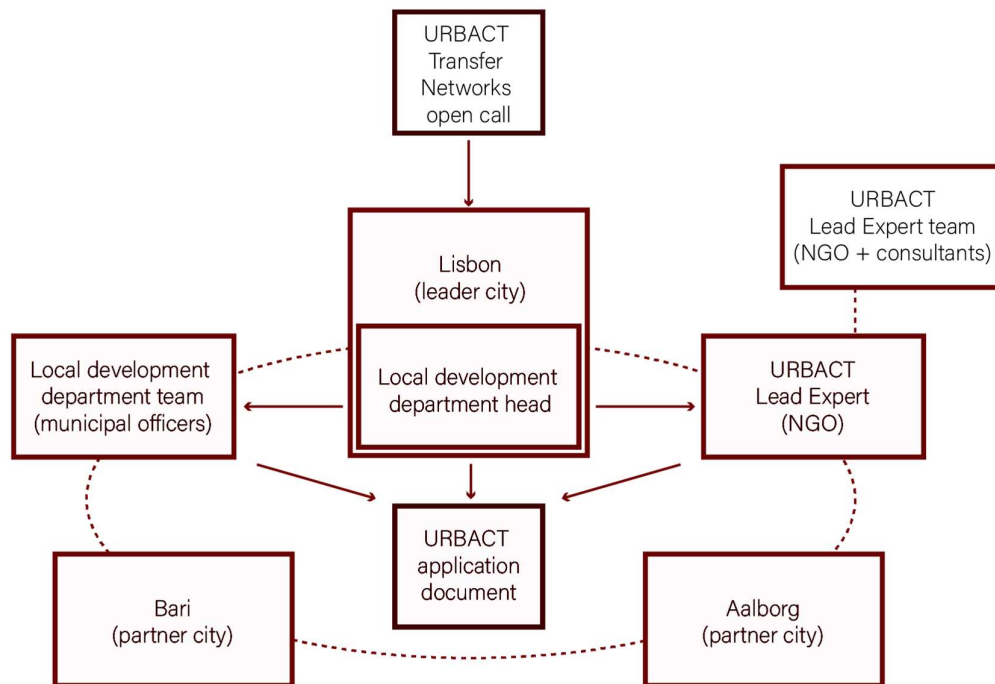


Figure 1 visualises the initial actor configuration behind the Com.Unity.Lab application. It highlights the central role of Lisbon's development department in coordinating with municipal officers from Bari and Aalborg, as well as with URBACT experts.

Some of the partners who were invited to join the Com.Unity.Lab TN in the second phase were brought in through contacts established in 2017 at the URBACT City Festival in Tallinn. This was the case, at least, for Aalborg and Ostrava. The festival also functions as a space for the creation of informal networks among cities facing common challenges, which may later be formalised into projects or networks.

The "follow the actors" method significantly enhanced the information gathered from documents. This approach involved conducting interviews with primary sources directly engaged in the Transfer Network (TN), primarily officers from Lisbon Municipality responsible for day-to-day tasks related to the TN, as well as the Lead Expert of Com.Unity.Lab. These interviews provided valuable insights into the mobility process, its ambitions and its operations. These contacts were initially planned as face-to-face meetings, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the timeline of the Transfer Network, prompting URBACT to extend its duration by a further six months, until June 2021. As the official transfer period concluded, interviewees from the Lisbon technical team of Com.Unity.Lab emphasised that the Transfer Network's primary achievement was the successful sharing of concepts and methodologies for establishing partnerships for local development and co-governance processes. This initiative not only reinforced the relationship between the municipality and its citizens but also promoted mutual learning among all the participating cities in Com.Unity.Lab.

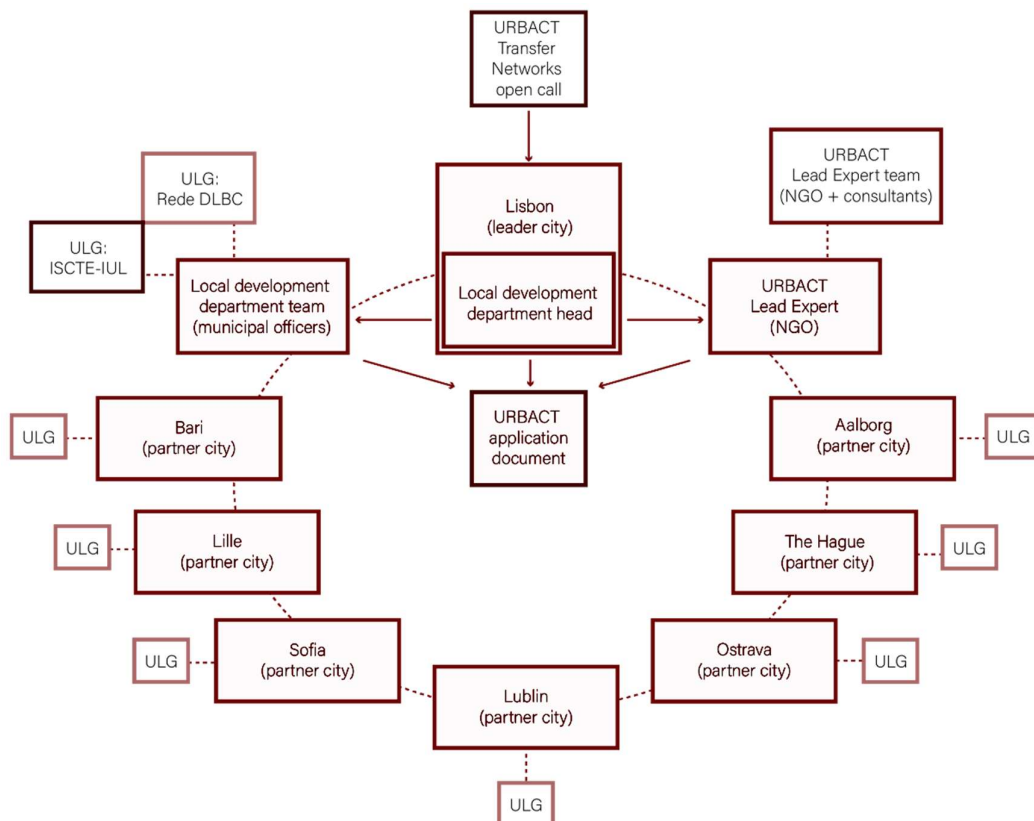


Figure 2 expands on the previous actor configuration by presenting the full institutional landscape of the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network during Phase Two. It builds upon the

foundational structure shown in Figure 2 by incorporating all eight partner cities and illustrating how local actors were integrated through the establishment of URBACT Local Groups (ULGs) in each city. The acronym ULG refers to the URBACT Local Group, a key mechanism of the URBACT programme that facilitates participatory implementation by bringing together local stakeholders, civil society organisations, and technical staff within each municipality. The inclusion of the label ULG: ISCTE-IUL marks the researcher's own position within the Lisbon ULG.

As part of the actor mapping, a broad set of documentary sources was reviewed to trace the evolution, communication, and framing of the BIP/ZIP transfer process. These documents, produced throughout the lifecycle of the Transfer Network, served as key evidence for understanding how ideas and strategies developed over time. Figure 3 synthesises the wide range of materials consulted during the research process:

Figure 3 – Com.Unity.Lab documents that it was possible to access

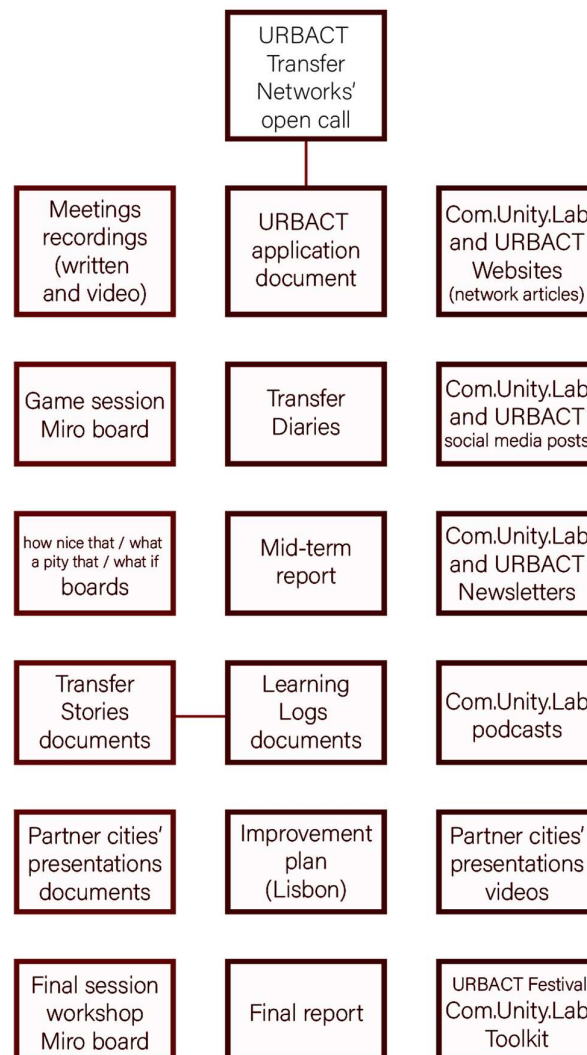


Figure 3 presents an overview of the documentary sources accessed for this study. These materials include both formal deliverables submitted to URBACT, such as the application document, mid-term and final reports, and improvement plans, and informal, process-oriented outputs including Transfer Diaries, Learning Logs, and Miro boards from game sessions and workshops. These documents were complemented by communication artefacts such as newsletters, social media posts, podcasts, and partner presentations in both video and text formats, which offered insight into how concepts were framed and circulated within the network.

Among these materials is the *Jogo Fórum Urbano*, a serious game created by the Lisbon-based collective *Local's Approach*, a member of the city's URBACT Local Group. Designed to facilitate understanding of local development strategies, the game was used with Transfer Network partners as a tool for engaging with the BIP/ZIP strategy's core vocabulary and operational logic in a participatory and interactive manner.

The diversity of these sources reflects the multi-scalar and collaborative nature of the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network, reinforcing the rationale for a qualitative, power-sensitive approach to policy mobility. Importantly, these materials enabled the research to trace not only decisions and impacts, but also the discursive and symbolic dimensions of the policy transfer process: what was emphasised, downplayed, or transformed in different cities.

The actor mapping presented in this section served as a foundation for identifying the institutional arrangements and stakeholder constellations that shaped both the internal dynamics of the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network and the transfer of Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Strategy. While the mapping alone did not reveal the full depth of influence or agency, it established who the relevant actors were and what roles they occupied. This foundational understanding enabled the next methodological step – following the decisions – to explore how agency was exercised and how key actors influenced the adaptation or reinterpretation of BIP/ZIP principles in the different urban contexts. This approach positioned them as potential power nodes, whose significance can be more fully understood by tracing their involvement in decision-making processes.

Follow the decisions

To identify the most active and relevant actors in the Com.Unity.Lab process, the “follow the decisions” step proved essential. As previously noted, ISCTE-IUL was officially incorporated into the URBACT Local Group in Lisbon, which enabled close and regular monitoring of the steps of the Transfer Network as a participant observer. This involvement made it possible to identify the municipal teams responsible for the local strategies and daily tasks of the Transfer Network in various cities, the most active URBACT Local Groups, and the most significant documents. It also

offered insight into how ordinary decision-making unfolded, often informally and asynchronously, reflecting the distributed and networked character of the Transfer Network.

To deepen the analysis of decision-making dynamics, a Drivers of Change matrix was used to visualise how actors positioned themselves along two critical axes: their interest in the transfer process and their influence over decisions (see Figure 4). This tool is adapted from the Drivers of Change methodology, originally developed by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and further refined by the Institute of Development Studies. Drivers of Change approaches systematically map how political, social, and institutional forces, and the actors who represent them, shape policy outcomes (O'Neill, Foresti, & Hudson, 2007).

Figure 4 – Drivers-of-change matrix that shows where each actor stood in the decision-making process

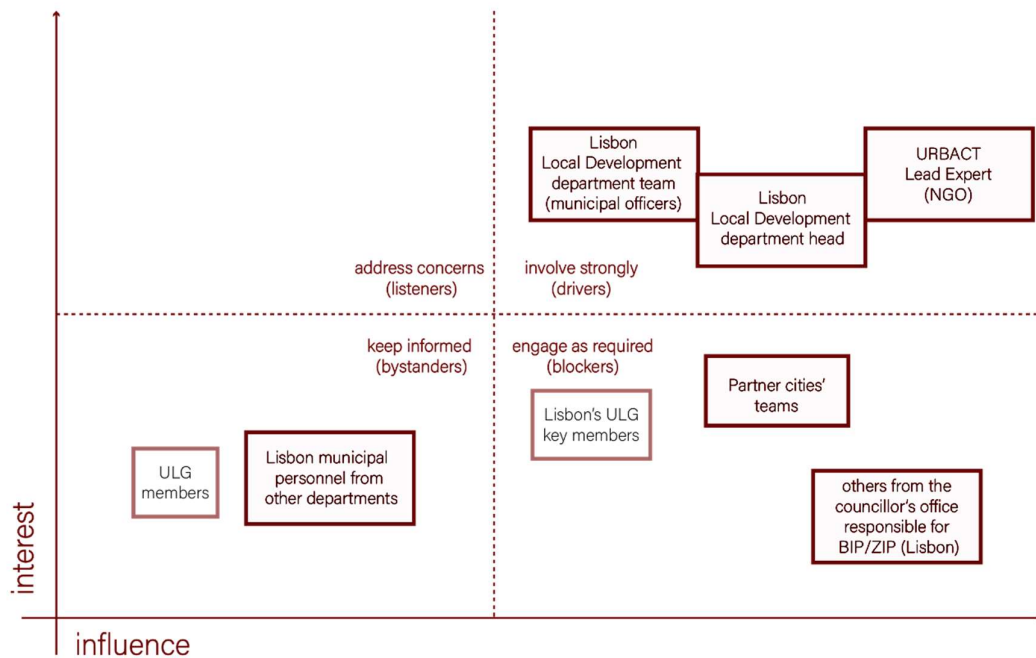


Figure 4 illustrates how certain actors emerged as key decision-makers, while others remained peripheral despite active involvement. The analysis underscored the central role of municipal officers, who were chiefly responsible for the project's day-to-day progress and decision-making. Several strategic solutions were often devised outside formal meetings by the Head of Lisbon's Local Development Department and their team, drawing on input from the URBACT Lead Expert. In other cities, meetings were mainly used to share concerns and experiences, while decisions were taken afterwards by the local municipal teams and subsequently conveyed during group Com.Unity.Lab meetings. It is worth noting that the level of engagement varied across municipal teams, a factor also influenced by the predominantly online format of the Transfer Network process. This digital format

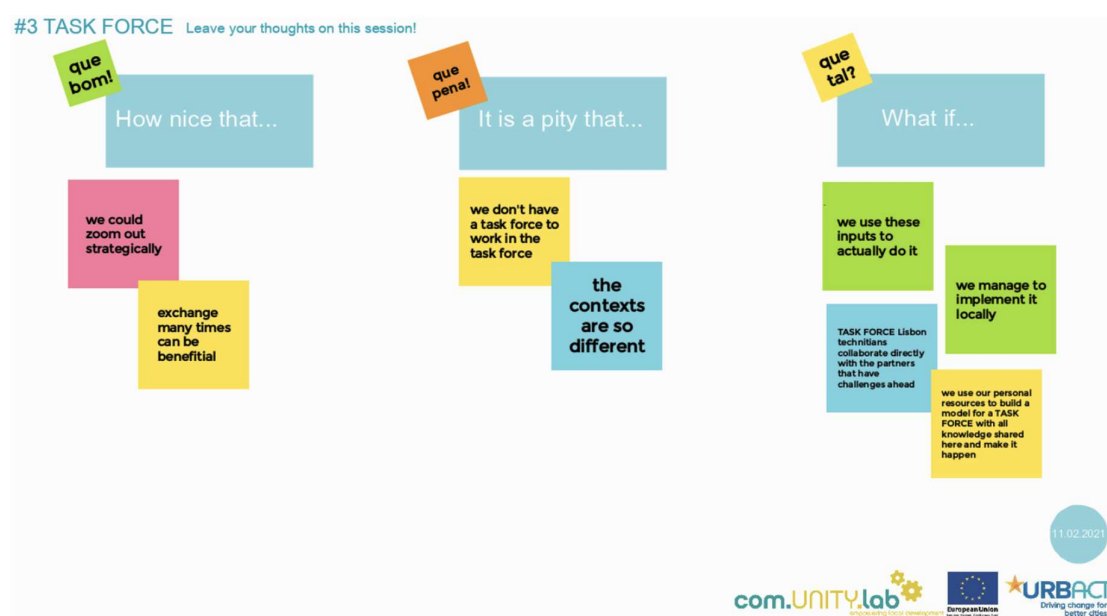
enabled some participants to be more consistently involved; for example, the municipal team from Ostrava maintained a particularly strong presence throughout.

Follow the effects

Frequent participation in meetings among the partners enabled the use of a simple yet valuable assessment tool that facilitated mutual learning and allowed for a preliminary evaluation of the policy mobility process. The analytical framework applied, titled “how nice that / what a pity that / what if”, was introduced to the authors by colleagues from the Brazilian Network for Collaborative Urbanism. This method was designed to prompt collective reflection on key moments, tools, and challenges encountered during the transfer process.

Within the Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network, this framework was applied on five occasions. Each session focused on one of the core instruments of the BIP/ZIP strategy, including the participatory map, the funding programme, the task force, and the CLLD networks. A fifth session was held to reflect on digital tools. These digital innovations included both the development of a municipal data platform and the adaptation of tools like the Fórum Urbano game manual into digital formats. These materials aimed to strengthen collaboration among stakeholders and make the strategy’s logic more accessible to partners. In this context, the HackaBip hackathon⁷ was organised to encourage the development of further digital tools that could extend the implementation of BIP/ZIP-like policies in different urban contexts.

Figure 5 – Some of the how nice that / what a pity that / what if collective evaluation exercises of the Task Force tool



⁷ A hackathon is an event set up by an organisation that seeks a high-quality solution through collaboration between experts.

Figure 5 presents one of the visual outputs from these collective evaluation exercises, focusing on the Task Force tool. It displays participant contributions sorted across the three reflection zones of the framework: elements that worked well, aspects that posed difficulties, and possible improvements or next steps. The figure illustrates that while participants appreciated strategic moments of reflection and exchange, they also recognised the constraints posed by differing local contexts and uneven capacity to operationalise the tool. Additionally, they identified pathways for adapting the model locally or collaborating more directly with Lisbon's technical team. The session reflected the open, dialogical nature of Com.Unity.Lab and showed that the act of collective reflection itself became a mode of learning and evaluation.

The application of this framework was complemented by the author's participation in the URBACT Festival 2021, conducted entirely online, where the Lisbon ULG team presented their experience alongside other partner cities. During this event, participants expressed initial impressions of the outcomes and limitations of the TN. One of the resulting outputs was the publication *Good Practice Transfer: Why Not in My City?*, published by URBACT in June 2021, which featured the Com.Unity.Lab network among its highlighted cases.

In parallel, direct conversations with Lisbon's municipal officers responsible for Com.Unity.Lab raised the question of whether any future monitoring was anticipated. Their response was affirmative in principle but also revealed a lack of concrete planning or institutional mechanisms to track developments after the official end of the network. They indicated that it would be valuable if cities involved in transfer processes were encouraged to continue partnerships and monitor the adoption and evolution of co-created tools. They suggested that such follow-up could be supported through the introduction of predefined indicators at the application stage, which would allow URBACT to refine its understanding of the type and depth of impacts associated with its networks.

While the final network documents, including the Learning Logs produced by each city, provide an overview of the process, they stop short of detailing what was implemented, tested, or transformed in each context. Some cities advanced further than others in developing cooperation tools inspired by BIP/ZIP, but most logs focused primarily on municipal staff perceptions rather than substantive evaluations of territorial or governance outcomes. There was no indication in the documents that cities intended to monitor the influence of these tools, which points to a gap this research aims to address.

The Com.Unity.Lab URBACT Lead Expert confirmed in interview that no formal methodology exists at the programme level to assess the procedural or longer term effects of transfer networks. She noted that this is apparently due in part to budgetary constraints, which prevent a more sustained follow-up. While final reports contain sections on impact, the absence of

structured follow-up moments makes it difficult to capture the full picture of transformation that occurs, and whether it occurs, once a network concludes.

These applied methodologies revealed how the uptake and adaptation of co-policy tools varied substantially across contexts, highlighting the role of civic and institutional ecologies in shaping outcomes. Across the Com.Unity.Lab network, the adaptation of BIP/ZIP tools revealed notable divergences in both ambition and execution. In Ostrava, the participatory map and the task force model were used to strengthen interdepartmental collaboration, integrating social inclusion more deeply into urban projects. Lublin built on its robust civic tradition, activating local partnerships for micro-interventions and enhancing its participatory governance ethos. Sofia faced institutional fragmentation and limited civic infrastructure, which constrained the meaningful application of the tools. Bari framed the instruments within pre-existing regeneration schemes but struggled to expand participation beyond known actors. Lille highlighted a tension between technical planning cultures and the open-ended nature of co-produced tools. Aalborg used the strategy to reinforce cross-sector coordination but encountered difficulty mobilising grassroots engagement. The Hague, focusing on CLLD, appreciated Lisbon's structured approach but noted that departmental silos and limited intermediary presence hindered sustainable co-governance. These variations confirm that the transformative potential of co-policies depends not only on the adoption of tools but on the enabling civic and institutional ecosystems. The "how nice / what a pity / what if" evaluations helped uncover these differences and underscored the critical role of political will, civic traditions, and institutional openness in shaping meaningful adaptation, while fostering exchange and mutual learning.

This experience demonstrated that:

First, analytical frameworks are welcomed by participants, especially when they are simple and quick to apply. The "how nice / what a pity / what if" tool offered an intuitive entry point into structured reflection and was embraced across different partner cities. In settings where evaluation resources are limited, this kind of accessible method can foster a learning-oriented culture without creating excessive demands on participants.

Second, the use of such frameworks often leads to a deeper understanding of what is being analysed. During the TN, they helped reveal how BIP/ZIP instruments were being interpreted, which assumptions were challenged, and which dimensions were lost or transformed in translation. This points to the political dimension of policy mobility: policies are not simply adopted; they are reimagined through local negotiations. By making these tensions visible, reflective tools serve as a window into the micropolitics of policy adaptation.

Third, the potential for these tools to be self-applied is a significant advantage. They allow local actors to assert interpretive autonomy over how transferred policies are framed and

assessed. In the absence of formal impact monitoring from URBACT, such grassroots-led assessment approach provide a means of claiming voice and agency in the mobility process itself. They could become instruments of democratic participation and knowledge co-production.

In the following section we reflect on how the observed ways of adaptation and resistance inform broader debates on policy mobility, institutional translation, and democratic urban governance.

Conclusion

This paper examined how co-policies travel, adapt, and deliver impact across diverse settings, using Lisbon's BIP/ZIP Strategy and its adoption through the URBACT Com.Unity.Lab Transfer Network as a central case study. While co-policies have demonstrated promising results in promoting spatial justice, as they move, they have also exposed limitations such as implementation obstacles and unintended consequences. In this paper, we seek to understand how to assess to what extent such initiatives can reconfigure power relations, enhance democratic practice, and shape distributive outcomes.

Although institutions like URBACT frequently frame themselves as neutral conduits for disseminating 'good practices', this study establishes that policy mobility is intrinsically political. The transfer of co-policies involves uneven capacities, divergent interpretations, and competing institutional logics. The idea that models can be replicated universally overlooks how policies are reassembled in accordance with local political cultures and agendas. Our findings therefore support the development of actor-centred, power-aware methodologies that scrutinise not only what is transferred but also how and why those transfers unfold.

The Com.Unity.Lab network offered the opportunity to observe, in real time, the first international transfer of a co-policy already well established at origin. By engaging with documents, interviews, planning tools, and collaborative interactions, we found that many decisions—on adaptation, priority setting, and resource allocation—were made informally and outside official channels. These 'ordinary' decisions profoundly influenced outcomes. Therefore, understanding who made decisions, under what constraints, and through which processes is as important as analysing the decisions themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic served to highlight the importance of procedural analysis. As activities shifted online, access to meetings and documentation improved, providing a clearer view of everyday decision-making and informal pathways of influence that would otherwise remain opaque. What was initially seen as a methodological limitation (restricted physical mobility) became a research

advantage, enabling deeper insight into institutional configurations and the micro-politics of implementation.

In responding to the study's core research questions, this paper has confirmed that while BIP/ZIP was widely welcomed and adapted by partner cities, institutional and political divergences created key tensions. Regularisation and autonomy emerge as key concepts in evaluating co-policies. While such initiatives can empower local actors, their political momentum often fades when there is no clear sense of local ownership or accountability. This means that any definition of 'success' must be negotiated, contextualised, and continuously revisited. As Falanga (2019) notes, participatory policies are inherently experimental, with unpredictable trajectories. Therefore, a meaningful assessment framework must capture not only whether objectives are met, but also include deeper dimensions—such as institutional responsiveness to citizen demands and broader socio-political transformation. Assessing co-policy mobility outcomes requires tools that uncover explicit and implicit value systems and 'hidden agendas', while also assessing whether policy objectives are being achieved and how they are pursued. These tools should measure the distribution and intensity of power among political and social actors (Cornwall, 2004), acknowledging that co-policies have the potential to reshape power dynamics through their implementation. Such analysis must consider whether initiatives intended to enhance civic influence actually align with dominant urban governance paradigms.

A central insight of this study is that power needs to serve as a primary evaluative lens. Power relations determine which interpretations prevail, which adaptations gain legitimacy and how conflicts are resolved. Both the literature and empirical findings underline that without attention to how agendas are formed, contested and institutionalised, assessments risk missing the deeper consequences of policy transfer. While co-policies can serve as drivers of meaningful change, enduring structural transformation only appears when these efforts align with broader institutional support and political commitment. These policies can hold transformative potential, however, it is necessary to assess whether transformation is genuinely realised or whether these policies instead entrench existing norms.

Addressing this, we propose that a power-distribution assessment framework should be developed, particularly to assess their redistributive ambitions. Reflective tools, such as 'how nice that', 'what a pity that' and 'what if', proved particularly revealing during network workshops. These frameworks enabled collective reflection, surfaced tensions, and articulated diverse aspirations. More than mere evaluation instruments, they functioned as political practices, allowing actors to co-produce meaning and challenge assumptions.

In transnational networks, most assessments conclude soon after implementation begins, offering limited insight into longer term outcomes or unintended effects. Conversations with Lisbon's municipal team revealed a desire for continuing learning and collaboration, but also highlighted a lack

of structured mechanisms for follow-up. Currently, URBACT's framework does not include provisions for sustained monitoring or longitudinal impact analysis. As a result, the lasting outcomes of co-policies mobility remains uncertain. In this context, Com.Unity.Lab serves as a striking example of how policy mobility studies often assume effects rather than systematically examine them over time. Furthermore, the prevalent tendency among policymakers to 'see like a project'—that is, to treat urban interventions as short-term, outcome-driven efforts—contributes to the absence of robust assessment frameworks, thereby obscuring long-term impacts, relation-based dynamics and power shifts that co-policies aim to enable (Nunes, 2025).

As Weiss (1997) has argued, producing outcomes is insufficient unless accompanied by reflection, interpretation and situational understanding. Co-policy mobility therefore requires assessment frameworks that are process-oriented, power-sensitive and time-aware. The 'follow the policy' method, tracking actors, decisions and effects, has proven effective in revealing these dimensions. Nonetheless, future research should further explore and expand from the 'follow the policy' approach, developing adaptive frameworks that enable actors to evaluate co-policies not only by their outputs, but also by how they reshape governance cultures, institutional legitimacy, and citizen–state relationships, guided by a power-distribution lens.

In bridging conceptual theory and empirical findings, this paper contributes to both academic debates and practical policymaking on the mobility of urban policies that encompass co-production and co-governance. For policymakers, it offers guidance on embedding assessment tools within transfer programmes from the outset. For scholars, it marks an important step toward building frameworks that attend to political agency, institutional context and the temporal unfolding of change.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the merit scholarship received from ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, which provided crucial support for the development of this research.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest.

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