The Social Cities Index
- A tool for urban leaders

On Thursday, January 24th, the IFHP revealed its first results from applying the Social Cities Index on a selected Danish municipality. This took place at the conference "Measuring what matters", where city leaders, statisticians, architects, and urbanists - representing a variety of Danish municipalities - met to share preliminary experiences with the Social Cities Index. The case from the Danish municipality formed round table discussions during the day. Main takeaways from these debates showed that the index is already delivering on three parameters: It is a new way to transform existing data into insights; it encourages collaboration on social challenges across urban silos; and it provides a significant boost to the topic of social sustainability in the public conversation.

Measure what matters

The Social Cities Index is the first step out of three in IFHP's flagship programme Social Cities. The programme is divided into 1) an index for transforming fragmented data into insights, 2) ideation labs for co-creating new solutions to the discoveries of the index, and 3) a platform for sharing best practices across neighbourhoods, cities, municipalities and nation states. Academic research shows general agreement that the dimensions of sustainable development has yet to provide equal attention to the three pillars of economic, environmental and social sustainability. Studies from the Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development[1], the OECD[2], and others, have argued that Social Sustainability is the most neglected element of the three because it is far more difficult to quantify, contextualize and develop than economic growth or environmental impact. As a result, social sustainability has primarily been dealt with in connection with the social implication of environmental and economic matters, rather than as an equally constitutive component of sustainable development[3].

With a billion more human beings set to dwell in cities and urban environments by 2030, the IFHP has developed the Social Cities programme to fill this gap. The programme is developed in close collaboration with selected Danish municipalities and London School of Economics' department for urbanization, LSE Cities. It is made possible with support from Realdania and the Ramboll Foundation. The aim of the Social Cities Index is to deliver the missing link for transforming the social objectives in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into action. Whereas the discourse on social sustainability in the Danish and European context has been driven by fragmented data, opinions and beliefs, the Social Cities Index provides a tangible tool for measuring social sustainability. The Index is thus the first of its kind to engage policymakers, city administrators, developers, urban professionals and citizens in a fact-based dialogue on how to increase the livelihood of their homes, neighbourhoods and cities.

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[1] Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development: Social Sustainability: An Exploratory Analysis of its Definition, Assessment Methods, Metrics and Tools, in 'Measuring Social Sustainability: Best Practice from Urban Renewal in the EU', 2007/01: EIBURS Working Paper Series, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK, 2007.

[2] OECD: Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World, OECD, Paris, France, 2001.

[3] OECD: Analytic Report on Sustainable Development SG/SD (2001)1-14, OECD, Paris, France, 2001.

IFHP Social Cities Index

The Index identifies indicators in three dimensions

1.0 Household
Affordability
Availability
Quality

2.0 Neighbourhood
Safety
Services
Social Capital

3.0 City
Job and Education
Mobility
Citizenship

In total, the index consists of three scale levels, nine categories and 40+ urban indicators. The scale levels divide the index into a: household, neighbourhood, and city level. First of all, at household level the index measures housing affordability and availability, as well as the citizens' perception of the quality of their homes. Secondly, the neighbourhood level measures safety, access to services, and the degree of social inclusion. Finally, at the city level, the index measures access to jobs and education, mobility, and to what extent citizens feel empowered to participate in local decision-making processes.

Through the pilot project in the Danish municipality, the index has already proven to be suitable for internal benchmarking between urban districts within the borders of a given municipality, for benchmarking a city's performance relative to its peers, and for benchmarking a city's performance to a national average. All data used for the index comes from either national statistics or surveys performed by the city administrations at local level.

Generating new insights

The greatest power of any index is to provide unexpected news to its stakeholders. To the conference participants, the Social Cities Index represents an innovative way to explore existing data sources and learn new things about their city - simply by changing their perspective. The multi-level design of the index makes it possible to manage social challenges on a broad geographical scale and simultaneously be sensitive to insights that are distinctively local. The value of the index as an urban planning tool is closely linked to its ability to provide indispensable facts to guide policy change, and thereby offer a return on the time invested in its implementation.

Encouraging collaboration across silos

The flexible design of the index allows for city administrations to adjust it to a specific context. At the conference, the index was presented with 40 selected urban indicators. However, participants at the conference agreed that an expansion of the number of indicators would allow the index to become even more customizable – and thereby drastically improve its sensitivity to contextual conditions and thus its scalability. Once adapted to a local reality, the tool creates a shared understanding of opportunities and risks across governmental departments by providing a fact-based diagnosis consisting of relevant indicators. The various levels of the index appeal to different actors in urban planning processes, e.g. politicians or administrative staff, depending on the need for detail. By integrating the index into current workflows, rather than replacing them, it provides an important tool for unifying undesirable silos in urban administrative systems. The better the index is incorporated into existing practices, the greater the impact.

Boosting the public conversation

Dialogue is a crucial first step for delivering desirable changes to the homes, neighbourhoods and cities we live in. The Social Cities Index is a powerful conversation starter and tool for dialogue between urban agents across all sectors. By providing new insights, it contributes to shifting mind-sets and creating new narratives for specific urban districts. The index makes it possible to summarize social sustainability in one picture and provides a fact base for engaging local businesses and civic society in development processes. As such, the index serves as a foundation for data-driven urban planning.

The Social Cities Index is a tool to manage the social impact of urban planning strategies. During the spring of 2019, the collaborative partners behind the index will meet to take the final steps of the pilot-testing of the Social Cities Programme.

Collaboration is everything

The IFHP Social Cities Programme is made possible by a grant from Realdania and Ramboll Foundation. The results and outcomes are created in a collaborative process, involving civil society organisations, academia, private ventures, and public organisations.

If future engagement in the programme is of interest to your city or organisation, please do not hesitate to reach out to the IFHP secretariat.

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