



INHABIT – INclusive Health And wellBeing In small and medium size ciTies

Guidelines and Lessons Learnt from INHABIT Inclusive Transition Pathways Synthesis

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This document presents a concise set of recommendations drawn from the experience of the INHABIT engagement process. They are directed at policy makers, project designers, coordinators, and local change agents with particular attention to partnerships that bring together stakeholders from the public and private sectors, research institutions, and local communities in co-creation. This policy guidance shows that processes are rarely linear or predictable. Hence insights are presented not as prescriptive steps, but as considerations for policymakers, practitioners, and local change agents navigating the complexities of delivering transformation for health and wellbeing.

1. Vision and Transition Pathways

Defining a clear vision is essential, but experiences show that the “ideal” pathway rarely unfolds as planned. Political shifts, resource limitations, and social dynamics often force course corrections to which stakeholders need to be prepared and contribute to. .

- Cities should adopt transition pathway visualisations to signal ambition and track progress, not to prescribe fixed routes. Urban change is iterative and non-linear; diagrams that imply tidy, sequential stages can mislead. Treat pathways as flexible, revisable frameworks that support learning, negotiation, and adaptation over time in philosophy of transparency and participatory codesign.
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2. Standardization vs Local Adaptation

Standardized tools and frameworks provide comparability and coordination across cities and among partners, yet INHABIT repeatedly encountered situations where such tools conflicted with local realities. A rigid application can feel bureaucratic and even alienating to local actors. Conversely, excessive flexibility can undermine peer-to-peer learning.

- The recommendation is not to choose one scheme over the other, but to approach standardization as a guiding reference rather than a straightjacket, continually negotiating among partners and stakeholders its fit to local political cultures, governance capacities, community and project's expectations.
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3. Capacity-Building and Intermediary Roles

Local Community Activators (or similar pivotal roles) are the linchpins of participation, translating abstract frameworks into lived processes and maintaining relationships across multiple stakeholders. Yet their effectiveness depends heavily on local trust, networks, and

institutional positioning. Training alone is insufficient; the experience demonstrated that ongoing mentoring and peer learning are crucial. Where these supports are absent, facilitators struggle, face uneven engagement, or loose continuity.

- Capacity-building for cities should be organized as a continuous, relational, and embedded process that combines ongoing mentoring and peer learning, rather than relying solely on episodic training or technical instruction.
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4. Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder ecosystems are rarely static. Formal structures like advisory boards often fail to produce meaningful engagement, while informal, spontaneous networks frequently prove more effective and in some cases more resilient.

- Policymakers should resist overly neat definitions of “community” or “relevant actors”. Stakeholder mapping should be reflexive, continuously asking: *Who is missing, and why?* Attention to power asymmetries and emergent actors is not optional—it determines whether cohesion goal is real or tokenistic.
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5. Tools and Knowledge Capture

Analytical and participatory tools—such as engagement diaries, integration grids, and co-management templates—can structure engagement, track progress, and support reflection. Yet the INHABIT experience demonstrates the trade-offs between systematic reporting and preserving situated knowledge.

- Policy guidance suggests emphasizing situated learning alongside standard metrics, ensuring that monitoring does not inadvertently diminish the lived perspectives of communities. Reporting protocols and field note guidelines can help maintain this balance.
- Tailoring tools to local realities—accounting for digital literacy, language barriers, and local practices—supports ownership and usability, though it may reduce comparability. Policymakers should consider prioritizing tool adaptability over rigid uniformity
- Pilot testing, simplification, and co-development with end users can prevent abandonment of tools critical to monitoring and engagement.

6. Governance: Complexity, Limits, and Social Capital

Polycentric governance and public-private-people partnerships (PPPPs) can unlock resources and foster innovation, but they also introduce friction, diluted accountability, and procedural strain. The experience from INHABIT demonstrated that where grassroots networks already exist, governance innovations flourish. Where they are absent, projects rely heavily on institutional support, raising questions about long-term sustainability once project funding ends.

- Cities should pursue clear articulation of roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority across participating actors, while preserving flexibility for experimentation and informal, trust-based collaboration.
 - To support effective implementation, cities are encouraged to map not only stakeholders, but also different sectors of their administrations concerned by the projects, together with mapping institutional constraints, (e.g. legal mandates, funding rules, decision-making bottlenecks, and accountability gaps), to proactively manage potential risks that often undermine cross-sector and integrated initiatives.
 - Where governance complexity or political volatility is high, cities should consider embedding neutral intermediaries or independent facilitators that could help navigate these dynamics and maintain continuity during political transitions.
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7. Participation Formats

INHABIT revealed that rigid thematic groups often dissolve, while flexible, informal arrangements proved more resilient.

- Urban projects should prioritise long-term engagement, even when slower or less immediately “efficient,” consistently producing stronger trust, community ownership, and social capital. This challenges policy cultures that prioritize short-term outputs over sustained relational work.
- To improve visibility, legitimacy, and public awareness, municipalities should establish dedicated or easily identifiable physical spaces for citizen engagement processes. If this is not feasible, consider designating existing community infrastructures as engagement spaces to ensure consistent recognition and accessibility.
- Policymakers and designers must assess social capital as a primary determinant of feasibility, not just project design or funding. Where networks are weak, resources may need to prioritize community-building before ambitious interventions.

8. Navigating Implementation challenges

INHABIT highlighted common pitfalls, including over-reliance on individual champions, overly complex tools, misalignment between timelines and social or institutional rhythms due to dynamic, unpredictable contexts.

- Rather than relying on individual champions or overly complex tools, cities can support projects through adaptive management, iterative reflection, and skilled intermediaries who sustain trust, navigate institutional barriers, and maintain continuity in dynamic, unpredictable contexts.
 - By developing transparent Action Plans as documents that clarify milestones, responsibilities, resources and expected outputs, cities can ensure initiatives remain responsive to setbacks, political shifts, and evolving community needs.
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9. Legal, Regulatory, and Financial Contexts

INHABIT illustrated that legal and regulatory frameworks can simultaneously enable and constrain innovation. Procurement rules, rigid national legislation, and institutional norms often limited inclusion of small actors or marginalized groups. The experience indicates that cities may need to :

- Explore legal experimentation or small-scale pilot agreements before large-scale deployment.
- Advocate for flexible procurement mechanisms or temporary exemptions to enable co-creation with civil society.
- Align project ambitions with realistic regulatory pathways, not idealized participation frameworks.

Initiatives should at best plan for feasible and sustained investment to move beyond conceptual design by integrating early mechanisms for local ownership of funding and management and exploring blended financing and community-managed funds to reduce dependency on external project cycles.

10. Communication and Storytelling

Communication is not just about dissemination. INHABIT demonstrated the importance of situated, iterative storytelling with the direct participation of end beneficiaries and people

with lived experience as testimonies, which helped build legitimacy, trust, and shared understanding.

- Policymakers should resist over-standardizing narratives or metrics, and instead valorize local perspectives, situated knowledge, and relational nuances as core inputs to decision-making and project evaluation.
 - A coherent and constant over time visual identity and accessible messaging support inclusion and transparency, enhancing external engagement and visibility, using different media, of participatory outcomes.
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11. Peer Learning and Transnational Exchange

Sharing experiences between cities is not merely a “nice-to-have”; it is central to critical reflection and adaptive learning enabling cross-contextual learning, calibration of strategies, and mutual support. INHABIT experience proved that Policy guidance emphasizing integrating structured peer-learning mechanisms from the outset should be carefully planned and implemented as part of the project’s roadmap.

- Policymakers should be aware that replication is rarely straightforward: replication should focus on process, relational roles, and adaptive governance, rather than attempting strict duplication of initiatives, also tapping on the the capacity of local intermediaries, activists and people with lived experience in the localities, to bridge actors and ideas.
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12. Sustainability and Transfer

The long-term durability of interventions depends on embedding processes in social ecosystems, because projects anchored solely in institutional mandates risk dissipation once external finance ends or political support changes.

- Cities should build initiatives on trust, community relationships, and adaptable networks that can endure political shifts, funding changes, and staff turnover.
- Skilled facilitators could be supported to maintain stakeholder engagement, navigate institutional barriers, and sustain momentum.
- Without compromising the core Inclusive Health and Wellbeing philosophy of INHABIT, cities should allow projects to adapt to evolving community needs, economic constraints and future opportunities and political realities, enabling networks to evolve and maintain initiative durability.