

City Lab: Limiting Local Democracy or Emphasizing the Importance of Representative Democracy?

Piotr Kopyciński, PhD
Assistant Professor
Cracow University of Economics
Cracow
Poland
piotr.kopycinski@uek.krakow.pl

Abstract

The aim of this article is to identify and describe the coordination mechanism used in the city lab – a platform that belongs in the ‘lab family’ (it has the same actors as the living lab, but their functions differ), where city users propose solutions to long-term problems, whereas city authorities watch over their feasibility and legitimacy. At the same time, due to the significant role of local authorities, a question arises whether or not, from the perspective of the existing forms of democracy, the concept of city lab does not entail deliberative democracy being limited by representative democracy. In order to answer the question, the literature and case studies (Graz, Leoben, Maastricht) were reviewed and informed by the findings of the interviews with city lab coordinators, which detailed the role of public authorities in these platforms. The findings support the key role played by public authorities in city labs (initiator, funder, coordinator), which ensure that the proposed solutions are both legal and feasible. Certain characteristics of the city lab coordination mechanism make it similar to the neo-Weberian concept of state, where the features of a traditional Weberian administration overlap with those of new public management and public governance. However, the claim that the neo-Weberian concept of state is actually used as the coordination mechanism in city labs should be approached with caution due to the lack of literature on the operationalisation of this public management method. Undoubtedly, the existence of city labs does not imply that deliberative democracy is superseded by representative democracy – it rather emphasises the role of the latter, where political responsibility for the implementation of the initiative rests with local politicians, while city users play an important role in proposing and implementing development ideas. For these reasons, city labs cannot be considered as a facade which permits local authorities to abandon the idea of deliberative democracy. Instead, they underscore the fact that city authorities are open to city users’ ideas in addressing long-term development problems (such as spatial planning and environmental issues), which are difficult to solve by public decision-makers due to bureaucratic constraints. Therefore, the city lab should be considered as an interesting idea typical of deliberative democracy, whose coordination mechanism (owing to the key functions performed by the city authorities) exhibits certain characteristics of the neo-Weberian concept of state.

Points for Practitioners

From the practitioners’ point of view, the article may suggest a way of managing complex public issues in the city. The article may be interesting for local government representatives as well as researchers who try to respond to the challenges posed by long-term city development, especially in the field of spatial planning. In making such key decisions, decision-makers can expand their own range of solutions to include the suggestions of local residents. On the one hand, the nature of certain problems may not exclude taking advantage of external suggestions, but on the other, it may prevent multi-level governance from being used as a coordination mechanism. The city lab formula means both that city users are involved and that the dominant role of city authorities is preserved.

Keywords

City lab, deliberative democracy, modes of governance, neo-Weberian state