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EDITED BY

Joe Ravetz,
The University of Manchester,
United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY

Enzo Falco,
University of Trento, Italy

*CORRESPONDENCE

Nilofer Tajuddin
✉ ntajuddin@resilientcitiesnetwork.org

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From mapping to alliances: practice-informed entry points for stakeholder engagement in EU mission cities

Nilofer Tajuddin* and Leon Kapetas

Resilient Cities Network, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Stakeholder engagement and co-creation are essential components of urban planning and implementation processes. There is growing awareness that engagement throughout the project lifecycle is crucial for successful implementation and ownership. While several methodologies are available, further progress is needed on how to leverage each stage of engagement to build consensus and foster partnerships. Several EU-funded projects demonstrating how sustained engagement can be implemented within the context of the European Green Deal and the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities have been analyzed to understand current practices. As a working resource for city practitioners and other projects, this article provides perspectives, practical tools and case studies from cities, organized into three entry points. We trace the process from stakeholder mapping, including reaching beyond commonly engaged groups, to the formation of alliances for ongoing knowledge exchange. Lastly, the article also explores insights on language and terminology while designing and implementing stakeholder engagement processes. Building upon existing research and collaboration with cities, this practice-based perspective aims to stimulate discussion on emerging trends in engagement within the planning and implementation of broader climate action goals.

KEYWORDS

climate action, climate governance, co-creation, participation, stakeholder engagement

1 Introduction

Urban areas are estimated to contribute approximately 70% of all global emissions, and house about 54% of the world's population (Moran et al., 2018). At the same time, 83% cities face significant climate risks, and these hazards are expected to become more intense and frequent in the future (CDP, 2024). Cities around the world, together with their local, regional, and national governments, are intensifying their efforts to embed climate action into their daily operations. Cities are central to achieving the Paris Agreement, and in Europe, they are key to meeting the 2030 and 2050 emission reduction targets set out in the EU Green Deal and the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities (Rivas et al., 2021; Trane et al., 2025; European Commission, 2019). While many European cities have ambitious climate action plans in place, it is essential that these plans are resilient, holistic, and designed to ensure just and inclusive transitions that leave no one behind (Da Silva Hyldmo et al., 2024; European Commission, 2019).

The climate transition will lead to both intended and unintended consequences. A resilient planning approach is therefore required to address while building capacity at all levels to adapt to emerging impacts (Arup and Resilient Cities Network, 2024). In urban and environmental planning processes, stakeholder engagement refers to a structured process of involving both

individuals and groups that are affected by or have an influence over decision-making. At the same time, it also presents an opportunity for collaborative knowledge co-production to understand the context that informs the decision-making processes (Gerlak et al., 2023). Transparent, meaningful, and intentional stakeholder engagement is a fundamental building block for advancing resilience and the Just Transition (Topaloglou et al., 2024). It is vital to engage urban stakeholders and residents at every stage of the planning process to ensure acceptance and ownership of solutions, while providing opportunities for stakeholders to voice concerns, express doubt, and understand trade-offs. Additionally, engagement processes can be leveraged for information and knowledge exchange, supporting project sustainability and capacity building among affected stakeholder groups (Kunseler et al., 2015). When designed innovatively, engagement processes can facilitate social learning and skill development (Cohen et al., 2015). For example, the use of data models and climate services can help stakeholders gain a better understanding of scenario planning and transition pathways (Liakou et al., 2022). Similarly, empowering local residents to act as champions within their neighborhoods to engage and mobilize others helps them develop leadership and networking skills (Jackson et al., 2025).

While there is a vast body of existing literature and practice on stakeholder engagement in urban governance and climate action, the focus is often methodological (e.g., outlining participatory tools or engagement techniques) (Parsons et al., 2025). Moreover, there is a risk of *ad hoc* or project-based approaches, leading to inconsistent outcomes and limited institutional learning (André et al., 2023; Van Der Heijden, 2021). Although several repositories of engagement tools and approaches have been developed, there remains a need for strategic, purpose-driven guidance (Loorbach et al., 2015) that helps cities design meaningful engagement processes that can support different phases of climate action, from planning to implementation and long-term partnership building. Such guidance would also enable more informed selection and application of engagement methods. Situated in this context, we have aimed to strike a balance between grounding the discussion in existing research and integrating insights from practice, particularly in observing how cities implement diverse engagement processes with varying objectives and target groups.

In combination with desk research and insights drawn from practice and collaboration in multi-city projects, this article analyzes two EU-funded programs under the EU Mission for Climate Neutral and Smart Cities supported by the Resilient Cities network. This practice-informed perspective proposes three key “entry points” based on emerging trends in how cities approach engagement: stakeholder ecosystem analysis, leveraging engagement during planning and implementation, and long-term partnership building. Each entry point is analyzed to provide an overview of its scope, key considerations, tools, and approaches that can guide implementation, and how it actively supports consensus-building. Finally, in Section 5, the paper incorporates engagement-related terminology and vocabulary as key tools for understanding the article and establishing the tone of stakeholder engagement.

While this paper is limited in scope due to constraints such as time and the extent of research reviewed, it represents an initial step toward framing and systematizing approaches to stakeholder engagement in cities. We have aimed to strike a balance between grounding the discussion in existing research and reflecting insights from practice,

particularly in observing how cities are implementing diverse engagement processes with varying objectives and target groups.

2 Challenges and barriers faced in engagement

While cities recognize the importance of engaging all stakeholders in their planning processes, they also face several barriers. Fostering an inclusive and participatory environment requires skilled practitioners guiding the engagement process, and this can be challenging due to limited municipal capacity, as well as the time, costs, and effort involved. In our collaboration with cities, it is widely acknowledged that engagement cannot be a one-off activity; it needs to be a long-term, continuous process. Cultivating such collaboration takes time and, in some cases, also leads to backlash, disruption, and disengagement when the process does not go as intended.

Some cities are hesitant to engage stakeholders on work-in-progress plans, fearing disruption or disagreement with their communities (Liakou et al., 2022). Conversely, cities that engage actively risk involving only the “usual suspects,” potentially excluding both those who are not typically engaged and communities facing barriers. At the same time, there is also a risk of engagement fatigue among certain groups. When engagement is not open and transparent, it can foster distrust and opposition toward the city’s plans. It is also important to note that when engagement processes are designed or led by dominant groups, there is a risk of power imbalance that may reinforce several forms of colonization, gentrification, and objectification (Foster and Warren, 2025; Cooke and Kothari, 2003; Anguelovski, 2016). Reflecting on this from the perspective of indigenous rights, the term “rights holders” is preferred to overcome the colonial connotations of the term stakeholder (Pomart, 2020). Additionally, with growing polarization within communities, the risks of backlash and disruption are higher, prompting cities to consider other strategies to mitigate challenges and misinformation locally (Liakou et al., 2022). Within this context of prevailing inequalities, fragmentation, and distrust, ensuring that engagement processes and the methods used are just, equitable, and inclusive is essential for long-term sustainability (Yakubu, 2025).

Despite these challenges, cities are learning from peer success stories on overcoming engagement barriers and striving to make engagement processes inclusive and equitable. Many examples highlight the importance of knowing the civic ecosystem influencing the city’s climate transition, both allies and blockers, through thorough stakeholder mapping. In these situations, using the right tone and communication would be essential to avoid derailing the process (Burke, 2016). Asking questions such as “*who is missing?*,” “*who could be allies or opponents and how can expectations be managed?*” could help identify and respond to potential risks. Engaging a core group of stakeholders who can connect, reflect, and act as voices and gatekeepers of their communities could be a successful strategy in ensuring all voices are represented.

3 Entry points for stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a continuous process embedded throughout the urban planning process. Building on existing methods

and connecting them with practical examples from the cities, this section proposes three entry points for purpose-driven stakeholder engagement. The examples, tools and approaches discussed here do not exist in isolation; rather, they draw inspiration from and building upon widely recognized frameworks such as collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2007), living labs (Steen and van Bueren, 2017), and deliberative governance (Hendriks, 2009), as well as commonly used stakeholder mapping and visualization tools such as the Mendelow Matrix. These approaches have been adapted and implemented in diverse formats across different cities and contexts.

The three entry points are informed by two EU-funded programs, NetZeroCities and UP2030, which reflect common trends or ways in which cities approach stakeholder engagement. These insights are further enriched by additional projects recognized as good practices by member cities within the Resilient Cities Network, as well as emerging initiatives identified through our research. Table 1 illustrates an overview of each entry point's scope, consideration, and examples captured in this perspective.

3.1 Stakeholder ecosystem analysis

Any engagement process begins with understanding the civic environment to identify the ecosystem and identify urban stakeholders and residents who can be engaged for consensus building. Within the

mapping and visualization of stakeholder ecosystems, various levels of detail can be achieved. The widely recognized ones include the power-interest or action network theory (Pouloudi et al., 2004), which offers good starting points to understanding the interconnected networks of stakeholders.

3.1.1 Mapping stakeholders using workshop canvases

A civic environment map is a visualization of various individuals, groups, and organizations, illustrating their roles, relationships, influence, and impact on the city's climate transition journey. It helps cities make informed decisions on whom to engage strategically. A *Companion guide for civic environment mapping* developed in the NetZeroCities project (Pidoux et al., 2023) elaborates on the purpose and principles of mapping of the civic environment:

- Mapping is a continuous and reflective process.
- Mapping is a visual tool.
- Mapping requires discussion, critical reflection, and consensus.
- Mapping helps represent the information and knowledge of the local ecosystem.

Special attention is paid to identify marginalized groups and communities facing barriers, so they are not excluded from the discourse. This also involves going beyond the usual suspects.

TABLE 1 Indicative engagement methods based on the three entry points proposed.

Entry point/ stage	Scope	Considerations	Examples/ Tools/ method suggested
1. Stakeholder ecosystem analysis	Mapping of stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mapping both urban stakeholders and residents - Mapping Communities facing barriers - Going beyond the usual suspects - Revisiting maps with stakeholders to identify who is missing or can be further engaged 	Civic Environment Mapping Tool and Companion Guide (includes a compilation of 15 existing stakeholder mapping canvases that have been analyzed)
2. Diversifying formats of engagement	Embedding co-creation as part of the implementation process	Building co-creation into every phase of urban planning in cycle	TU Delft Strategic Planning cycle, UP2030
		Build co-creation in different phases: Needs assessments, Visioning, Actioning, Upscaling	Toolkit for Stakeholder Engagement toward Carbon Neutrality, UP2030
	Using design and implementation as a means of engagement	Co-design and co-implementing public spaces of shared value	OASIS schoolyards in Paris
		A call for ideas to invite people to engage through aspirations for better streets	Healthy Streets Approach in Budapest
		Leveraging existing assets and identifying a champion who can lead and implement parts of the process	Resilient BoTu program in Rotterdam
	Experimenting with games and alternative methods	Using interactive board games to build capacity and knowledge	Engagement building blocks, NetZeroCities
Climate action-focused board games for workshop collaboration		PlayTheCity	
Leveraging AI to visualize ideas in real time during workshops		UrbanistAI	
3. Building long-lasting partnerships and collaborations	Alliances to steer shared goals and ambitions	Transdisciplinary collaboration platforms composed of diverse urban stakeholders	Learning and Action Alliances
	Shared commitments co-created by multi-level stakeholders	Innovative governance tool to build commitment and shared action plans with multi-level stakeholders	Climate City Contracts

However, in practice, significant challenges remain in identifying all groups experiencing marginalization or vulnerability. These gaps may stem from blind spots among those conducting the mapping, as well as from engagement barriers that arise when municipalities rely on partner organizations with greater access to certain communities. This underscores the importance of first developing a comprehensive visualization of all stakeholders to design engagement strategies that are genuinely inclusive and responsive to the full range of community needs.

Based on research of 15 mapping canvases available across different repositories (Tajuddin and Pidoux, 2023), the NZC *Civic Environment mapping tool* consolidates these canvases into a single starting point, capturing a range of stakeholder characteristics (Tajuddin et al., 2023). The tool enables mapping according to the transition goals, identifying their priority per sector (e.g., housing, energy, mobility), resources, influence, and potential clusters. The mapping guide also presents the 15 analyzed canvases, grouping them by their intended use: to explore, analyze, or engage (Figure 1). It is important to note that the choice of mapping format can influence both the process and its results.

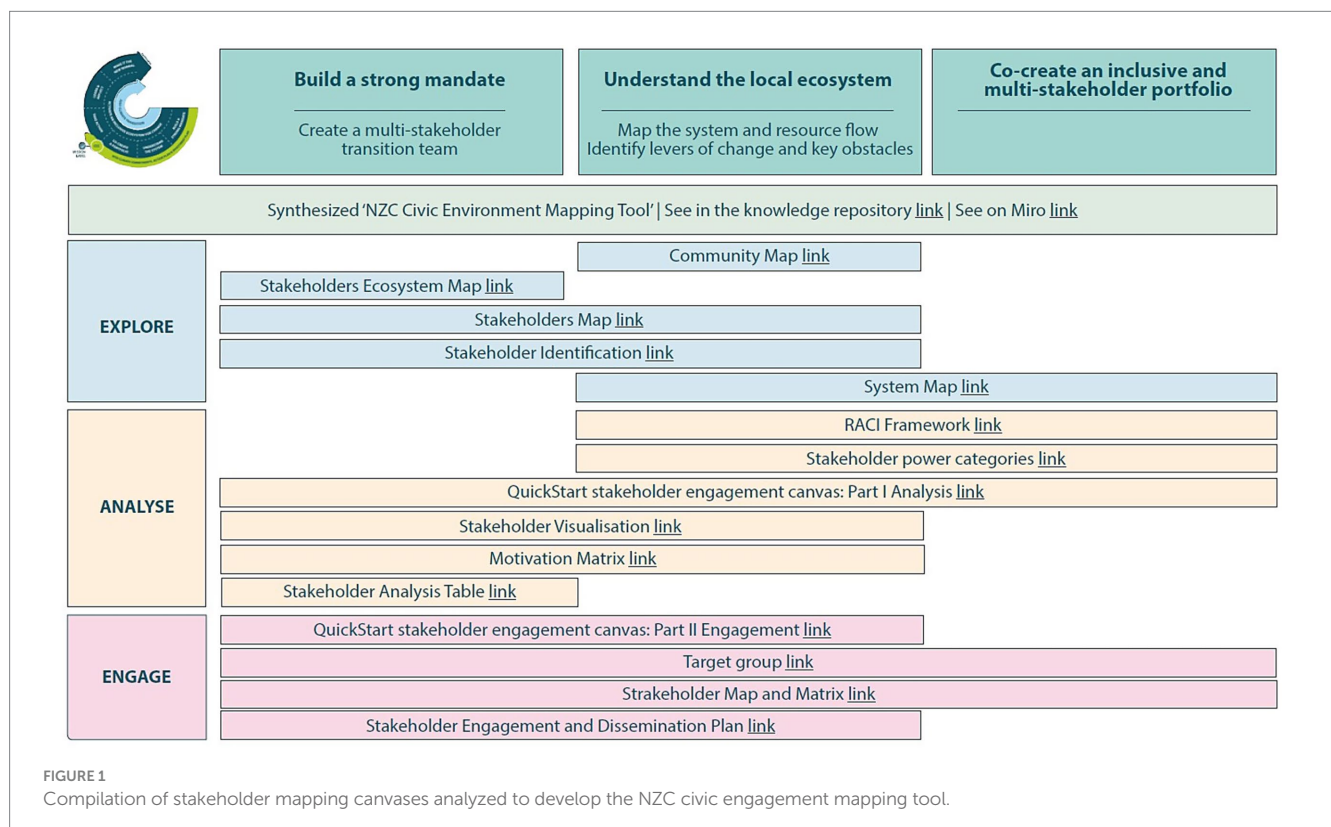
3.2 Diversifying formats of stakeholder engagement

Since engagement occurs across the different phases of the urban planning cycle, it is essential to employ a diversity of methods that appropriately frame each discussion and generate outputs that support project progress and implementation. Some engagement activities focus on understanding community needs and aspirations, while

others involve co-designing or co-constructing spaces collaboratively. Certain methods invite ideas from the wider community, whereas others encourage individuals to act as local champions. This section captures this diversity of methods and presents examples from cities that have successfully put them into practice.

3.2.1 Embedding co-creation as part of the implementation process

Projects can be designed so that engagement is inseparable, progressing hand-in-hand with planning and implementation. In the EU-Funded UP2030 project, 10 cities in Europe are integrating the principles of climate neutrality, resilience, and Just Transition in their pilot neighborhoods and urban planning process (UP2030, 2023b). A key consideration was engaging stakeholders continuously throughout the typical urban planning cycle, with co-creation implemented at every stage. A cyclic model for this was developed in the *TU Delft Strategic Planning cycle* (Rocco et al., 2024). In UP2030, co-creation activities at each phase had a specific focus, such as defining needs, visioning, ideating, testing, and evaluating. Over 3 years, cities co-developed innovative neighborhood planning instruments, such as guidelines, toolkits, and training programs, with a core group of stakeholders. These instruments addressed multi-sector action across housing, urban regeneration, greening, mobility, energy and other thematic focus areas. Note that engagement fatigue in such multi-year processes was a recognized risk, underscoring the importance of diverse and creative engagement methods. It is important to note the interdependency between establishing a comprehensive stakeholder ecosystem and subsequently selecting appropriate methods for engagement and co-creation. A well-mapped and extensive stakeholder landscape provides the necessary foundation for choosing



techniques that are contextually relevant, equitable, and capable of supporting meaningful participation.

Resources such as the *Toolkit for Stakeholder Engagement towards Carbon Neutrality* (UP2030, 2023a) were effective in designing meaningful and interactive engagement processes for each phase. This approach encouraged cities to think beyond a linear, step-by-step process, favoring cyclical engagement that integrated considerations of spatial justice. It also supported continuity and the development of long-term partnerships with stakeholders who could serve as ongoing collaborators, forming *Learning and Action Alliances (LAAs)* (Dudley et al., 2013; O'Donnell et al., 2018) that help steer project progress at every stage. Read more about LAAs in Section 3.3.

3.2.2 Using design and implementation as a means of engagement

Engagement during co-design and implementation processes invites meaningful contributions from stakeholders and fosters local ownership of solutions. Design and construction processes are often continuous and staged, presenting numerous opportunities to engage different groups at different moments. Below are examples of how these processes can be leveraged for effective stakeholder engagement:

Co-design and implementation of resilient schoolyards (*Resilient Cities Network Arup the Lego Foundation, 2022*): The OASIS schoolyards project in Paris demonstrates how play spaces and natural schoolyards can be used for broader resident engagement. In this model, R-Cities, together with the city team, school students, caregivers, and teachers, co-design green spaces within schools. This process has been guided by four principles: co-design and collaboration, inclusive and accessible spaces, experimental learning and pedagogy, and community engagement and awareness. During implementation, planting activities are organized to actively engage children in shaping their environments. This approach demonstrates how place-based interventions can serve not only as spatial transformations but also as vehicles for capacity building, experiential education, and the strengthening of social capital. However, such initiatives require sustained engagement efforts, first to identify relevant stakeholders, and subsequently to design activities that foster enduring relationships between communities and their environments. The involvement of local partners and community organizations is critical in this regard, ensuring local ownership, continuity, and the long-term stewardship of the schoolyards beyond the implementation phase. Given the highly specific spatial focus, extensive engagement forms the foundation of such co-design methodologies. Different co-design techniques may be deployed to address the distinct needs and profiles of various groups, such as children, caregivers, educators, and other relevant users.

Call for ideas in shaping streets (UP2030, 2023b): In UP2030, Budapest designed a competition for the Healthy Street Challenge, inviting municipalities to co-create street transformations with their communities. This initiative aims to build local capacity around the Healthy Streets approach by providing participants with access to knowledge resources, training opportunities, and leadership development. The underlying intention has been to equip local partners with practical tools and frameworks that they can adapt to their specific contexts. Early findings indicate growing interest in leveraging such well-tested methodologies; however, extensive on-the-ground engagement remains necessary to demonstrate how these approaches can unlock multiple co-benefits, including improved

public health, livability, and climate resilience. In large-scale, city-wide open calls, political commitment and dedicated funding have emerged as critical enablers of success, while bureaucratic barriers often slow down implementation. Consequently, establishing a robust yet flexible governance framework is considered a key success factor to ensure legitimacy, acceptance, and smooth execution of such participatory initiatives.

Identifying local champions for project implementation (*Resilient Cities Network, 2020*): Communities facing barriers are often difficult to reach, being excluded from conventional communication channels, experiencing institutional distrust due to systemic neglect, or facing challenges related to language and accessibility. In Rotterdam's Bospolder-Tussendijken (BoTu) district, the Resilient BoTu 2028 program leverages the energy transition and climate resilience as a driver for broader social development. Applying the *Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)* Approach, residents are engaged incrementally to identify and empower local champions who lead the implementation of various transition projects. For example, local "energy coaches" and ambassadors are trained to identify households with low energy performance and distribute simple solutions, such as radiator foils, to reduce energy loss and lower energy consumption. The program has facilitated the strengthening of informal community networks, which have gained momentum in mobilizing residents and building capacity across multiple dimensions of urban resilience. However, capturing insights from these bottom-up initiatives and integrating them into formal municipal governance structures remains a persistent challenge. Municipalities often operate on a program-by-program basis, and persistent siloed practices continue to constrain cross-departmental collaboration. Consequently, opportunities for institutional learning and structured reflection occur less frequently than would be beneficial. This is a missed opportunity. Initiatives such as Resilient BoTu 2028 are generating valuable insights on social resilience at the neighborhood level, yet stronger learning mechanisms are needed to make such innovative, community-centered approaches a standard part of municipal climate action. As more neighborhoods in Rotterdam show interest in the Resilient BoTu model, municipalities are increasingly exploring how they can foster, support, and embed community-led innovation in their everyday work.

3.2.3 Experimenting with games and alternative methods

Games and alternative methods are increasingly relevant for broadening the reach of engagement and mitigating engagement fatigue. Interactive approaches help build capacity and make processes more accessible to those who may not typically participate. City teams often face challenges in selecting the right methods for their local context and engagement needs. Designed as an interactive board game, the *NetZeroCities Engagement Building Blocks* (Amann et al., 2024) supports consideration and evaluation of various stages of the engagement process, enabling informed decisions on how to actively involve stakeholders. This game is closely connected to the Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit described in Section 3.2.1. While the toolkit functions as a web platform, the Engagement Building Blocks game enhances the design process in workshop settings. Several participation experts are also "gamifying" engagement processes. A prominent example is PlayTheCity, which creates a large-scale game version of a project plan and invites participants to discuss decisions

and interventions for the city's energy transition and climate adaptation plans (PlaytheCity, 2025). With advancements in digital technology, co-design techniques using generative AI, developed by UrbanistAI, can visualize participants' ideas in real time, opening a new dimension for engagement (Interoperable Europe, 2023). However, it is important to note that the target engagement groups may vary depending on the simplicity or complexity of the games employed. Emerging evidence also indicates that art and game-based approaches can help bridge engagement gaps, particularly within communities that may not readily participate in more formal or structured discussion formats. (Murray et al., 2024; Sonke et al., 2025; Ng et al., 2024).

3.3 Building long-lasting partnerships and collaborations

Another important purpose of stakeholder engagement is to build long-term relationships and collaborations. This ensures that cities do not always have to start from scratch and can leverage meaningful connections established through past and ongoing processes. While informal partnerships and collaborations were discussed in previous sections, this section highlights formal processes and alliances that provide stakeholders with greater credibility and decision-making authority.

3.3.1 Alliances to steer shared goals and ambitions

Closely related to Living Labs, Learning and Action Alliances (LAAs) (Dudley et al., 2013; O'Donnell et al., 2018), facilitate reflexive governance and institutional learning. LAAs are transdisciplinary collaboration platforms composed of diverse urban stakeholders and typically involve processes of shared consensus building and joint action planning. They are often established around specific issues or geographic areas, aiming to achieve positive, sustainable change through collective action. In the UP2030 project, LAAs help foster involvement of different stakeholders at every step of the typical planning process captured in section 3.2.1 (UP2030, 2023b). For example, to scale up the "Healthy Streets" approach in Budapest, the city established a Knowledge Centre, a formalized multi-stakeholder alliance that brings together key urban stakeholders to co-develop tools, resources, and capacity-building programs for broader implementation across the city. It is important to note that while LAAs are effective in fostering transdisciplinary collaboration, they require substantial time, capacity, and resources to convene stakeholders regularly and to ensure that the group operates with a clear purpose and mandate.

3.3.2 Shared commitments co-created by multi-level stakeholders

Under the EU Mission for Climate Neutral and Smart Cities, cities are developing Climate City Contracts (CCCs), which include a commitment, action plan, and investment plan. CCCs go beyond traditional municipal planning practices, presenting an innovative governance instrument to guide climate neutrality goals for 2030 (Littek and Wildman, 2022; Doci et al., 2025). By co-creating a portfolio of actions across emission sectors such as buildings, industry, transport, water, and energy, and involving signatories from city

leadership and urban stakeholders, CCCs encourage shared commitment and collective implementation toward climate neutrality in cities. CCCs demonstrate how multi-actor and multi-sector agreements across the city's self-determined strategic priorities require extensive engagement efforts to build consensus and agree on a shared ambition. However, following the development of such governance instruments, the next step concerns implementation and accountability. In the upcoming phase of the Mission, the extent to which these agreements are put into action and their measurable impact remains to be explored.

4 Conclusion and discussion

This paper has explored how stakeholder engagement can be understood and operationalized through three key entry points: stakeholder ecosystem analysis, engagement during planning and implementation, and long-term partnership building. By examining both theoretical frameworks and practical applications across multi-city collaborations, we have identified emerging trends, recurring challenges, and opportunities for more inclusive and effective engagement.

Engagement is a continuous, iterative process and offers an opportunity to build sustained relationships with all stakeholders. It is not just about gathering information or co-creating plans but also about giving back to communities, through capacity building, training, and awareness-raising. There is no-one-size-fits-all approach to engagement; the process requires experimentation and customization, and adaptation over time. Multi-media approaches, for example, can be tailored to different target groups to reduce fatigue and broaden participation, while also leveraging them to share key information, stories, and updates.

While this paper is limited by factors such as time and the breadth of research covered, it lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of stakeholder engagement in cities. Insights have been drawn from both existing literature and practical experience, reflecting the range of ways cities are implementing engagement processes to meet diverse goals and reach different groups.

Three entry points have been highlighted as key stages for testing and experimentation: mapping and visualizing stakeholder ecosystems, diversifying methods of engagement, and leveraging engagement as a tool for partnership and consensus building. Each stage is elaborated with relevant tools and case examples for learning. While these entry points provide a useful framework, they are by no means the only way to approach engagement. Naturally, cities are exploring many other strategies to design and implement their engagement ambitions. Our approach represents one way to consolidate diverse methods and tools into actionable, purpose-driven entry points. In this context, our role as facilitators is to identify patterns in practice and present them as guidance that can support other cities in structuring their engagement efforts.

It is also important to note that the examples and tools discussed in this paper are particularly suited to urban stakeholders who are already organized into groups. Resident engagement, in contrast, represents a vast and complex area of research in its own right. While we provide some illustrative examples of direct resident engagement, this is not explored in depth, and future studies could focus on identifying emerging trends and effective practices in this domain. Building on these insights, subsequent research can further refine entry points,

broaden the range of methods and tools, and strengthen practical guidance for cities pursuing inclusive, effective engagement strategies.

As cities continue to navigate the complexities of climate action and resilience, sustained, inclusive, and well-structured engagement will remain a cornerstone for achieving long-term impact, ownership of solutions, and the development of local capacity. Given that many cities participating in the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities are facing similar challenges and pursuing comparable ambitions, their experiences and lessons learned can be transferred and adapted as practical knowledge for others. Engaging stakeholders in a meaningful and structured manner is a cross-cutting aspiration for many cities striving to achieve an inclusive and just transition. In this regard, the findings presented here are also relevant to cities globally that seek to learn from how peers are implementing various forms of consensus-building and collaborative decision-making.

Finally, we acknowledge that many tools and examples explored in this perspective have been developed through collaborations supported by the Resilient Cities Network. These examples were selected based on our practical experience and the information available to us, with efforts made to broaden the scope where relevant by triangulating with existing literature and resources. Since this perspective focuses on capturing the methods used at different engagement stages, it does not capture examples of where engagement efforts may have failed due to various factors. We recognize that the guidance presented here is not exhaustive, and there are multiple valid ways to approach the development of such entry points.

5 Establishing a shared vocabulary for inclusive urban engagement

While approaching stakeholder engagement, establishing a clear vocabulary with the appropriate tone and intent is important for guiding these processes. Language shapes perceptions, influences behavior, and can either include or exclude participants. The terminology used in engagement processes can perpetuate colonial narratives and reinforce systemic inequities (Reed et al., 2024; Fernandez-Sanchez et al., 2024).

In developing the three key entry points discussed in Section 3, the following terms were identified as particularly important for building consensus. We discuss these terms for two reasons: (1) to contribute to the vocabulary in this domain based on practical experience, and (2) to provide a glossary of terms used throughout this publication. While these do not cover all aspects, they offer an initial perspective on how to approach language and intention in engagement.

- Just transition: A Just Transition is broadly defined as one that ensures no one is left behind or pushed behind in the transition to low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economies and societies. Such a transition enables more ambitious climate action while unlocking several co-benefits to society, balances trade-offs through the equity perspective, and provides an impetus to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. (UNCDP, 2023)
- Urban stakeholders: Individuals who represent groups or organizations with a stake at the city level across public, private, and civil society sectors. (Kahane et al., 2013; Parry et al., 2023)
- Residents: In this article, we consider the term “residents” instead of “citizens,” as the term “citizens” has an inherent political connotation and often excludes individuals who may not possess formal citizenship, such as undocumented migrants or temporary residents (Kahane et al., 2013). In contrast, “residents” encompasses all individuals living in a particular area, regardless of their legal status. This broader term ensures that all inhabitants are considered in planning processes, promoting inclusivity and equity.
- Civic environment or ecosystem: The entire local ecosystem of residents, urban stakeholders—including civic groups and other groups from the private and public sector who need to be engaged in the process.
- Marginalized communities: Individuals, groups, or communities that are typically excluded from discussions about urban development and decision-making. They are often disproportionately impacted by decisions made without their involvement (Dorkenoo et al., 2022; Ngcamu, 2023). Note that these differ from “stakeholders beyond those typically engaged,” which calls for moving beyond the ‘usual suspects, those often overlooked because they are not obvious decision-makers. Such stakeholders may possess specific local knowledge or lived experiences, including key elderly individuals, frontline staff, or particular experts on the ground (Colvin et al., 2016).
- Vulnerable or disadvantaged communities: Vulnerability is a dynamic concept impacted by social, environmental, and psychological factors, among others (Howarth et al., 2025). While traditionally used to describe communities that are more susceptible to shocks and stresses in comparison to others (Swanson, 2021), we prefer to use “communities facing barriers” instead, as it emphasizes that vulnerability arises from position, not nature.
- Communities facing barriers: Communities are not *inherently* vulnerable; rather, they face challenges and barriers shaped by structural systems and positionality. This reframing emphasizes that vulnerability arises not from individual traits but structures that perpetuate unequal power relations and historic or institutional biases (Reckien et al., 2018). An alternative phrasing we have seen is “people made vulnerable by systemic inequities” (Fernandez-Sanchez et al., 2024). Embedding this equity-oriented understanding in practice can lead to more inclusive approaches to procurement, outreach, accessibility, language, and compensation.
- Urban stakeholder vs. resident engagement: When we refer to urban stakeholders, we mean all the stakeholders in the city that are organized in groups. These include resident associations, businesses, groups, and organizations in the city. With resident engagement, we mean members of the community who participate as individuals and who are not organized in groups. They are impacted by the policy, plans, and implementation of the climate transition. When we say stakeholder engagement in this article, we mean all the abovementioned groups and individuals. However, it is important to note that it is often recommended to engage urban stakeholders and residents in parallel processes. Organized groups of stakeholders and individual residents differ not only in interests but also in power dynamics. To avoid either process being hijacked, it is important to create a safe participation environment for all stakeholders involved. (Kahane et al., 2013)

- Engagement vs. participation. While engagement is an intentional and focused process that involves stakeholders who are or will be affected in decision-making, participation is a broader approach that creates an environment that invites civil society to take part in decisions (Arnstein, 1969; Reed, 2008; Parry et al. 2023), encompassing varying degrees of interaction as illustrated in the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. In both cases, local governments have a role to play. While they take on an active and moderating role in engagement, they take on a supporting or facilitating role in participation (Mees et al., 2019).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

NT: Visualization, Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. LK: Methodology, Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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